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BLACK SWAN

(US, 2010, d. Darren Aronofsky)

The initial response to being mesmerised was the maybe-inelegant but apt, 'Whew' (and then some).

Tchaikowski, Freud and Jung and many others would probably be quite excited by this exploration of the themes of Swan Lake. We are alerted to this at once with Nina (Natalie Portman in an intriguing performance) dancing with a frightening black swan – and then her waking. With a dream to open the film, there will be many dreams, hallucinations and fantasies along the way until the expected but also unexpected ending which is, in Nina's words, 'Perfect'.

For some audiences, the treatment of Nina's perfectionism may be too much, too confronting, too graphic. But, Nina herself is both white swan and black swan and she has to dance both. This means that for the dancer, she has to be her ego character and her alter ego. Early in the film, Nina passes herself in a tunnel. She is going to encounter her other self more and more and she is going to find it personified in another dancer whom she sees as rival and demonises as a black swan (Mila Kunis as Lily, a performance that has to be both sinister and charming).

We see Nina as a girlish perfectionist, dominated by her loving but ever-demanding mother (Barbara Hershey is now playing mothers, and fits here because of some resemblance to Natalie Portman). She is driven but introverted, keeping to herself, without a social life, without personal and social development, tied to her mother's apron strings.

According to the director of the ballet (Vincent Cassell bringing his capacity for being frightening and attractive fully to this role), Nina is all technique and needs to both find herself and lose herself. He is sexually aggressive and she begins to react with vigour rather than accepting passivity. He urges her to discover her sensual self, her sexual self, something which alarms and embarrasses her. Nevertheless, deep down there is her sensual black swan self which surfaces in the way desires do when they have been suppressed and can be integrated if acknowledged but which can also lead to madness and acting out the desires (in reality or in the mind) which is what happens to Nina.

And, all the times, there is the music and there is the dancing, a lot of music and a lot of dancing, but all in the context of the ballet's plot and of Nina's desperation to perform her dual role perfectly.

This should give pleasure and satisfaction to those audiences who are watching for the ballet and for the psychodrama. There are also elements of the horror film in the imagining of the black swan and of Nina's fervid and violent imagination.

A personal difficulty: I would have preferred far less handheld camera photography. Of course, it has a realistic and sometimes disorienting purpose, especially as the camera so often follows Nina, trailing us along in her path. More satisfying is the constant use of mirrors – Nina contemplating herself, donning her costumes, putting on make-up, and occasionally glimpsing her black swan self.

Darren Arenofsky has not made so many films but they are all distinctive: science-fiction of *Pi*, the drug world of *Requiem for a Dream*, the fantasies of *The Fountain* and the earthy, violent world of *The Wrestler*. I admire all of them, but I found *Black Swan* the most interesting and challenging.

BURLESQUE

(US, 2010, d. Steve Antin)

Burlesque ain't what it used to be.

Back in the days of Gypsy Rose Lee and before, it was bump and grind 'dancing' for an ogling male audience (which led, I suppose, to the so-called Gentlemen's Clubs of recent times which do not really foster gentlemanly behaviour at all).

Here, we are in Los Angeles in the present day in the kind of film that Madonna might wish she had made twenty years ago (although she tried out lots of the routines in a number of video clips). This is a rags to riches story, the naive young woman who arrives in LA (from the empty plains of Iowa, of course) looking for a job and who falls on her feet (no, that's not right, she is quite adept on her feet) and lands work as a waitress, then tries an audition and fills in when the lead dancer does not break a leg but is unreliably drunk – and a new show is created around her since she is the greatest thing to hit LA since... And, because she is played by a reliable and talented singer, Christina Aguilera, there is a certain credibility about the whole thing.

There is no stone unturned, no shoe unfitted, no stick unshaken in writer director, Steve Antin's screenplay. You know what is going to happen but that does not matter all that much. It is watching how it happens that is the important thing. This makes *Burlesque* something of a guilty pleasure unless you are like a number of those at the press preview who decided that the best they could offer to the film was to laugh at the obvious and melodramatic lines.

We are taken into a different world, not necessarily one that we would normally want to be in. We spend most of the time in the burlesque club with a few excursions to shared apartments, to an LA mansion for a party and to a lawyer's office. By and large, we spend a lot of time in the darkness, illuminated by spotlights. There is an opening number about burlesque, presided over by Cher, looking more or less the same as she did 23 years ago when she won an Oscar for *Moonstruck* – she looks well preserved (and we might be wondering how). The song and choreography are in the Bob Fosse and Cabaret style (with Alan Cumming, who did play the MC on Broadway, doing a similar routine).

Christina Aguilera clearly believes in *Burlesque* as a star vehicle for her movie career and does her best, though her best is belting out the songs, a number of which she wrote.

There are some funny and ironic moments, many of which come from Stanley Tucci a la *Devil Wore Prada*, as the master of costumes in the club. Cam Gigandet is the romantic lead, a would-be song-writer who works in the bar at the

club. Eric Dane is the handsome, ultra-capitalist villain who wants to buy the club and pull it down for re-development. James Brolin turns up as a lawyer and Peter Gallagher exudes anxiety as Cher's ex-husband and part-owner of the club with only days before they lose ownership.

This is one of those excessive films which you surrender to or perch on a great height all the better to look down on it!

CHRONICLES OF NARNIA: VOYAGE OF THE DAWN TREADER

(US, 2010, d. Michael Apted)

Though I willingly went into the cupboard with Lucy in the first of the Narnia film series, I didn't find myself as much at home there as I had expected. Enjoyable, yes. Interesting enough, yes. But, not quite the magic anticipated. And there were the religious symbols, like the God in the noble lion Aslan, blessed still with Liam Neeson's voice, if you wanted to discover them but they were rather more oblique than I was led to believe. This was even more so with Prince Caspian but there was rather less enjoyment, less interest and far fewer religious references. So, I was not greatly anticipating going aboard the Dawn Treader, let alone being washed back through the painting of the ship and the sea into Narnia. Whether it was that the plot was more straightforward, I'm not sure, but I liked this one better.

This episode is geared to the fans of the previous films and presupposes you know who the Pevensie children are and what happened to them previously. Actually, Peter and Susan are now too old to go to Narnia (but appear in a brief fantasy sequence in America when Lucy succumbs to the temptation to be beautiful and to look like Susan only to find that she has been written out of their lives as has Narnia itself). This means that the two protagonists for Dawn Treader are Lucy, who is given a strong screen presence by Georgie Henley, and Edmond (played by Skandar Keynes, the younger brother who had succumbed to the White Witch to accept the temptation to power – and there is a brief repeat temptation this time) who is okay but is not a dominating presence. Actually, Ben Barnes, returning now as King Caspian, is much better and stronger than before.

But, there is a new cousin, Eustace Scrubb (which sounds and equivalent of Hyacinth Buckett). In fact, Eustace (well and obnoxiously played by Will Poulter) has aspirations to be your perfectly ordinary, no frills, down-to-earth, wary of imagination and derisive of fantasy young Englishman – well, of those days, anyway. Eustace resents his cousins staying with him during the war and takes every opportunity to complain and whine (young whingeing Pom) in a priggish, piggy way. When he finds that the picture on the wall does have moving water (which he scoffed at) and ends up stranded in the sea, he still resists all belief in Narnia. He particularly dislikes rodent, Reepicheep. Simon Pegg is the elegantly voice of Reepicheep. Eustace is not only a pain in the neck but hampers the mission of the Dawn Treader at every move – until he is transformed into a dragon, which does him no end of good, and he admits at the end that he was a better dragon than a boy. As can be seen, he does provide some drama for the film.

In the meantime, King Caspian and Lucy and Edmond, discover that citizens are being taken as slaves and hidden away in a mysterious cloud dominated by a monstrous power. Seven Lords had tried to do something but had been defeated. The voyagers learn that they must collect the seven swords and place them on Aslan's table. The monster and some darting and swirling by Eustace-dragon bring some action to the climax of the film (the monster seems to have gone to the same make-up artist as Bill Nighy in the Pirate of the Caribbean series).

There are also some difficulties for the main characters as they are subjected to their personal temptations, with Edmond and Caspian building up to a confrontation, and Tilda Swinton looking in briefly as the White Witch. However, Aslan appears to them guiding them to righteousness.

The righteousness themes seem to me to be much more explicit than in the previous films.

This comes to a fine, rather didactic, conclusion to the film where Aslan suggests that God might be the name for him in our world, that he lives in a world beyond but is, nevertheless, present in our world and to us. He enables us to confront temptations, as we have seen for Edmond and Lucy earlier in the film.

Of local interest, the film was made in Queensland (with some photography in New Zealand) and featured some local actors, especially a vigorous Gary Sweet as the Captain of the Dawn Treader.

The film continues the appeal of fantasy on our screens.

DESERT FLOWER

(UK/Germany, 2009, d. Sherry Hormann)

Desert Flower is the Somali meaning of the name of Walis.

This film is based on the autobiography of a young girl from the deserts of Somalia who walked to Mogadishu to escape from her home and to be with her grandmother, who worked in the Somali embassy in London, lived in the UK as an illegal, holding on to her Muslim traditions, who worked in a burger cafe and became a top model with a world reputation. Rags to riches stories don't come more amazing than this.

But, while that is one of the main themes of the film, it is not the only one. Waris Dirie underwent the tradition of circumcision at the age of three, before she was betrothed to an elder as his fourth wife. The reality of female genital circumcision may not be familiar to many in the west as it was not to Waris' friend in London, Marilyn. This enables the screenwriters to communicate the pain and the horror of this kind of mutilation. Which means that the other main theme of the film is the campaign to stop this procedure. When Waris becomes a successful model and is to be interviewed by a top magazine about the day that changed her life, she opted to tell her story of the mutilation day. She then went on to address the United Nations and became a spokesperson on the issue for the UN.

Actually, the two strands sit uncomfortably together in this film. We move suddenly from one to the other, jolting us from the affluent and chic world of modelling back to the desert and the poverty.

It is difficult to say why the film does not have as much impact as might have been expected. Perhaps it is its aim to reach a wide audience unfamiliar with this material, so it takes the method of straightforward storytelling, the only artistic artifice being the juxtaposing of the two strands, the narrative and the contrasting flashbacks. It is also very earnest in its tone – some sensitive (over-sensitive) comments accuse the film of being patronising to its central character and the themes, of being condescending. However, others comment that the film is a reasonable adaptation of the autobiography, expressing Waris's view of what happened to her. The film does become rather didactic at the end with Waris's address to the UN, but it does bring home her experience and the consequences and the need for countries to prohibit circumcision (which a final note says has happened while still reminding audiences that 6000 girls are circumcised every day).

Ethiopian born Liya Kebede has a challenge to portray Waris from being a very reserved and heavily clad young woman to a confident woman who can strut the catwalks and be photographed nude. The British cast is quite exuberant. But that is the word often associated with Sally Hawkins. She plays Waris's room-mate, Marilyn – exuberantly. Timothy Spall is clearly enjoying himself as the photographer who discovered Waris as she was mopping the burger cafe floor in Notting Hill. Juliet Stevenson exudes drama queen as the dominating head of the modelling agency.

On the whole this is a film that women will relate to much more intimately than a male audience will, from the ugliness of the mutilation to the glamour of fashion. Empathetic men will try to respond to the serious themes and not indulge in the ogling that the fashion and photography sessions are geared to excite.

For an audience who would prefer a more sobering film on female circumcision, Ousmane Sembene's 2004 Moolaade is the film to watch.

THE DILEMMA

(US, 2011, d. Ron Howard)

Americans. They're certainly out there, extroversion personified. That in itself may be a friendly warning about The Dilemma and its style and impact. Americans out there.

It might seem a romantic comedy with Vince Vaughn and Jennifer Connolly. Sometimes it is. It might seem a boofhead comedy with Kevin James. Sometimes it is. It might seem a drama about business and car manufacture and technology. Sometimes it is. It might seem a drama about fidelity and infidelity. And often it is. It makes for a heady kind of mixture.

Late in the film, it occurred to me that maybe the best way of responding to the film and its set of mostly unlikeable characters, is to take on the attitude of a therapist: sit, look and listen, while trying to read the characters, their problems and dilemmas, and looking for leads for their better mental and emotional health. Then, just before the end, there is an actual group therapy session, so this response was on the right track.

This is a problem drama for 40-somethings. The four central characters are at that age and their interests are in marriage, relationships, and success in their work. They value friendship as we immediately see. They value career as we then see. Kevin James is Nick, a wiz at technology for car engines. Vince Vaughn is Ronnie, his friend and partner, the mouthpiece and promoter for whom every presentation seems a variation on Saturday Night Live. Nick is long married to Geneva (Winona Ryder). Ron ought to be proposing to Beth (Jennifer Connolly, as the only really

sympathetic character in the film).

So far, so good. Possibilities of a contract with Chrysler. Friends and success. An engagement in the offing.

But..., and here the dilemma starts. Ron sees Geneva with another man (a loopy Channing Tatum as Zip). And here is the dilemma. Should he tell Nick or not? He puts his foot in it with his sister who thinks he is warning her about his marriage. Nick is too busy with the project to listen, except to encourage Ron to propose. Geneva tries to put a story over on Nick. Beth just wonders what is wrong with Ron when he appears with plant poisoning and a black eye and a hyper state of anxiety.

For those of a calmer and quieter disposition in the face of such a dilemma, Ron's reaction is so overboard, constant, grating, verbose, emotional, judgmental and self-righteous, leading him to snoop, photograph, threaten and give a singularly inappropriate toast at Beth's parents' 40th anniversary party, that you feel like avoiding him or giving him away. But, the therapist needs to listen and mull, even when the client is grating and unengaging. At times, you might even feel sorry for Geneva and her reasons for her affair – but she has no chance against the buddies.

The dilemma is worth pondering. How much truth should be told – and, importantly, when and how?

While the film does offer its answer, I'm not sure.

THE FIGHTER

(US, 2010, d. David O. Russell)

There is a long tradition of American films about boxing, as a sport, as an industry and the repercussions for individuals and family. *Champion*, *The Set Up*, *Somebody Up There Likes Me*, *Requiem for a Heavyweight*, *Raging Bull*, *Cinderella Man*. Quite a collection of films. *The Fighter* is up there with them.

Many audiences are not boxing fans and may wince at some of the fight scenes in this film. But, there is a lot more to the film than the gruelling poundings.

Non-American audiences may be surprised that this story is based on actual characters and their quite recent past. In fact, the two brothers at the centre of the film are seen in actual footage during the final credits. The trainer, Michael O'Keefe, seems to be played by a sympathetically talented actor, but it is O'Keefe playing himself. The setting is Lowell, Massachusetts, and much of the film was made there, including the use of the actual gym of the story. Given that the film is grounded in fact, this is surprising, given the often unflattering portraits of the main characters.

The Fighter is the story of two brothers, Dick and Mickey Ward. *The Fighter* applies to both of them but the centre of the film is Mickey, the younger brother. The film opens with Dick speaking direct to camera as documentary makers are filming him for a documentary about his comeback. Comeback does not seem likely as Dick is a wild and bug-eyed interviewee, fidgety and jumpy and hyping what he says – he spends a lot of time in a crack house. The scene includes home movie footage of the two brothers. While Dick had his moment in the 1970s, it is now the 1990s and he is training Mickey who has ambitions but fears he is a loser. This sets the tone for a story of powerful family bonds (and domination, especially by their tough as nails mother, Alice) played out in fights at home and in the ring.

One of the reasons the opening is so attention-grabbing is that Christian Bale is playing Dick. Sometimes Bale seems stolid (even as Bruce Wayne), especially as Melvin Purvis in *Public Enemies*, and in *Terminator: Salvation*. He was at his serious best in *3:10 to Yuma*. But, here... he is hyperkinetic, a performance that deserves many awards. Which means that Mark Wahlberg, as Mickey, has to play the straight role to his brother's histrionics. This Wahlberg is always able to do and makes his dramatic mark in a less showy manner. Melissa Leo (so strong in *Frozen River*) brings the matriarch, Alice, to frighteningly domineering life. She has an entourage of six daughters who seem something like a Greek chorus in attendance, with moments like the Furies.

This means that, although the boxing is the setting for the drama, and we see inside the gyms, the bouts, the championships, the deals and the pressures, *The Fighter* is a film about family. (It was released at the same time in America as *Animal Kingdom* and both Jackie Weaver and Melissa Leo divided the Best Supporting Actress awards from a variety of critics associations – an out-there matriarch compared with a smilingly-sinister in-there matriarch, both wreaking emotional havoc on their sons.) And Amy Adams (who can do sweet as well as pouty – *Doubt*, *Julie and Julia*, *Leap Year*) is able to adapt to the tough environment as Mickey's girlfriend – who knows how to stand up to Alice.

David O. Russell has not made so many films and they range from *Three Kings* to *I Heart Huckabees*. This is one he can be proud of.

GULLIVER'S TRAVELS

(US, 2010, d. Rob Letterman)

Come to think of it, my first awareness of Gulliver's Travels was Dave Fleischer's 1939 animated version which I really enjoyed and gave me some images of Lilliput which stood me in reasonable stead as I later read Jonathan Swift's satirical 1726 novel. I may have read the Classic Comic version as well.

Which means that this version of Gulliver's Travels is for youngsters learning the story and for those who don't intend to read Swift himself. This is the goofball version.

Jack Black is Jack Black, no smaller than he used to be and still suffering from a poor self-image, despite his flamboyant humour, and still stuck on rock and roll. So, this is the Gulliver that Dean Swift never dreamed of. To find critics and members of the public expecting it to be a 'faithful film version' are in need of reality checks. This is a live-action, cartoon version full of 'cool' and 'dudes' from Manhattan that uses the basic Lilliput story with an excursion to Brobdingnag that is designed for a chuckle and, perhaps, some shots at Americanising culture. (The theatre scenes where the Lilliputians are so moved by Gulliver's version of The Empire Strikes Back and the end of Titanic where Gulliver is 'king of the world' as well as all the lights and posters he gets the people to build to transform a very British Lilliput into Times Square (ads for Gavatar and Galvin Klein), did raise a laugh.

Gulliver has worked in the mail room at a New York publishers, has not had the courage to confess his crush to Darcy, the travel editor. When he pretends to be a writer, off he is sent to the Bermuda Triangle and look where the waves send him.

The Lilliput episodes are as you might expect, although the hero is the tall Horatio, a commoner (Jason Segel) who has a crush on the Princess (Emily Blunt doing a persuasive haughty). Gulliver does a Cyrano de Bergerac to help Horatio woo the Princess. Billy Connolly, Scots accent and all, is the king while Catherine Tate is the queen, both welcome presences. However, Chris O'Dowd as General Edward, all pomp and ridiculousness in the ra-ra British vein is a very welcome comic villain and traitor.

Darcy comes looking for Gulliver and finishes up in Lilliput as well where Gulliver becomes the hero he formerly boasted about being, saves Lilliput and declares his love for Darcy.

And then he bursts into song, as if it were the culmination of a Broadway musical, king, queen, princess and Horatio and the populace all joining in, including the rulers from rival Blefuscu who keep invading Lilliput. The song is Edwin Starr's 1969 anti-Vietnam war song, War.

So, a jolly little lowbrow film, in 3D, which can easily be superseded by the next film version of the book, and a message that we should be ourselves, that pomposity is absurd – and so is war.

HELEN

(US, 2009, d. Sandra Nettlebeck)

Helen had very little commercial release. In fact, it is not a particularly commercial film. Which is a pity since it treats a very serious theme with intelligence and sympathy. The subject is depression.

German writer-director, Sandra Nettlebeck, had experienced the suicide of a depressed friend and read up on the issue. She took a number of years to write this project which has finished as a German-Canadian production.

The story is not unfamiliar. Helen is married to a successful lawyer and her daughter, by a previous marriage, lives with them. She teaches music theory at a college. Everything seems almost perfect as the film opens (after some credits footage of home movies showing a happy Helen and her daughter) with a birthday celebration.

However, signs soon appear that all is not well with Helen. She sleeps fitfully, cleans up obsessively, comes in from jogging to her husband's office, somewhat suspicious, she breaks down, begins to withdraw and weep. There are scenes where she is hospitalised, where a lawyer argues that she can't be kept in the institution, there is more than awkwardness at home, deeper withdrawing and overwhelming depression. It has a profound effect on her husband who has no experience of how to cope with someone he loves suffering like this. Her daughter is upset.

This is all as might be expected from this kind of plot. What makes the difference is the performance by Ashley Judd as Helen. Someone remarked that the actress disappears inside her role so that we see only Helen. This is right. And this

is a great value to the film as the actress makes us frighteningly aware of how much Helen is suffering, the overwhelming nature of depression and the inability to snap out of it as so many people would wish.

Helen has made the acquaintance of a music student, Mathilda (Lauren Lee Smith) at college and finds her again at the hospital since she also suffers from depression. They offer some mutual support, Mathilda being a good listener and finding a value in life by supporting Helen. Helen moves in with her. However, the desperation point is reached. The issue of contemporary shock therapy is also raised.

Goran Visnjic is sympathetic as David, the husband, who did not know of his wife's previous episodes and is torn between trying to understand, trying to do the right thing but not knowing what to do.

The screenplay opts for hope so that the audience is not overwhelmed by the depression that does lead to suicide attempts and deaths. It is not a lecture on psychology or therapy or a study of how a family can cope. Rather, it is a story that takes its audience into the lives of its characters and asks for empathy.

KORKORO

(France, 2010, d. Tony Gatlif)

Writer-director, Tony Gatlif (born in Algeria with a gypsy background and settled in France) has developed a cinema career of making arresting films with gypsy stories, themes of wandering peoples, and a focus on their music, *Latcho Drom*, *Gadjo Dilo*, *Exils*, *Princes...* *Korkoro* is his latest, but it is different from his other films insofar as it takes us back into World War II history.

In Vichy France there was legislation against the gypsies and their way of life, especially preventing them from moving around the countryside. As one of the bigoted and fascist characters says of them in the film, they are considered as vermin. With their poor reputation for being wandering thieves and scoundrels, they did not elicit a great deal of sympathy from the French countryiders. Gatlif ensures that they do receive some sympathy from his audience.

Korkoro is the name the gypsies give to a little boy, an orphan, who follows them and wants to join them. He has been in an orphanage and fostered but has suffered and is hungry. The gypsies are wary but let him tag along. When the gypsies arrive at a fruit-picking destination, they are under scrutiny from the French authorities as well as the German officials in the town.

The film shows the harshness of the treatment towards the gypsies, something they don't understand, especially as they say the war is not their war. The authorities check their documents and use them against them. They are rounded up and interned. The main gypsy character audiences can identify with is the mentally-limited Taloché, a genial clown character – played with some miming allusions by James Thiéree to his grandfather (he is the son of Victoria Chaplin).

A sympathetic vet, who is the mayor of the town, befriends them and also takes *Korkoro* into his house and cares for him. The other sympathetic character is Miss Lundi who works in the town hall office, working with documents, but who also teaches in the local school. She makes an appeal to the gypsies to better their situation by learning to read and write. She gets mixed results. However, she is also part of the resistance and both she and the mayor are arrested and tortured.

The mayor sells an ancestral property for a peppercorn price and it is made available to the gypsies, according to the law, and they could stay for the duration of the war, something they find too difficult. *Korkoro* always helps them. Then, as the situation deteriorates, he pleads to go with them. The concentration camps become a deathly prospect.

Throughout the film, Gatlif is able to introduce sequences of song and dance and the exhilaration of gypsy music.

2010 saw a number of films which took audiences back to the 1940s and occupied France and Vichy France, *Gainsbourg*, *Sarah's Key* along with *Korkoro* and the 2009 *L'Armée du Crime*. An opportunity to remember some hidden aspects of the war experience and to learn more about prejudice and persecution.

LITTLE FOCKERS

(US, 2010, d. Paul Weitz)

Yes, unless there is really clever and witty writing with some good plot developments, sequels begin to wear thin. This is the case with *Little Fockers*. *Meet the Parents* was very funny as we met florist, former agent, Jack Byrnes (Robert de Niro being serious and lacking humour) being ultra-demanding of and threatening to his prospective son-in-law, male nurse, Greg (Gaylord) Focker (Ben Stiller). In the sequel, *Meet the Fockers*, there was the added pleasure of

meeting Barbra Streisand and Dustin Hoffman as Greg's way-out parents. Teri Polo was there as Greg's wife, Blythe Danner as Jack's wife – and Owen Wilson kept turning up.

They are all back. Despite the title, the (very uninteresting) children, the little Fockers, are not in the film all that much. The main addition is Jessica Alba as a drug sales rep who urges Greg to promote a Viagra-like pill called Sustengo, which leads, of course, to some obvious jokes and a trauma for one of the little Fockers (and maybe to the audience to find De Niro complicit in erection jokes). In fact, the screenplay is full of body jokes, bodily function jokes and sex jokes that are more adolescent in tone than adult. They begin in hospital with literal in your end oh!

Not that there aren't some amusing moments. Greg tries to stand up for himself against the domineering Jack. His father, Bernie, comes back from Spain and learning the flamenco. His mother, Roz, has a TV show *Sexpress Yourself* (which Barbra Streisand comperes with relish). Owen Wilson, Greg's wife's old flame, turns up all the time with New Age ideas and techniques to solve all the Byrnes and Focker problems. He got a lot of them from Deepak Chopra – who also turns up in a scene with Wilson. Laura Dern is the principal of a progressive primary school. Harvey Keitel is the boss of a building firm (and has a confrontation scene with Robert de Niro, reminding film buffs that it is more than 35 years since *Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver*).

Paul Weitz (*American Pie*, *About a Boy*, *The Golden Compass*) directs. All three films were written by John Hamburg. This one seems more manufactured than inspired.

LOVE AND OTHER DRUGS

(US, 2010, d. Edward Zwick)

This is one of those films where audiences, especially older (and much older) audiences who may feel impelled to write off the drama as shallow or amoral or both, need to wait until the final credits for any judgment. The first half of the film might qualify for those descriptions but there is much more substance in the second half.

Edward Zwick was responsible for the popular television series, *thirtysomethings*. He knows the market for this kind of entertainment. However, the central characters here are in their twenties (as were Rob Lowe and Demi Moore in Zwick's 1986 film version of David Mamet's play, *Sexual Perversions in Chicago*, *About Last Night*). *Twentysomethings* will identify with this film.

Jake Gyllenhaal plays Jamie, drop-out from medical school, a carefree type from a wealthy and professional family (glimpses of George Segal and Jill Clayburgh as his parents). He also has a wiz younger brother who has built up a company but has the disadvantages of being overbearingly crass and larger than he should be (Josh Gad). Jamie is a salesman with persuasive spiels and a capacity to ooze charm. When he loses his job (he has no scruple regarding sexual adventures and has to pay the price), he finds an opportunity in selling pharmaceuticals, resuming his charm and insistent persistence. He has clashes with Prozac salesman and steals and throws out their samples. But then Viagra appears and he and the drug are a huge money-making combination.

With his doctor friend, Hank Azaria, he poses as an intern and encounters a young woman who has Parkinson's disease. They clash. They don't clash. They relate. They fall out. She, Maggie (Anne Hathaway), is a brash and rather uninhibited type who escorts oldies to Canada in buses to fill their prescriptions in a less expensive place.

So far, so callow and shallow. She is, despite appearances, self-pitying. He is self-centredly self-absorbed.

But, something clicks and he falls in love, finding it difficult to say, but going into action to try to find a cure for Maggie and for Parkinsons. He has gone to a convention in Chicago with its temptations of the high life but she finds that a group of Parkinson's people and their spouses, at an Unconvention, open up ways of living with the illness and making something of life.

But, she is still unwilling to be dependent and so parts with Jamie. Which means that each of them has to face themselves and make mature decisions as to what their future will be and whether it will be together. Can she admit her need for help? Can he? Can he let go of the promotion that would make him more money and fulfil his old ambitions? You guess.

MEGAMIND

(US, 2010, d. Tom McGrath)

Megamind is the inflated name of a galactic being that could have been a superhero but opted for the dark side. Like the hero of *Tangled*, he begins the film by telling us that he is falling to his death. As if... He reminds us that he started

out from another planet as baby, grew up on earth and launched his evil career because he landed in a prison rather than in a wealthy mansion (starting like Superman but turning bad). During his school days, he confronted another intergalactic child who becomes Metroman, the hero.

So, this is an amusing variation of good versus evil, animation style (and 3D if you choose).

But, we are asked not to judge on mere appearances. Megamind is small, blue and is accompanied by his fishy henchman, Minnion, who helps him with his dastardly tasks. Obviously, the city is not keen on Megamind and embraces the heroism of Metroman – who suddenly seems to be vanquished and disappears. In the middle is the Lois Lane variation, Roxanne.

But, it is not as simple as all that. Out with Metroman. Megamind is frustrated with no good character to challenge him. Then, he does the Frankenstein thing and transforms a cameraman, Hal, into a hero, Titan, who then opts for evil himself. What is a supervillain to do!

Megamind has the ability to shape shift and assume other appearances (like Bernard, Roxanne's office associate), so off he goes to rescue Roxanne and save the city. Can he succeed, especially if he is falling to his death?

This one may not stay in the memory all that long but it is enjoyable while it is there. The animation is both traditional as well as doing some satirical drawings of heroes and villains.

The voices come from Will Ferrell doing a range of odd accents as Megamind, while Jonah Hill does not disguise his voice or mannerisms at all as Titan. Tina Fey is a vigorous Roxanne, David Cross a sweet Minnion, Ben Stiller is Bernard (when Megamind is not taking him over) and Brad Pitt is Metroman.

Probably, Megamind would not have minded being Despicable Me.

MORNING GLORY

(US, 2010, d. Roger Michel)

When you can advertise 'From the writer of *The Devil Wears Prada* and the director of *Notting Hill*', you have a guaranteed audience. With the attractive Rachel McAdams starring and the added presence of Harrison Ford, Diane Keaton and Jeff Goldblum, then more audiences will turn up. And enjoy *Morning Glory*.

For integrity's sake, I should declare a special lack of interest in the topic! My radio is fixed on Radio National (and BBC Radio 4 in the UK) and, definitely, definitely, not fixed on popular breakfast programs. *Morning Glory* is about one of those TV shows that people glance at as they are getting dressed, cooking and eating breakfast and getting ready to go to work, shows which rely on pop and popular stories, celebrities and weather personalities and so on. This film tries to have its frittata (cooked by Harrison Ford) and eat it as well. It offers criticism of the breakfast show genre but then more than endorses it. (So, perhaps, Radio National listeners and ABC 24 Hour News viewers need to lighten up – only, perhaps, perhaps!)

The writer of *The Devil Wears Prada* (Aline Brosh McKenna, who also wrote *27 Dresses*) offers the same humorous and sardonic tone to the business world and communication world of television. The director of *Notting Hill* (Roger Michel who also did the serious *Changing Lanes*) brings the same (rather British) tone of humorous observation of human nature.

It is Rachel McAdams' film. Since she was one of the Mean Girls (actually, the leader) in 2004, she has had a series of good roles (*The Notebook*, *Red Eye*, *State of Play*, *Time Traveller's Wife* and Irene Adler in *Sherlock Holmes*) and is able to carry this film as a workaholic, overly ambitious morning television producer.

But, the pleasant surprise of the film is how Harrison Ford can do curmudgeonly and yet make it funny, sometimes appalling, with expert timing. He is the Pulitzer-prize winning journalist who is, according to Patrick Wilson (the love interest here) who was his producer for many years, the third worst person in the world. Ford does sardonic, arrogant, detached, petty, obnoxious (and that is all in front of the TV camera as he co-hosts the morning show). Also along for the ride is Diane Keaton as the on-screen ditzzy-merry host who can chortle at even the most absurd of stories or humiliating stunts for the weatherman (Matt Malloy). Offscreen, she is in the Harrison Ford vein.

Jeff Goldblum has the more serious role of company boss – where ratings mean everything.

Actually, a lot of the action is quite trite, as are the stories aired for indiscriminating viewers, who tend to perk up when the co-hosts begin sparring. But, as light entertainment which doesn't bear too much thinking about, it is a comedy of

errors, comedy of upsets, with dialogue which is sometimes spiky, sometimes sparkling.

SARAH'S KEY (ELLE S'APPELLE SARAH)

(France, 2010, d. Gilles Paquet-Brenner)

This is a very fine and moving film.

For the first half of the film, Sarah is a strong-minded young girl. However, she is caught up in a European situation beyond her control. In the second half of the film, she is not seen on screen but is a strong presence as the audience explores the mystery of her adult life.

The European situation is, of course, World War II. Sarah (Melusine Mayance in a strong performance) is Jewish. She lives with her parents and younger brother, Michel, in the Jewish quarter of Paris. As the film opens (after a tender credits sequence with Sarah playing with her little brother), the French police (rather than the Gestapo) are rounding up French Jews and moving them to the Paris Velodrom nearby. They are kept in squalid, unhygienic conditions with little to eat or drink and with hastily packed suitcases. Before long, the adults and older children are sent to the railway stations to be transported to the camps.

While we have seen these situations on screen before (recently in Gainsbourg), the immediacy of the filming here, the handheld cameras immersing the audience so strongly into the middle of the crowds means that it is more vivid and harrowing than in many of the other films.

But, that is only the beginning. The title refers to the key that Sarah used to hide Michel in a cupboard to avoid detection. She had told him to stay there until she comes for him. This weighs so heavily on her and on her parents that she becomes more and more desperate.

The film is also set in the early 2000s. A French family are moving into the home of the husband's parents in Paris, renovating it. The wife is American and a journalist. When pictures of the 1942 experience of the Jews come up at the office and the very young writers know nothing about these events, she sets out to investigate, which leads to the awareness that Sarah's house is the house of her family. What did they know at the time, since they moved in soon after the rounding up of the Jews?

This raises the issue of the complicity of the French in the treatment of the Jews, the Vichy authorities and the police. The film offers an opportunity to acknowledge what happened and a speech of Jacques Chirac is included in the narrative.

There is a whole lot more to the film. The review so far refers only to the first part, so readers will appreciate just how much there is in the film.

As the plot develops, we intercut between the 1940s and the 2000s, eventually looking at the 1950s and 1960s as well.

A sympathetic French policeman helps Sarah (after initially standing on her foot when she tried to get her key, later allowing her to retrieve an apple thrown over the camp fence by sympathetic local women). Without revealing too much of the plot, one can say that she encounters an elderly French couple who refuse to help at first but then make her part of their family – and she is able to return to the room with the key. Niels Arestrup (the prison boss in *The Prophet*) brings the dilemmas of the ordinary French people under the occupation emotionally to life.

Kristin Scott Thomas plays Julia, the journalist who is searching for the truth of what happened in the home and what happened to Sarah. It is one of Scott Thomas' best and most emotional performances. She can embody coolness and detachment perfectly in many films, so it is moving to see her in this role. Her quest takes her to the US and to Italy and encounter with a middle-aged man, played by Aidan Quinn.

The story that she uncovers has much joy but also much sadness, as has her own story and the repercussions for her marriage, her husband not understanding while her in-laws relish the opportunity to open up what happened in the past and appreciate that there was honour amongst the dishonour in the war years.

The film is based on a novel by Tatiana de Rosnay.

TANGLED

(US, 2010, d. Nathan Greno and Byron Howard)

Becoming tangled could get hairy. Well, here it does for Flynn Rider, a Robin Hood type of sorts (who reveals that his actual name is Eugene). He becomes ensnared by Rapunzel, she of the long and healing hair.

It looks more like a traditional Disney film than most of the other animated films of 2010 – which is fair enough since it is a Disney film. As in the past, the fairy tale has been Disneyfied for a wide audience. This also means that the story has been very much Americanised, accents, some slang and some cutesy bits of dialogue and all. Which does not mean that it is not entertaining, just that it has been Americanised!

Not being too familiar with the tale of Rapunzel, I watched it with more interest than usual. It is an enjoyable variation of Snow White, Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty stories. There is a villainous crone (who has been using a magic healing flower to rejuvenate over the centuries), well voiced by Donna Murphy, who abducts the young princess Rapunzel when the king's messengers have discovered and taken her flower. She raised Rapunzel in a high tower, brushing and cultivating her ever-growing powerful hair.

But, Rapunzel is nearing eighteen and has a longing to descend from her tower. Her rather sarcastic 'mother' has all the reasons why she should not go and tends to mock, then cajole, then spoil Rapunzel.

But, the aforementioned Flynn Rider and his thug partners have stolen the princess's crown from the palace and, to escape, he hurries up the tower. Instead of a romantic welcome (that will come later), she clobbers him with a frying pan! However, out they go into all kinds of adventures, 'mother' arriving back to manipulate matters and coax Rapunzel back, even to resorting to kill Flynn.

As the film went on, it became more and more enjoyable, even with some romantic, some comic and some schmaltzy songs, until 'mother' got hers and there was a happy ever after.

Mandy Moore voices Rapunzel and Zachary Levi (Spock in the 2009 Star Trek) is Eugene. And there is a very entertaining horse who is a great scene-stealer!

THE TOURIST

(US, 2010, d. Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck)

Fluff and nonsense. And in equal parts. A film for winding down, letting the mind go into neutral and just gliding along.

It looks good. Nice scenes of Paris boulevards, apartments and cafes. Very nice scenes of lush Italian countryside. Even nicer vistas of Venice, the canals, the side streets, the Rialto, plenty of them. And the hotel is the Danieli – nothing but the most affluent.

She looks good. That is, Angelina Jolie, looking as glamorous as you could want, dressed to the nines and beyond in a variety of dresses and gowns, walking along the streets and into hotels and ballrooms as if she were permanently on the catwalk of life. Well, I suppose she is.

Can't say that Johnny Depp looks all that good, longish unkempt hair, moustache and an almost permanent look of boyish lostness – even when clambering over the roofs of Venice in his pyjamas, pursued by gunmen. The final line of the film is a joke at the expense of his face.

Perhaps you are getting the picture - or the variety of pictures The Tourist offers.

Plot is another matter.

It seems often enough like a continental romantic comedy. Then there is a kissing scene and the orchestra swells (and there are some when it doesn't swell) and we find that it is all a dream and it is being sent up. Actually, the film has its tongue very firmly in its cheek for a lot of the time and challenges the audience to determine whether it is being serious, being romantic, being silly and spoofing. (Critics and public alike decided that they couldn't decide or didn't want to and thought the film too trivial to give an opinion beyond disapproval.) But, whether you like it or not, that is the point: a glamorous spoof.

Actually, there is more to the plot than that. It is a policier with the touch of the thriller. An Englishman named Alexander Pearce, who committed enormous fraud on a gangster, is being pursued by Scotland Yard (a pleasant Paul Bettany who seems to get it wrong all the time and his boss, Timothy Dalton – as if James Bond had retired to bureaucracy). His girlfriend is under constant surveillance and by Interpol (with some inefficient and some corrupt Italian police as well). Steven Berkoff is at his most Berkoffish as the gangster with Russian thugs and no scruples.

Johnny Depp plays a Wisconsin maths teacher in a completely opposite style to Jack Sparrow, the Mad Hatter or Willy Wonka – which is a bit of relief.

Police, gangsters, thugs,

There are some major, major twists at the end (which you may see coming), but it is to the credit of the cast that they make these twists seem quite implausible when they are revealed. The Tourist would not bear seeing twice because the dialogue, behaviour of the characters and the situations would seem even more improbable than in mere retrospect. This is not a screenplay to engage the intellect.

It is based on a 2005 French story, Anthony Zimmer, starring Sophie Marceau and Yvan Attal with American Christopher Macquarrie (The Usual Suspects) and Julian Fellowes (Gosford Park) contributing to the screenplay.

It is useful to compare the two films. The original French film by Jerome Salle is more streamlined in plot than The Tourist. Sophie Marceau is less aloof than Angelina Jolie, Yvan Attal less scruffy than Johnny Depp. The re-make makes a lot more of surveillance technology and of the detective on the track of the fraudster. The same twists are there but, there is a momentary credibility in the original than in the remake.

However, audiences will recognise the similarities of plot, especially up to the train journey and the arrival in Nice. There is the hotel room, the chase by the Russians, the interrogations by the police. But the new writers have added quite a bit of detailed comic business, some of it witty, some of it droll compared with the original. There is no grand ball in the original but the set up is the same – but maybe Anthony Zimmer at the end is a bit more honourable than Alexander Pearce.

And many eyebrows have already been raised with the discovery that the director of The Tourist is Florian Henckel von Donnersmark. It is his second film – he won the Oscar and universal plaudits for his feature film debut, The Lives of Others. So there!

TRON: LEGACY

(US, 2010, d. Joseph Kosinski)

While Tron: Legacy is a sequel to the now-classic 1982 film, Tron, it is also something of a re-make, a re-interpretation of the original story to allow for the passing of time, the developments in technology and to dramatise a relationship between father and son.

For science-fiction fans, the Grid of Tron (well before the Matrix) has beguiled the imaginations of computer game players as well as those whose lives are devoted to the developments of these technologies. For those less inclined towards the wonders and mysteries of the Grid, this sequel may not do it for them. It is certainly full of whiz-bang wizardry (make that whiz whiz whiz whiz... bang bang bang bang... wizardry) that, in 2010 boggles the senses and the mind (but how will it look in another 28 years?). It is full of strange characters, computer clones who seem human but are highly sensitised robotic creations that can smash in an instant. There are games, competitions, battles. But, is that enough? For many, yes it is. For others, there needs to be a more human component.

And that there is - which will tide the humanitarians in the audience through the wizardry.

The film opens with Sam, the son of Kevin Flynn, who went into his arcade those decades ago and created the Grid, hoping that this alternate world could help the real world to be a better place. The film has a flashback to 1989 with Kevin and his young son, Sam, and their bond after Sam's mother has died and the boy's hopes to share his father's work and insights. But, Kevin never came home.

In the present, Sam (Garrett Hedlund) is something of a daredevil and enjoys sabotaging the Board Meetings of his father's company, now a corporation that puts its futuristic technology on sale instead of making it available, free of charge. Kevin's friend and partner, Alan (Bruce Boxleitner) is still there – but tells Sam he has a message from his father's office.

So, begins Sam's venturing into the Grid and discovering its magnitude and power. But it is dominated by Kevin's creation, an alter ego, Clu (who appeared in the first film). Jeff Bridges played Kevin all those years ago and here he is again, trapped by Clu in the Grid. Bridges brings his age and authority to his role as the benign but imprisoned wise man, happy to be re-united with his son but concerned that he escape from the Grid and from Clu. But, Bridges also plays (as he did before) the ageless Clu (with Bridges affected by computergraphics to look young).

In a way, this is the Frankenstein story again, with Kevin the creator who makes a monster instead of the creature that

could change life. And the monster turns against its maker, jealous of the son and aggressive towards the only remaining artefact of a group that he massacred (Quorra, Olivia Wilde). How will they escape? Which is the issue occupying the last part of the film.

Michael Sheen turns up in the bizarre role of a creature who runs a kind of nightclub and seems to be on something that makes him like a burlesque entertainer gone sinisterly but flamboyantly giggly.

Tron was released in 1982, the year of Blade Runner and both films have us remembering runners, matrixes and even the 2001 voyage beyond Jupiter. The screenplay also offers to those who would like to explore deeper metaphysical themes of being, identity, transcendence and scientific themes of development and their consequences as well as 'ordinary' human themes of family and relationships, material to ponder.

The opening and closing of the film (the real world) have been filmed in 2D, while inside the Grid, all is 3D. (And, not to spoil the ending, there may not be a sequel as the producers now haven't got a Clu!)

UNSTOPPABLE

(US, 2010, d. Tony Scott)

Once the adrenalin starts to kick in for the audience, the impact of this thriller is unstoppable.

Although they have been around for under two hundred years, trains exercise a frequently mesmerising fascination for so many people. And they have provided any number of films with a wonderful atmosphere for murder mysteries like *Murder on the Orient Express*, for disappearances like *The Lady Vanishes*, for trains out of control like *Runaway Train* and *Silver Streak*. This is the story of a train out of control – and is based on actual events from Ohio in 2001.

Director Tony Scott and actor Denzel Washington combined for the remake of *The Taking of Pelham 1 2 3*. They work together this time to much better effect. The action takes place over a couple of hours. The plot is basic. Slob railway workers take short cuts in security and a train with a large number of carriages, some filled with toxic, flammable materials, takes off on its own, making demands on local controllers as well as the rail corporation's executives. Meanwhile, a veteran and a rookie take out an engine to haul some goods carriages – and find themselves in harm's way. They decide to attempt a risky manoeuvre to try to slow down the train and to try to stop it.

Nothing new, but it is always startling.

Scott wastes no time in getting the runaway train going and with realistic styles of camerawork plus a lot of footage from television crews intercut with the rail drama and the characters trying to cope, the pace is quick and constant. It is edge of the seat stuff.

The film gets some drama from what is in the path of the train: a carriage load of school children learning about train travel, a crashed wagon with some frightened horses – and a number of towns that could be contaminated or lit by explosions and, finally, a large city where the train has to go round a curved bend at a slower rail so that it can stay on the track, a bend near a large industrial area.

Denzel Washington gives a confident, laid-back performance, a practical and wise man with 28 years' experience, who knows what he is talking about and is game enough to test his convictions. He is an ordinary working class hero, the backbone of America, a hero one can believe in. With him is Chris Pine (who successfully commanded the *Enterprise* as the younger Captain Kirk in the new *Star Trek*). Pine is a sensible young man who does make mistakes, is ticked off by Denzel but who rises to the occasion. There are some brief aspects of the stories of the two men which offers a little more human interest.

Meanwhile back at headquarters, Rosario Dawson is trying to deal with the unexpected crisis, using common sense, trust in her workers, and not afraid to stand up to the wheeler dealing of the officials.

The film really offers a strong critique of lazy work practices and the petty human reactions that can lead to disaster. It reminds us that there can be dire consequences of pettiness and not taking responsibilities seriously. It is also critical of the powers that be who have one eye on the crisis and the other on the balance sheets.

This is a film which sets out to entertain by telling a story which is exciting and frightening – it could happen. But, like popular entertainment, it also lets us leave the theatre, pleased with and proud of the men and women who do their best to save situations and take risks.

YOGI BEAR (3D)

(US, 2010. D. Eric Brevig)

Yogi Bear is 50 years old this year. He first appeared in his television series in 1961, then a feature film in 1964, Hey There, It's Yogi Bear. With revival of interest in the 1980s, a new series, and the some specials in the 1990s, he has been on screen for half a century. He has now reached the 3D era.

Actually, it's all pretty much the same as usual – which means that it keeps its popular formula and ensures its audience of knowing what they are getting. This is especially so for the younger audiences (who were lining up at the press previews - where the critics were able to sit with a real audience of children and parents - to be photographed with Yogi, Boo Boo, or both).

Yogi Bear is an unlikely hero. He is not the smartest bear in the forest despite his hat and tie and his being able to talk. He is, perhaps, the vainest of bears, and his second name is not modesty. He is also food-obsessed, especially that found in picnic baskets, which he devises many ways of stealing from under the noses of unsuspecting picnickers. So, that provides a lot of the humour (including a pie in the face). He also builds a flying machine which is used for a special mission at the end of the film.

There is a need for a special mission since a corrupt mayor and his Machiavellian public relations assistant have concocted the idea of raising money (for campaigns and bribes) by selling off Jellystone Park and re-zoning it. This to the dismay of Ranger Smith (Tom Cavanagh) who is in the upright tradition of sturdy rangers, and of Rachel (Anna Farris, who has specialised in spoof movies, the Scary Movie series and The House Bunny) who is making a documentary about Jellystone, starring Yogi. There is also Ranger Smith (T.J. Miller) who makes Yogi look like an intellectual. Andrew Daly does the smilingly oily politician very effectively.

This part of the plot might keep parents interested while the children enjoy the slapstick.

Also involved is a frog mouthed turtle, an allegedly endangered species who provides the reason for keeping Jellystone as a park. So, plenty of environmental consciousness.

Dan Aykroyd obviously enjoyed voicing Yogi, but it is difficult to discern Justin Timberlake's voice as Boo Boo.

Easy family entertainment.

END

SIGNIS FILM REVIEWS FEBRUARY 2011

127 HOURS

AFTERWARDS (ET APRES...?)

ARCTIC BLAST

BARNEY'S VERSION

BRIGHTON ROCK

GREEN HORNET, The

HEREAFTER

HOW DO YOU KNOW

MECHANIC, The

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SANCTUM

STONE
TAKERS, The

127 HOURS

(UK/US, 2010, d. Danny Boyle)

127 hours means time going into a sixth day. That was the amount of time that climber, Aron Ralston, was in a crevasse, trapped when he fell and a large stone pinioned his arm.

One of the main features of this true life film (the author wrote of his ordeal in a book titled *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*) is that it shows the irrevocability of an accident. No amount of anger, not the least bit of wishful thinking can change what has happened. It's the precariousness of the accident that comes across as well. Aron Ralston was climbing alone in the mountains, with a limited amount of food and, more importantly, water.

While there are many lyrical moments in the film, this is a story that is visceral and does not hesitate to indicate the reality of the physical pain, especially when Aron decides that amputation of his trapped arm is the only solution for his survival. Not that the film offers too many graphic close-ups, just enough for us to see and for the camera movement and the editing to make the suggestions more powerful.

James Franco plays Aron Ralston and brings him alive as an eager young man who loves the mountains, has a zest for living and finds that his life might be suddenly coming to an end. We are introduced to him cycling hard, climbing vigorously and helping two hiking girls to enjoy the spirit of the climb (and an exuberant freefall into a cavernous pool). These memories will come back to him – and he can also watch them as he has his video camera with him and leaves it on over the days of his suffering. He remembers his family, past episodes (some with joy, some with regret). He is also encouraged to persevere, especially during the amputation, by his vision of a young boy smiling at him.

The director is Danny Boyle, filming after his Oscar-winning *Slumdog Millionaire*. (Boyle has shown great versatility and a wide range of interests: *Trainspotting*, *The Beach*, *28 Days Later*, *Millions*, *Sunshine*). He has worked with *The Full Monty*'s screenwriter, Simon Beaufoy. The atmospheric (sometimes pounding) score was composed by *Slumdog* Oscar-winner, Indian A.H. Rahman.

Boyle has always shown great flair in his visual style, much more evident here with time-lapse photography, split screen shots, and a heightened colour palette for mountains and desert.

As with so many stories of real people, the actual Aron, with his wife and baby son (the premonition fulfilled), appears smilingly at the end – and still climbs though, as the caption reads, he always leaves a note to say where he will be.

AFTERWARDS (ET APRES)

(France, 2009, d. Gilles Bourdos)

From France, a film about death and the afterlife, then from the US Clint Eastwood's Hereafter. The two films could serve as companion pieces.

Afterwards opens with a death and a resuscitation, a little boy who is hit by a car trying to get help for a little girl who has had an accident. He seems dead, but comes out of coma to grow up into a father but also a rather ruthless insurance manager. The question of why he is alive is raised in black and white flashbacks: a doctor who asks the boy why he - came back from the coma.

Romain Duris plays Nathan, the man who came back. When a visitor to his office, Dr Kay, wants to talk to him about his health and caring for himself, he is disturbed. This is exacerbated when the doctor tells him that a man on the subway (the setting is New York) is going to die within minutes. And he does. Dr Kay sees an aura around those who are destined soon to die.

It emerges that Dr Kay really is an authentic doctor and does care for people, especially those who are dying. He comforts their families. Once again, he gives Nathan an indication that someone else is going to die. Nathan mostly believes him and follows through with the doctor's suggestion.

But, the experience so disturbs him that he assumes the doctor is warning him about his imminent death. He decides that he must alter his life and mend the breaks, especially with his estranged wife (who was the little girl at the opening of the film) and daughter. Some moving flashbacks explain why this has happened.

There are many contemplative moments in the film, the languid opening on a lake, fields of puffballs, the desert and a beautiful flower that dies the day it opens.

The film is not exactly about the hereafter. Rather, it presumes the hereafter but wants to emphasise that the important place for healing and forgiveness is here, before death.

Romain Duris is a versatile French actor, very popular in France and in Europe. Dr Kay is played by John Malkovich in a performance that is quite restrained compared with many of his other, rather eccentric, performances and is the more affecting for it.

While the questions of afterlife, of afterwards, are important, Nathan discovers that it is in life that the important choices are made, actions done. He also discovers why he really came back from his coma.

ARCTIC BLAST

(Australia/Canada, 2010, d. Brian Trenchard Smith)

Since the icy blast which powers down through the ozone layer to produce a mammoth freezing originates south of Hobart, the title seems anomalous by a full hemisphere. Surely Antarctic Blast would not have been box-office poison! Actually, it wasn't the box-office takings since this film was released straight to DVD.

It is a close relation to The Day After Tomorrow, with the world freezing, not just North America. And it is a close relation to all those disaster films where the lone hero has the solution to the global problems (this one seems remarkably close the explosions at the end of Armageddon) and the obtuse superior wants to go his own way. But, it is not a close relation to The Day After Tomorrow or Armageddon in terms of budget, special effects or cast. These are quite minimal.

That being said, and allowing for all the impossibilities, coincidences, heroics and challenges to physics laws and action, it is a passably undemanding 90 minutes disaster entertainment. If you are demanding, let it pass.

It's not many films that can boast of being filmed in Hobart – and there are many attractive shots of the city and of Tasmania (before the 'arctic' blast arrives and ices up everyone and everything).

Our hero is an American working in Tasmania (Michael Shanks), married to a wife who feels he is work-preoccupied – there is nothing like a global disaster problem to put paid to this difficulty! He has a teenage daughter who feels neglected and has the touch of rebellion (though she survives but her two friends are iced). Meanwhile his boss in Philadelphia (Burt Davison) is not too sympathetic and wants answers, wants data – and wants them now.

But, it is not only Hobart which bears the brunt of the blast, which as it gathers pace, looks like a pursuing tsunami – and there is a certain amount of morbid enjoyment in seeing it overwhelm popular world landmarks like Big Ben and the Eiffel Tower.

Brian Trenchard Smith, who has made a long career of making this kind of film, directs a cast, mainly of Australians, who do their best to co-operate with the hero and save the world.

Old-style matinee material – with a sparing use of modern effects.

BARNEY'S VERSION

(Canada, 2010, d. Robert J. Lewis)

We all have our own versions of our lives, whether they be accurate or not. Those who have shared our lives with us, or those who have been influenced by us, will have their versions, possibly, even probably, quite different.

Montreal Jewish novelist, Mordechai Richler, chronicled stories of his home city in novels, stories and essays. He was not always a benign critic. Barney's Version came later in his career, many noting the autobiographical connections. Film versions of his novels include Ted Kotcheff's fine *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1974) with Richard Dreyfuss and *Joshua Then and Now* (1985) with James Woods. Barney's Version stars Paul Giamatti, who won a Golden Globe award for his performance.

The place is Montreal, with some excursions to New York City. The time settings go back to the 1970s and move through the ensuing decades.

However, Barney's Version is not a straightforward, linear narrative. The audience is invited to share Barney's memories, the memories of an older, sardonic, gruff and blunt, disappointed, alcoholic man who may not be able to hold on to his memories for much longer. Giamatti shows his ability, first of all in making an on-paper unpleasant character interesting to watch, and, secondly, in portraying the changes that the decades and his experiences make on Barney.

A major focal point for the storytelling is Barney's marital experiences, illustrating the kind of person he was at particular stages of his life. While we are introduced to him as a curmudgeonly older man, stuck in his TV work (a serial that has gone on for years), pestering his ex-wife's husband, cared for by his daughter, we are taken back to his rather more carefree days in Rome, a kind of bohemian life with artistic friends and a sudden marriage to a pregnant girlfriend (Rachel Lefevre) which does not last long. We are also introduced to his best friend, a frequently drug-

sodden writer, Boogie, (Scott Speedman) – and are puzzled by the arrival (in the present) of an aggressive detective (Mark Addy) who has written a book accusing Barney of the murder of his friend. Enough questions and enigmas to keep us wondering.

Barney's second marriage is to a dominating 'Jewish Princess', played with presumptuous verve by Minnie Driver. She has one of the most disapproving fathers in movies. His disdain of Barney in so many scenes is very entertaining in a morose kind of way. But, at the wedding, Barney glimpses Miriam (Rosamund Pike), falls in love and continues over time to pursue and hound her. Eventually, they do marry and spend years together. And, even more eventually, Barney ruins things. Rosamund Pike is a standout in the film. She portrays Miriam with sensitivity and charm, making the audience appreciate how Barney can be infatuated by her, love her, marry her and remain married to her for years. She is a good and patient woman.

But, the actor playing Barney's father, a rather outgoing, randy former policeman not noted for tact, is Dustin Hoffman – a solid reminder of what a scene-stealer he can be. (It is not only older actresses who play mothers on screen, now it is older actors who play fathers, Hoffman and Jack Nicholson in *How Do You Know*.)

This is a Canadian production and three prominent directors have cameos: Atom Egoyan and David Cronenberg as directors of the series and Ted Kotcheff as a train conductor. Bruce Greenwood is the producer who later marries Miriam and Jake Hoffman (Dustin Hoffman's son) plays Barney's son.

The film is over two hours long and not all audiences will be enthralled by meeting Barney and becoming involved in his life. But, for those who do, the story is intriguing, the ending moves towards a pathos we were not anticipating, the performances are of top quality. It is a portrait of a flawed (very) human being, warts and all – but, ultimately, not irredeemable.

BRIGHTON ROCK

(UK, 2010, d. Rowan Joffe)

The new film version of Graham Greene's 1939 novel, *Brighton Rock*, brings some Catholic themes into prominence. A BBC/UK Film Council production, it is directed by Rowan Joffe, who wrote the screenplay for *The American*, a Greene-like drama about a burnt-out hitman. His father, Roland Joffe, directed *The Mission* and *City of God* as well as the forthcoming film about St Jose Maria Escriva, *There be Dragons*, all films with Catholic themes.

Greene himself wrote the screenplay for the Boulting Brothers' 1947 version of *Brighton Rock*, imbuing it with his frequent themes of sin and the possibilities and impossibilities of redemption. His central character, Pinkie (played with force by Richard Attenborough and now by a sullen Sam Riley) is one of the nastiest of Greene's villains, young, brash and ambitious, the opposite of that other Greene arch-villain (all smiles and sinister calculation), Harry Lime, from *The Third Man*. The other central character is the naive young waitress, Rose, who becomes the target of Pinkie's scheming so that she will not turn a police witness against him for the murders he committed.

The setting of the present film is 1964 rather than Greene's original 1930s. It is the period of thugs and gangs, of Mods and Rockers and riots, the time just before the abolition of capital punishment in Britain. The film recreates the period and offers the visuals of Brighton, the dark swirling water, the Pier, the Pavilion, the blocks of waterfront flats, streets, tea rooms and bars, as well as dilapidated houses and estates.

It is not usual to have Catholic characters and themes in British films. However, they are a staple of adaptations of Graham Greene novels. There is no shirking of them here. But, what they do show is how little touched by the depth of faith so many Catholics are. Pinkie says he is 'Roman' but doesn't practise, though he says that atheists have got it all

wrong denying God and, especially, the existence of Hell. But, there is a moment when he is being chased along the beach, when he drops to his knees and starts reciting the Hail Mary. Rose is devout in a junior primary school kind of way. She is pious, prays the Rosary, goes to Church, lights candles, kneels before the Crucifix.

These depictions could serve as an indictment of the frequent lack of adult follow-up in faith development for so many Catholics – which Greene wrote about in the 1930s, in his screenplay in the 1940s and which is again presented here.

The convert Greene always struggled with the teachings of the Church, not only the moral issues, but the theology of sin, grace, forgiveness and redemption. He believed that literature had, of necessity, to be about sin.

The person of grace in the film is the blowsy Ida (Hermione Baddeley memorable in 1947, Helen Mirren in the current version). She is not a person of faith in any way, except in some goodness in human nature, in her trying to protect Rose, and in a sense of justice that evil should be punished. She is no saint, even at the end, but she does good.

This version of *Brighton Rock* brings an old way and style of Catholicism centre screen in a drama that is powerful. Audiences might wonder and question. It is not the core Catholicism of believers whose focus is not just on the Passion and death of Jesus but on the Resurrection (a criticism made of Mel Gibson and *The Passion of the Christ*).

THE GREEN HORNET

(US, 2010, d. Michel Gondry)

This superhero comedy drama has been something of a sign of contradiction.

Diehard devotees of the now so many versions of the superhero on screen have lamented the fact that Seth Rogen is nobody's idea of a hero let alone a superhero and that the action and effects don't match up to other high-tech blockbusters – even though it is made in 3D. Fair enough. But, this viewpoint does seem to miss the point of the movie and the treatment.

Certainly, Seth Rogen (even with a bit of weight loss) cannot compete with Batman, Spiderman (though Green Hornet keeps an eye on the storylines and activities of these heroes) and certainly not Superman and co. And that is how The Green Hornet ticks. It is a tongue-in-cheek romp, a send-up of the conventions of the genre while putting them to amusing use. When we notice that Seth Rogen and his writing partner, Evan Goldberg (Superbad, Pineapple Express), are responsible for the screenplay (with plenty of dude, cool and four letter language), then we should not be expecting po-faced action. When we notice that the director is Frenchman, Michel Gondry, whose projects are never quite straightforward (Eternal Sunshine, Human Nature, Science of Sleep, Be Kind Rewind), then anything is possible.

Which is rather a long introduction to a favourable review of The Green Hornet.

Britt Reid (Rogen) has been treated severely as a boy by his newspaper tycoon father (Tom Wilkinson). He grows up to be a partying spoilt brat (superbad style) who is confronted with responsibility at his father's sudden death. Not that he undergoes a full conversion. He is still vain, petulant, cowardly and so on, despite his undergoing a kind of Bruce Wayne-Batman experience after, by accident, routing a group of thugs. So exhilarated is he (and he has the money to finance the weaponry and cars) that he pushes the paper to promote his new identity as The Green Hornet (much humour about his choice of name and mask).

He actually can't do it at all without the help of his father's mechanic, Kato (Jay Chou in a role that was once Bruce Lee's), who does all the work while Britt takes all the credit (and believes his own publicity). Shades of Inspector Clouseau and his Cato.

Cameron Diaz comes on board the paper and does research on how The Green Hornet is going to act – which, of course, Britt puts into action. Except that he wants everyone to think The Green Hornet, unlike Spiderman, is a baddy: doing good by looking superb. But... the city's criminals and the crooked DA (David Harbour) then set out to get rid of the Hornet – in a series of amusing (except for those who want it all to be serious) bouts of mayhem, chases and action (not least a knockout brawl between Britt and Kato).

Lots of scenes are stolen by the old-fashioned local gangster chief from Russia, especially our first view of him confronting an upstart Armani-suited would-be criminal boss, James Franco (uncredited). As he goes along, exasperated by the Green Hornet, he wants to look more up-market, dressing in red and changing his name from Chudnoffsky to Bludnoffsky. It is to the credit of Christoph Waltz that he is able to make this character both funny and ludicrous as well as sinister. It takes a moment to realise that it is Waltz who looks and sounds so different from his Oscar-winning role in *Inglourious Basterds*.

A superhero tale for those who enjoy more than a touch of the absurd.

HEREAFTER

(US, 2010, d. Clint Eastwood)

An impressive film for audiences who like to reflect on the themes of their movies.

The credentials are impressive. The screenplay was written by Peter Morgan, best known for his political dramas like *The Queen*, *The Special Relationship*, *The Last King of Scotland* and *Frost/Nixon*. He has gone in a very different direction this time, a more meditative approach to his storytelling.

Very interesting that Clint Eastwood should choose to direct the film – and was in production when he turned 80 in May 2010. It is movie-making by an old man who is control of his skills but is thinking thoughts beyond this world. He is exploring themes of near-death experience, the possibilities of an afterlife and of communicating with those who have died.

Clint Eastwood has been directing for over 40 years as well as developing a screen persona for longer: an iconic western figure in the spaghetti westerns, the Dirty Harry policeman in that series as well as the symbolic gunfighters in his 'religious' westerns. He brought this acting career to a close with his coach and issues of assisted suicide in *Million Dollar Baby* and his gruff Walt, a dirty Harry figure who finds self-sacrificing redemption. (After that, he made the tribute to Nelson Mandela, *Invictus*.)

The opening of *Hereafter* is quite overwhelming, action before the reflection. The re-creation of the tsunami in Thailand received an Oscar nomination. But, the film settles down to tell three very different stories.

The structure of the film is quite schematic. Sections of each story are told in regular turn until, in a pleasing way, the three central characters are brought together in London.

It should be said that *Hereafter* has quite a European feel to it rather than a glossy Hollywood style. That and the

seriousness of the subject of the Hereafter might account for the film not doing very well at the US box-office.

The first story is set in Paris and concerns a TV journalist and host (Cecile de France) who tries to come to terms with what she experienced in almost drowning. It affects her relationships, her work and sends her to Switzerland to consult an expert on near-death (Marthe Keller).

The second story is set in San Francisco. Matt Damon works in a factory. We learn that he has powers, mysterious to him as well as to others, whereby he knows matters about a person by touching them. He regrets these powers and the effect they have had on his life and resists the attempts of his brother (Jay Mohr) to make a business out of the phenomenon. There is an episode where a young woman (Bryce Dallas Howard) who does a cooking course with George and she finds out more than she anticipated or wanted.

The third story is set in London. Twins live with their addict mother, trying to shield her from social workers. When one of the twins is killed in an accident and the other is sent to foster care, he wants to know more about his brother whom he senses is always with him. Frankie and George McLaren play the twins as recognisably ordinary boys.

It might seem impossible for the three central characters to meet but they do, not in an overtly contrived way, but satisfyingly. George's love for Charles Dickens' novels is an important factor. He listens to tapes of the novels (read by Derek Jacob whom he meets at the London Book Fair).

Clint Eastwood shows great sensitivity in dealing with the themes and in the performances he gets from the central figures.

This is a film to surrender to and it will be richly rewarding.

(The French film, *Et Apres...?* (Afterwards, 2009) with Romain Duris and John Malkovich, would serve as an interesting companion film to Hereafter, different but touching on similar themes.)

HOW DO YOU KNOW

(US, 2010, d. James L. Brooks)

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Given the strong cast and the Oscar-winning writer and director, James L. Brooks (*Terms of Endearment*, *Broadcast News*, *As Good as it Gets*), it is very surprising how less than involving this romantic comedy actually is.

The premiss is the familiar one: how do you know you are in love?

The centre of the film, and the character asking the question, is a softball champion who has been forced to retire because she is over 30 and a few seconds slower in responses than up and coming players, Lisa (Reese Witherspoon). She suddenly is involved with a baseball player who is narcissistic, with too much money and too exploitative of women, Matty (Owen Wilson). By chance, she encounters business executive, George (Paul Rudd) who is being indicted on fraud – the blame for which is on the father who brought him up, Charles (Jack Nicholson).

Plenty of ingredients, but...

Lisa tends to know her own mind and is really living with Matty on the rebound of her disappointment in not being picked for the softball team. She thinks George is flaky. George falls in love with Lisa, but is tangled in her problems and his own financial difficulties and his relationship with his father. His secretary, the pregnant Annie, (Kathryn Hahn) who is devoted to him, wants him to know the truth about his father.

What is fairly obvious from early in the film takes a long time to work itself out.

Since Reese Witherspoon is so attractive, we are prepared to put up with her dilemmas. Paul Rudd is so nice, we are prepared to be patient until everything is sorted out. Owen Wilson does another variation on his screen persona – and is prepared to send up the naivety and sometimes earnestness of his self-absorbed character. And there is Jack Nicholson, playing a father whom you really couldn't trust.

Some of the speeches seem overwritten and overwrought.

What a pity.

THE MECHANIC

(US, 2011, d. Simon West)

Once upon a time, British Michael Winner used to direct Charles Bronson action dramas like *The Stone Killer*, *Chato's Land*, the *Death Wish* films and, in 1972, *The Mechanic*. But that was four decades ago. Now the sons of the original producers have decided that a remake of *The Mechanic* is in order and desirable, the original having achieved some cult status among the fans of the 70s actioners.

The Mechanic is someone who fixes problems. But, the mechanic's employers are in the business of business and eliminating rivals and threat. The mechanic is a hit man.

This means that this version is a 21st century, glossy 're-imagining' (as they say) of how hit men work and the techniques they use to make a murder seem like an accident or a suicide. This version is so glossy and fast-moving that it could serve as a recruiting film for the profession.

It also presents its audience with something of a moral dilemma (as distinct from the problems concerning hired killers in the first place). Arthur Bishop is an absolutely ruthless hit man. But, as his story progresses and despite his protestations to the contrary, he seems to be gaining some kind of conscience and some moments of remorse. This means that he becomes something of a hero for the story, especially when his employers are unscrupulous tycoons and the son of his best friend (whom he is persuaded to kill) becomes his apprentice, a disreputable young man who is in it for anger release, some risky thrills and some revenge.

Whether the fans who will be following the set-ups and double crosses, along with the skills in murder and cover-ups, will notice the moral dilemmas is another thing.

This is compounded by the casting. Who could be Charles Bronson in the 21st century?

The man who has made a niche for himself and garnered a big group of fans is former Olympic diver, Jason Statham. From *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, through *Transporter* and *Crank* films and a lot of others to *The*

Expendables, Statham who does not claim to be much of an actor but is quite a distinctive screen presence, finds that the Bronson mantle has fallen on him, and seems quite comfortable. Not much of a smiler, in fact not much of a user of facial expressions, he nevertheless, in his silence and abruptness, conveys the feelings of the hit man who knows he should retire and get a life.

Ben Foster (so persuasively evil in 3:10 to Yuma) has no difficulty in conveying the ambiguous character of the apprentice (played by the more genial Jan-Michael Vincent in the original). Donald Sutherland is the father and Tony Goldwyn (so effective as the villain in Ghost twenty years ago) is the ruthless boss.

The film achieves what it sets out to do, tell a moral tale about amoral characters without providing easy answers and peppering it with action and hit men activity along the way.

THE NEXT THREE DAYS

(US, 2010, d. Paul Haggis)

Have you had the experience while watching a film, a new film, that you have actually seen a lot of it before but can't remember where? Fans of French films who have not checked where *The Next Three Days* derives from may well have this sometimes alarming déjà vu. It was a relief at the end to find that it is based on a French drama of only two years ago, *Pour Elle* (Anything for Her) with Diane Kruger and Yvan Attal.. No wonder it was familiar.

France has been replaced by the US, Pittsburg specifically. Paul Haggis (*Crash*, *In the Valley of Elah*) has adapted the plot well and Americanised it very satisfactorily.

It begins as a drama and ends as a thriller, probably quite far-fetched, but suspenseful as the last part unfolds.

Russell Crowe plays a loving husband and father (real life mellowing him?). Elizabeth Banks plays his wife. Suddenly, police intrude into their home and arrest her, charging her with murder. Circumstantial evidence brings a guilty verdict and a long sentence. Her husband visits her faithfully. Her little son affects indifference because she doesn't come home. Can anything be done?

This is a story where a fairly laidback and genial teacher devises a plan to effect his wife's escape from prison. He studies various ways this might be done. He interviews a man who escaped many times and has written a book about it (a solid cameo from Liam Neeson). Gradually, after a long time of hit and miss experiments and testing possibilities, he does make a plan. The question, of course, is, once it is under way, will it work, will the unexpected happen (it does) and can they possibly get away.

While the first part of the film is fairly measured and spends a lot of time building up the characters and showing how the plan might seem a folly, the execution of the plan is effective and tense. Part of the effectiveness of the film is that the family seem fairly ordinary (with Brian Dennehy as the grandfather along with other relatives). Audiences can identify with them, with the shock of the arrest and the prospect of ruined lives.

Entertaining even if you have doubts afterwards that this kind of thing could really happen.

RABBIT HOLE

(US, 2010, d. John Cameron Mitchell)

This is a drama focusing on a couple who have lost their son, hit by a car outside his house. He is their only child and was four years old. Each of them tries to deal with their grief in their own way, but this sets up great tensions because they have reacted so differently. How can they come to terms with what has happened to their son and to them? Can they?

This is a well-written and well-acted film. It offers strong opportunities for Nicole Kidman and Aaron Eckhart to show their dramatic skills. They work well with and against each other so that the audience is drawn into their conflict. Members of the audience will respond in different ways to the husband and to the wife, liking one and disliking the other, judging one and excusing or making allowances for the other.

Nicole Kidman is Becca. Her way of coping tends to suppress too much emotion and to move to a more cerebral stance. Aaron Eckhart is Howie, who is far more emotionally expressive, regretting Becca's moves to eliminate what he values as memories of his son, his dog, the clothes and items in his room, even the suggestion to sell the house. He accompanies Becca to a help group but she is alienated by their outpourings and, especially, of their reliance on religious comfort and their talk of God. She laughs. She walks out. Howie continues to go and befriends Gaby (Sandra Oh) whose husband has walked out on her. Can she supply comfort and support for Howie? Comfort for herself?

What sustains Becca is tracking down the high school student who was the driver of the car. He is also living with regrets and a scruple that it may have been his fault, although the little boy had run out on to the street after his dog. The young man, Jason (Miles Teller) is finishing school but is a sketcher and is composing a graphic comic-book, *Rabbit Hole*.

Becca is also handicapped by her irresponsible sister, Izzy (Tammy Blanchard) and handicapped and helped by her rather simple and homespun mother (Dianne Wiest) who is still grieving the death of her adult son by an overdose. Becca resents her mother's comparing the two deaths and the motherly grief.

While the film is serious, there are some humorous touches, which enable the audience to stay with the drama, with their own thoughts and feelings. The film derives from a play and part of the success of the film is that it has some very strong dialogue and speeches which express the inner life of each of the central characters.

The film is directed by John Cameron Mitchell, better known as a director of some sexually provocative features, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* and *Shortbus*. He makes a very effective transition to more mainstream material with *Rabbit Hole*.

RAMONA AND BEEZUS

(US, 2010, d. Elizabeth Allen)

Definitely for its niche market, younger girls.

Joey King makes a feisty and articulate 9 year old Ramona. She lives in Portland, Oregon, with her older sister, Beatrice (who has become Beezus because Ramona could not pronounce Beatrice properly), Selena Gomez, as well as a little baby sister. Her father is very nice (a genial John Corbett). Her mother is very nice and caring (Bridget Moynihan). And she has a very nice aunt, Aunt Bea, Ginnifer Goodwin. In fact, despite some mischief from Ramona and her frequently getting into trouble, along with bad report from her teacher (Sandra Oh), it is mostly very nice.

This is American wholesome family entertainment – but the boys may be wanting to watch something else (especially if they have sisters and may see all of this in real life).

There are some complications, of course. Dad loses his job and goes out for interviews but you know something will turn up – it does and it is very nice too. Aunt Bea used to have a crush on neighbour, Hobart (Josh Duhamel who must have been wondering at times what he was doing, with his movie reputation, in a film like this). He is back after wandering round for ten years but now realises he loves Bea. One of Ramona's more egregious mess-ups (loads of paints over his vehicle) brings them together.

There is a lot in the film about Ramona growing up and taking responsibility. Her mother handles Ramona's decision to run away with some wisdom. And, an ending with wedding bells, and the family all settled, with Ramona promising to be better behaved, means that all's well that ends very nicely well.

THE ROMANTICS

(US, 2010, d. Galt Niederhoffer)

There is some passing reference to the literary romantics of the 19th century, but this film is a long way from the literature (in some instances it might be more related to their behaviour in real life).

This is a take-it-or-leave-it romantic comedy, based on a novel by the writer-director.

The set-up is this. Several friends from college days, now in their 30s, travel to a wedding. There will be a rehearsal, a pre-ceremony dinner with lots of drinking and lots of rather silly speeches, the anguish of the night before and then the wedding itself. That seems to be straightforward, but it is not. The main visitor, Laura (Katie Holmes), has always been in love with the about-to-be groom, Tom (Josh Duhamel), but they have broken up long since. But, given the characters' expressions and behaviour, it is quite clear that the romance is still smouldering not too far under the surface. So, why has Tom proposed to Katie's old roommate, friend and rival, Lila (Anna Paquin)?

If that sounds interesting, then *The Romantics* might be worth a look. On the other hand, Laura's angst is obvious. Lila's determination is pig-headed with a variety of motivations. And Tom's behaviour still seems incomprehensible.

Candace Bergen turns up for older audiences as Lila's mother and organiser of the wedding.

SANCTUM

(Australia/US, 2010, d. Alister Grierson)

James Cameron gives his name to the publicity for this action adventure which is not in the blockbuster vein, despite the settings and the 3D. It is rather old-fashioned matinee stuff. Not that Cameron's films aren't a bit in the matinee style, especially in their often prosaic dialogue. (This one has the same kind of dialogue but it is peppered with a lot of Australian slang and the touch of crass.) Not that Cameron is not interested in water stories from *The Abyss* to *Titanic*

and documentaries on the Titanic. His cameras are employed here as well. Cameron and the writer, Andrew Wight, who was a diver in caves in the Nullabor in 1988 and had a similar experience, have worked together on all Cameron's films in recent years, especially his underwater documentaries.

Why this film is called Sanctum will have to be one of those mysteries. Perhaps it's the inner sanctum of the last vast unexplored cave and cavernous underground system. But it is no sanctum for the characters who disappear one by one, victims of the elements, the remote and deadly dangers and human flaws and clashes.

The plot? A group of caver-divers are in Papua New Guinea (Queensland and Dunk Island standing in) exploring the vast caves and underground lakes and rivers with a mixture of high current technology and old-fashioned derring-do. As they prepare for going beyond their limits, a cyclone with torrential rains comes down on them and it is a matter of escaping. (Unlike The Descent films or The Cave, there are no mysterious spirits or demons – just the hazards of nature.)

This may mean that the film is really of interest to cavers and divers, perhaps a bit tedious for those who prefer their armchairs or for those who want slambang action. Sanctum is something of a spelunkathon.

While the caves are spectacular (filmed in South Australia's Mt Gambier), the 3D techniques are a little disappointing and (testing with removing glasses throughout) many of the scenes look exactly the same in 2D.

Richard Roxburgh as the tough explorer who finds his identity in spelunking rather than in marriage and family and who barks out orders constantly brings a stronger performance than the script and plot might warrant. Rhys Wakefield is his alienated teenage son – who will come to know and admire his father. The rest of the cast is Australian and allowed to keep their accents and their rough and ready language, except for Alison Parkinson who becomes an American climber who accompanies her boyfriend, Welsh Ioan Gruffudd sporting a broad American accent as a spoilt and self-centred playboy billionaire (we hiss his villainy).

Two cultural elements: a PNG highlander in full regalia, including nose bone, sitting like an icon, but also playing cards; and the quoting of Kubla Khan and Coleridge.

Sanctum offers adventure, B-grade, until the next one comes along – which it will pretty soon. And then the next... and the next.

STONE

(US, 2010, d. John Curran)

It can be safely said that Stone is not a crowd-pleaser. At first glance, it might seem like a thriller, a parole officer confronting a bizarre prisoner and audiences expecting the worst between them. Well, something of the worst does happen but not in a thrilling way. Rather, this film, the screenplay based on his play by Angus McLachlan, is strong on verbal interactions, often a two-hander between officer and prisoner, between officer and prisoner's wife, between officer and his wife.

So, this is a psychological drama, a drama of tests of integrity as well as of manipulative game-playing and seduction. It is not a pacy drama. It requires attention from its audience, demands that they get over their fidgets. Attention to the wordplay and verbal jousting means a deepening awareness of (very) flawed characters, not really sympathetic personalities who have made messes of their lives or who have messed others' lives.

The director is John Curran who is at home with this kind of material, who does not compromise in presenting harsh realities and relationships. His films include *Praise, We Don't Live Here Anymore* and his powerful version of Maugham's *The Painted Veil*. Curran's direction is unhurried and he uses the camera to help us focus on particulars (the characters' eyes and gazes, trapped and crushed insects), long takes, careful framing. Curran also tinkers with the sound engineering, a lot of sounds, noises (which the prisoner becomes conscious of) and regular snippets of religious radio and rather literal biblical moralising.

There is also an alarming prologue concerning the parole officer, his young wife and his baby daughter which sets a violent tone to what will develop. Then the film moves forward two decades or so. The officer is at home with his wife, church-going, scripture reading, she particularly religious and emotionally damaged. At work, he has to be tough, but he is about to retire. He wants to keep his last case-load before leaving. And that is where he encounters the prisoner.

The officer is played by Robert de Niro, a more subtle performance than many of his recent turns, yet with a range of moods at home and at work. He is not really a nice man but he looks as if he has learned some integrity. Edward Norton is the prisoner, reminding us of how extraordinarily deceiving he was in his first film, *Primal Fear*. He wants to get out as does his schoolteacher wife who sets out to work on the officer. The seduction is well written and well played, with Milla Jovovich acting more effectively than all the *Resident Evil* performances combined. And, at home, Frances Conroy gives a fine performance as a complex, wounded woman.

The interactions become dramatically intense at times as integrity is tested. Where can it end? The finale here is not a cut and dried American ending. Life will go on but how?

Stone (the nickname of Norton's Character) will not draw big audiences, but it may find a following for audiences interested in offbeat dramas and the work of John Curran and his cast.

THE TAKERS

(US, 2010, d. John Luessenhop)

Nothing subtle about the title of this heist action thriller. The central characters are real takers. They commit armed robberies and have no scruple in taking what they want to be theirs.

Maybe nothing particularly new here – but who says that everything has to be new? Yes, this is a gang of thieves. They work together. Some of them fall out. (Come to think of it, there is more than a resemblance to *The Town*, which was in fact made after *The Takers*.) But, this is a rather affluent group of seeming gentlemen who act thuggishly. They dress smartly, speak well, live in the best hotels and wear tailor-made clothes which, of course, they can afford. Idris Elba is the leader with some suavity and brains. Paul Walker look as if he has gone further out in defying the law than in the *Fast and Furious* series. Hayden Christensen is meant to offer brawn, though he still looks scrawny. Somebody mentioned he is acting-challenged and there seems to some truth in this. Chris Brown (who does the longest and most complicated run from the police chase in movies and doesn't seem too much out of breath) and Michael Early are two brothers. They are joined by a former member of the gang who is coming out of prison (Tip Four of the gang are African Americans.

And the law? We are initially surprised to find that two characters whom we may have thought were part of the gang are LA police. Matt Dillon gives strong performances these days and is the tough cop, full-time committed and vigilant (divorced with a young daughter whose parental visits are spoiled as he follows leads instead of taking her out). His partner is the pleasant Jay Hernandez who finds problems of his own. Zoe Saldana has a brief role as a girlfriend and Jonathan Schaech is the respectable seeming money manager for the thief.

There are two major heists, one brief and efficient, the other something of a fiasco (but not quite).

Thus the plot and characters. The rest of the review needs to emphasise that this is pretty much a non-stop actioner, fast, handheld camera work to remind us that it is real. Pounding score with music, editing, dialogue and performance all aimed at adrenalin pumping. The Takers does what it set out to do (which was not to be a masterpiece but a robbery genre piece).

END

From France, a film about death and the afterlife, then from the US Clint Eastwood's Hereafter. The two films could serve as companion pieces.

Afterwards opens with a death and a resuscitation, a little boy who is hit by a car trying to get help for a little girl who has had an accident. He seems dead, but comes out of coma to grow up into a father but also a rather ruthless insurance manager. The question of why he is alive is raised in black and white flashbacks: a doctor who asks the boy why he came back from the coma.

Romain Duris plays Nathan, the man who came back. When a visitor to his office, Dr Kay, wants to talk to him about his health and caring for himself, he is disturbed. This is exacerbated when the doctor tells him that a man on the subway (the setting is New York) is going to die within minutes. And he does. Dr Kay sees an aura around those who are destined soon to die.

It emerges that Dr Kay really is an authentic doctor and does care for people, especially those who are dying. He comforts their families. Once again, he gives Nathan an indication that someone else is going to die. Nathan mostly believes him and follows through with the doctor's suggestion.

But, the experience so disturbs him that he assumes the doctor is warning him about his imminent death. He decides that he must alter his life and mend the breaks, especially with his estranged wife (who was the little girl at the opening of the film) and daughter. Some moving flashbacks explain why this has happened.

There are many contemplative moments in the film, the languid opening on a lake, fields of puffballs, the desert and a beautiful flower that dies the day it opens.

The film is not exactly about the hereafter. Rather, it presumes the hereafter but wants to emphasise that the important place for healing and forgiveness is here, before death.

Romain Duris is a versatile French actor, very popular in France and in Europe. Dr Kay is played by John Malkovich in a performance that is quite restrained compared with many of his other, rather eccentric, performances and is the more affecting for it.

While the questions of afterlife, of afterwards, are important, Nathan discovers that it is in life that the important choices are made, actions done. He also discovers why he really came back from his coma.

An impressive film for audiences who like to reflect on the themes of their movies.

The credentials are impressive. The screenplay was written by Peter Morgan, best known for his political dramas like The Queen, The Special Relationship, The Last King of Scotland and Frost/Nixon. He has gone in a very different direction this time, a more meditative approach to his storytelling.

Very interesting that Clint Eastwood should choose to direct the film – and was in production when he turned 80 in May 2010. It is movie-making by an old man who is control of his skills but is thinking thoughts beyond this world. He is exploring themes of near-death experience, the possibilities of an afterlife and of communicating with those who have died.

Clint Eastwood has been directing for over 40 years as well as developing a screen personal for longer: an iconic western figure in the spaghetti westerns, the Dirty Harry policeman in that series as well as the symbolic gunfighters in his 'religious' westerns. He brought this acting career to a close with his coach and issues of assisted suicide in *Million Dollar Baby* and his gruff Walt, a dirty Harry figure who finds self-sacrificing redemption. (After that, he made the tribute to Nelson Mandela, *Invictus*.)

The opening of *Hereafter* is quite overwhelming, action before the reflection. The re-creation of the tsunami in Thailand received an Oscar nomination. But, the film settles down to tell three very different stories.

The structure of the film is quite schematic. Sections of each story are told in regular turn until, in a pleasing way, the three central characters are brought together in London.

It should be said that *Hereafter* has quite a European feel to it rather than a glossy Hollywood style. That and the seriousness of the subject of the *Hereafter* might account for the film not doing very well at the US box-office.

The first story is set in Paris and concerns a TV journalist and host (Cecile de France) who tries to come to terms with what she experienced in almost drowning. It affects her relationships, her work and sends her to Switzerland to consult an expert on near-death (Marthe Keller).

The second story is set in San Francisco. Matt Damon works in a factory. We learn that he has powers, mysterious to him as well as to others, whereby he knows matters about a person by touching them. He regrets these powers and the effect they have had on his life and resists the attempts of his brother (Jay Mohr) to make a business out of the phenomenon. There is an episode where a young woman (Bryce Dallas Howard) who does a cooking course with George and she finds out more than she anticipated or wanted.

The third story is set in London. Twins live with their addict mother, trying to shield her from social workers. When one of the twins is killed in an accident and the other is sent to foster care, he wants to know more about his brother whom he senses is always with him. Frankie and George McLaren play the twins as recognisably ordinary boys.

It might seem impossible for the three central characters to meet but they do, not in an overtly contrived way, but satisfyingly. George's love for Charles Dickens' novels is an important factor. He listens to tapes of the novels (read by Derek Jacob whom he meets at the London Book Fair).

Clint Eastwood shows great sensitivity in dealing with the themes and in the performances he gets from the central figures.

This is a film to surrender to and it will be richly rewarding.

Almost two hundred years ago, poet William Wordsworth was able to contemplate a life after death at Tintern Abbey. He spoke of 'intimations of immortality'. In many Western cultures these days, there seems to be an innate scepticism about this topic, even an automatic rationalist antipathy to the very thought on the part of many intellectuals. This was evident in the rather aggressive phrases used to critique Clint Eastwood's recent more meditative film, *Hereafter*. 'Jawdroppingly silly' was the verdict of one reviewer.

Yet, there has been a recent movie interest in this theme, not only with *Hereafter*, but with a French Canadian production whose title asks, *Et après?* It was translated as *Afterwards*. Even a Kate Hudson romantic comedy took up the theme of a young woman dying of cancer in *A Little Bit of Heaven*. The public, however, is still resistant to these themes, judging by box office returns, although it has no difficulty in embracing the otherworldly tales of Tolkein, C.S.Lewis or *Avatar*.

Interest in the afterlife in the movies has fluctuated between the comic and the serious. In the 1940s, especially from Hollywood during the war, there were fantasies like *Here Comes Mr Jordan* and *Heaven Can Wait* where people went into the next world and were given a chance to live life again or take a lift going up or down! Some fantasies were serious like *A Guy Named Joe* where Spencer Tracy, killed in action, is commissioned to help people on earth and then go to heaven. The British post-war drama, *Stairway to Heaven* imagined a heavenly court where the dead were judged.

Over the next sixty years, there were the same patterns. *Here Comes Mr Jordan* was remade a number of times (*Heaven Can Wait* and *Down to Earth* indicating the good to be done down here before settling into heaven). Steven Spielberg remade *A Guy Named Joe* as *Always* (with Audrey Hepburn as an angel). There have been quite a number of 'guardian angel' films where people have a sense that there is a presence helping and guiding them.

Very few films, however, try to imagine what heaven or hell might really be like. It is easy to take a parody look at hell in such films as *Little Nicky* or Woody Allen's *Deconstructing Harry*. The main serious attempt to show heaven and hell was in an ambitious but a not so successful film, *What Dreams May Come*. Heaven was a fulfilment of the way we looked at earth, in its beauty. Hell was quite frightening, especially a sequence of what looked like a sea of lost souls.

However, apart from banquet imagery, or the weeping and gnashing of teeth, the scriptures do not give us much detail at all about the afterlife. Paul says that no eye has seen, nor ear heard... He says that when we die we will fully love and know God and be fully known and loved. I John reminds us that we will have the fullness of life. Which means that films on the afterlife are really showing us aspirations and hopes. They remind us of the experience of death and what we need to do on earth before we leave it.

This is the key to the three recent films.

A Little Bit of Heaven is the lightest of the three though probably the most accessible to a wide audience. When the heroine is diagnosed with cancer, she has a comedy version of a near death experience, imagining God looking and sounding like Whoopi Goldberg (genial at least). Marley has lived a self-centred life, unable to make commitments. Her progress towards death is marked by some angry outbursts against friends and family, but she is moved to fall in love and to make steps towards reconciliation with everyone.

This plot is very similar to a Filipino film, 100.

February sees a mixed bag of releases while audiences are expected to patronise the Oscar and other awards' nominees. However, the Oscar winner for Best Documentary Feature, *Inside Job*, is included here. So is Peter Weir's *The Way Back*, gruelling to watch, but with a lot to reflect on, human nature, survival and reconciliation.

Some of this month's releases were screened during the Berlin Film Festival and are reviewed in that section: *True Grit*, *Unknown* and the Australian film, screened there for younger audiences, *Griff the Invisible*.

SIGNIS FILM REVIEWS BERLINALE 2011

As always, there was a wide range of films to be seen in all sections of the Berlinale. It was the Iranian film, *Nader and Simin, a Separation*, which stood out at its press screening and subsequently won The Golden Bear as well as the prizes for best acting ensembles, both male and female.

Nader and Simin also won the Ecumenical Award for the Competition.

The Ecumenical Jury also gave a commendation to *The Forgiveness of Blood*, a contemporary story of blood feuds which keep old traditions in Albania. The International Jury gave it its award for Best Screenplay.

A popular film opened the festival, *Berlinale*. On the last day of screenings, audiences saw *Unknown*, filmed in its entirety in Berlin, with plenty of glimpses of well-known landmarks, which pleased the local audience. There were three German films in Competition, *Sleeping Sickness* which raised issues of Europeans working in Africa, *If Not Us, Who* which took up the themes of 60s protest and 70s violence in Germany, and a popular thriller variation on World War II stories, *Mein Bester Feind*. (The applause for the last two films at the Friedrichstadt Palast was long and loud – and cheers when the villains of *Mein Bester Feind* were ultimately defeated and humiliated.)

While the Ecumenical award in the Panorama competition went to the very serious look at women and rape, *Invisible*, another film in that section worth looking at was *Even the Rain*, (Tambien la lluvia), Spain's nomination for Best Foreign Language Oscar in 2010.

What follows are reviews of the films seen in Berlin.

ALMANYA – WILKOMMEN IN DEUTSCHLAND (WELCOME TO GERMANY)

AUSENTE

CAVE OF FORGOTTEN DREAMS

COME RAIN, COME SHINE

CORIOLANUS

DANCE TOWN

DEVIL'S DOUBLE, The

FEMMES DU 6IEME ETAGE (WOMEN OF THE SIXTH FLOOR/ SERVICE ENTRANCE)

FORGIVENESS OF BLOOD, The

FUTURE, The

GRIFF THE INVISIBLE

GUARD, The

IF NOT US, WHO

INVISIBLE

LATE BLOOMERS

MARGIN CALL

MEIN BESTE FEIND (MY BEST ENEMY)

MUNDO MISTERIOSO, Un (A MYSTERIOUS WORLD)

NADER AND SIMIN, SEPARATION

ODEM

OUR GRAND DESPAIR

PINA

PREMIO, El (THE PRIZE)

ROMEOS

SCHLAFKRANKENHEIT (SLEEPING SICKNESS)

SWANS

TAMBIEN LA LLUVIA (EVEN THE RAIN)

TROPA DE ELITE 2 (ELITE SQUAD 2)

TRUE GRIT

UNKNOWN

UTOPIANS

VAMPIRE

V SUBBOTU

WIND AND FOG

YELLING TO THE SKY

ALMANYA – WILLKOMMEN IN DEUTSCHLAND

(Germany, 2011, d. Yasemin Sanderelli) (COMPETITION)

With many ultra-nationalist movements arising in modern Western Europe, here is a pleasing rejoinder that blends serious issues with a comic and light touch.

The issue is that of the Turkish presence in Germany, the descendents of the Turkish guest-workers who were encouraged to migrate and augment the workforce in the 1960s. How hearty now is the Welcome to Germany?

While the story starts in the present, with the grandfather and grandmother who migrated in the 1960s and 1970s (he, by courteously stepping back for another migrant in a queue to become the millionth and first worker entering) wanting to

become naturalised (he no, she yes), we are taken back to those early days in Turkey. The story is being told by one of the granddaughters to her little cousin who has been bullied at school. The teacher has asked the Turkish children where they came from. He is from Anatolia but the teacher's map ends with Istanbul – but this is righted at the end! We are shown the courtship of the young couple in the village, the marriage, his work in Germany and the correspondence, the children and their growing up, the transition to Germany. They are some funny scenes as mother and children go into their new apartment and draw all kinds of conclusions about German cleanliness, lack thereof, and other problems. There is also a funny scene when the old man has a dream before his citizenship ceremony where the busy official asks whether he and his wife will be good Germans who eat pork regularly and go to Majorca for holidays every two years.

At a family gathering in the present, the old man announces he has bought a house in Turkey and everyone is to go there for their holidays. So, much of the latter part of the film is the rediscovery of Turkey, the combining of the love of the country of origin with the love of the country of adoption.

AUSENTE (ABSENT)

(Argentina, 2011, d. Marco Berger) (FORUM)

The title comes from roll-call, Present and Absent. The setting is a secondary school. The issue is sexual desire and attraction, seduction and boundaries and the consequences of crossing boundaries.

The film is brief, small-budget, the work of writer director, Marco Berger who has also edited the film (which is generally darkly photographed and has a sometimes disconcerting score). Berger has said that he admires Hitchcock thrillers, especially *Psycho*, where a central character dies and is absent from the rest of the film.

The theme is controversial. How calculating can a 16 year old boy be as he discovers his sexual orientation and connives and contrives to place a teacher in a situation that has a plausible prima facie innocence? And how does a teacher who knows the ethical boundaries deal with such a calculated situation?

The treatment is frank but generally restrained which makes the film an interesting case study.

CAVE OF FORGOTTEN DREAMS

(US, 2011, d. Werner Herzog) (SPECIAL SCREENING)

Cave of Forgotten Dreams is an evocative title for any film. It reminds us that we are people of imagination, stories and images lurking just below the surface of our consciousness or buried much deeper, coming to light unexpectedly. They can be both creative and destructive. Philosophers like Plato speculated on reality and images through images on a cave wall.

German director Werner Herzog (resident in the United States for some time) has been a film-maker who has explored many a forgotten dream in an almost five decades career of offbeat film-making. He recreated the angry, passionate dreams of the conquistador, *Aguirre the Wrath of God*. He filmed the ambitious dream of a latterday artistic conquistador who wants to build an opera house but has to haul a boat over South American mountains, *Fitzcarraldo*. Dreams are Herzog's staple.

For some time, he has been making documentaries and this is his latest. Even his documentary choices have been maverick: Kuwaiti oil fields aflame (*Lessons of Darkness*), the death of a couple who lived amongst grizzlies in Alaska (*Grizzly Man*), his visit to Antarctica (*Encounters at the End of the World*) and many more. Then he surprises everyone by making American films, even police thrillers, *My Son, My Son, What Have Ye Done* and the remake of *Bad Lieutenant*.

This time he is far more straightforward (at least until the final twenty minutes), filming a solidly interesting documentary about the primeval paintings discovered in the French caves in the valley of the Ardeche in 1994. The Chauvet Pont-d'Arc Cave (named after one of the discoverers), is a vast cave, blocked at its entrance thousands of years ago, preserving the art and many fossilised bones. Carbon dating indicates that they are more than 30,000 years old. The film was made in collaboration with History Films.

The paintings exhibit some sophistication: walls scraped for better surfaces for the art, etching as well as incising around some of the figures.

It is Herzog himself who speaks the narration. On the whole, it is surprisingly objective most of the time, a tone of respect and wonder and straightforward communication of information and what it was like for him and his crew to be allowed into the caves and the methods and difficulties of filming (especially the light).

Since the preservation of the art work is important - and there are dangers (as has happened in other caves) of deterioration because of atmospheric effects (and tourist breathing) - it means that the caves are quite off limits except to scientists, palaeontologists and other specialists. Herzog received a privileged permit in being allowed access to film. With the limits of a crew of four and with small cameras, he has captured the majesty and beauty of the caverns, the great stalactites and stalagmites, and offers his audience ample opportunity to contemplate the long-trapped paintings.

There are a great number of interviews to explain the history raising and all kinds of scientific questions. After 90 minutes, we have a fairly good grasp of the caves and their treasures, even though we would not pass an immediate exam after the film.

It is said that there are thirteen different species of animals, principally horses, on the walls of the caves. While most of the interviews attempt to give informed data about the caves and paintings (with references to other parallel paintings

like those of Australian aborigines), there are some locals and eccentrics who offer some Herzog-like interpretations and speculations.

The film has been shot in 3D processes. While this does not make a great deal of difference in the early part of the film (except for shots of the crags and ravines in the magnificent remote landscapes), it comes into its own in the latter part where Herzog simply photographs the paintings, roving over them, meandering, just as we might gaze at them, focusing on one, turning our gaze to another and then repeating our looking with moments of contemplation.

But, just before the end Herzog goes into Herzog mode, trying for some mystical and transcendental meanings (not a bad thing in itself). At best Herzog's reflections are evocative, suggesting that we think into the lives of the painters and what this artistic output meant to them. He wonders what these discoveries and investigations could mean for us as we think about human nature, its development and capacity for survival over millennia. Herzog has always been eclectic so many of his comments are random and idiosyncratic. Sometimes they are more than slightly oddball as he expresses them (albino crocodiles and other symbols included). But, maybe, as we have time to meditate before the paintings, our own imaginings and thoughts might be poetic and oddball about these ancient painters and their lives.

Herzog suggests, in a playfully serious voice, that these images are 'proto-cinema'.

We can certainly be grateful for this cinematic service in Herzog's revealing the caves and the art to us.

COME RAIN, COME SHINE

(Korea, 2011, d. Lee Yoon-ki) (COMPETITION)

Plenty of rain, not much evidence of shine.

After a single ten-minute take with he and she driving to the airport, engaged in casual domestic conversation, she quietly tells him that she is moving out with another man. The film then slows right down to fifty minutes of her packing, wandering their house, remembering details, some slight interactions, giving us more than ample time to be interested (or not) and decide whom we should like/dislike. It is pouring outside.

Then a little cat falls through a grate. They rescue it. It scratches the husband and his wife tends to it. The chatty neighbours who are looking for the cat, arrive, talk, compare notes, turn on the TV for the weather, devise ways of enticing the cat out and, finally, leave. He prepares a pasta meal, she a salad. He goes upstairs to wash his eyes after cutting up onions. The cat returns, eats fish from a tin, and she looks at it.

The cat symbolises the woman and her behaviour, scratching the man, returning and being at home. Come shine.

CORIOLANUS

(UK, 2011, d. Ralph Fiennes) (COMPETITION)

The name is not readily on the tip of the tongue, not even for many Shakespeare buffs. The plot is not well-known.

Julius Caesar, yes. Even Titus Andronicus for many. But, Coriolanus?

Ralph Fiennes has performed the role on stage and has not only starred in this cinema adaptation (adeptly abbreviated by John Logan from Shakespeare's long text) but producing and directing. Fiennes shows a sure hand in direction and, of course, brings Coriolanus to vivid life himself.

As with Ian McKellen as Richard III in the 1990s, Coriolanus is brought into the present, echoing most forcibly the Balkan wars of the 1990s. And, filming was done in Serbia and Montenegro, with Belgrade itself standing in for Rome. Strong stuff.

One of the best features of the film is the manner of reciting Shakespearean verse or, rather, speaking it with rhythms that are close to ordinary speech, making the lines comprehensible and dramatically effective. Only at a few key points does Coriolanus declaim and it is appropriate. This is a non-declamatory film, the cast using a tone that is far from less than loud – and all the more persuasive.

While this is true of Ralph Fiennes himself, it is true of Vanessa Redgrave's fine performance as Volumnia, Coriolanus' proud, even militaristic mother, a possessive, ambitious and warlike woman whose love for her son is sometimes alarmingly intense but is the key to the resolution of Coriolanus' crisis of pride and revenge against the Rome that disowned him.

Brian Cox is effective as Coriolanus' mentor, Senator Menenius. Gerard Butler seems somewhat stolid as the leader of the Volsci, Aufidius. The other impressive members of the cast are Paul Jesson and James Nesbitt (Northern Ireland accent and all – to Gerard Butler's Scot's tones) as the powerful tribunes that engineered the ousting of Coriolanus. There are some savage battle sequences (tanks and explosions) and some hand to hand fighting between Aufidius and Coriolanus. Shakespeare's tragedies and histories all have bloody moments and Coriolanus is no exception, although they fit well here.

A key factor in Fiennes' interpretation is the role of protests (the film screening in Berlin only days after the ousting of President Mubarak by protesting and demonstrating Egyptians). Some protestors are genuine. Some are rabble rousers. Some are vicious. And all show that they can be manipulated by the politically shrewd (be they protestors or politicians).

And the media. Coriolanus is no charismatic television personality. He certainly does not play to the crowd or the media gallery (rather against it). In a reality TV parallel, he is quickly voted out by the public and made to leave Rome. Shakespeare's focus is on the state and order in the state, hubris and its consequences, leading to a personal revenge. As in Shakespeare's other plays, order in the state is restored but at a cost.

DANCE TOWN

(Korea, 2011, d. Jyon Ku-hwan) (PANORAMA)

Dance Town sounds far too chirpy a title for such a sad, almost despairing film.

We do not usually see many films with a North Korean setting. While Dance Town opens with vistas of Seoul but also shows a middle-aged woman being sick on a bridge, most of the film is flashback. The woman, a former table tennis champion, divorced from a cheating husband, now happily re-married, lives in a suburb of Pyongyang. Her husband goes on business trips to the south and brings home illegal cosmetics and DVDs. He does errands for unknown sources. But, she is soon advised by her husband to escape to the south.

The film is about the plight of refugees from the north, some initial suspicions on the part of officials and interrogations and continued surveillance and phone tapping. There is a welcome from government, social and religious (US Protestant) groups. She is able to share experiences with other refugees but she is basically lonely, anxious about her husband in the north. She is also exploited and abused by an envious policeman.

There are some sub-plots concerning social workers, Methodist missionaries and a schoolgirl who takes abortifacient pills.

Downbeat even to the end, serving as a sad reminder that the aftermath of escape can be highly traumatic.

THE DEVIL'S DOUBLE

(Belgium, 2011, d. Lee Tamahori) (PANORAMA)

Maybe you remember those stories about the dissolute sons of Saddam Hussain. They were rife in the 1990s and re-invigorated at the time of the invasion. Maybe you remember the headlines only but none of the details. That is where this drama comes in. Plenty of details.

With a great deal of news footage of the Iraq-Iran war during the credits, this film anchors its portrait of Uday Saddam Hussain in the historical realities. It also spends some time on the rivalry between Kuwait and Iraq and Iraq's anger at Kuwait and its oil dealings and separation from Iraq. However, with the death of Uday during the early part of the 2003 invasion, the politics of later Iraq are not to the fore.

The film is based on the actual experience of Latif (who, in fact, attended the premiere of the film at the Berlinale). He was at school with Uday and many had noticed the resemblances. After serving in Iran, he was summoned to the palace to be threatened by Uday that he was to become his brother and serve as his double. Saddam Hussain also had his doubles (playing tennis with one of them in a bizarre sequence). Latif is repelled by the completely capricious self-indulgence of Uday (of which we are shown many examples). While Saddam Hussain may have unified Iraq, he allowed a decadent upper class to flourish and a regime that held little respect for accountability (irrespective of weapons of mass destruction).

What makes this film not only interesting (sometimes in a prurient kind of way as we are fascinated by Uday's psychopathic sexuality and violence - his treatment of a 14 year old schoolgirl and of a bride on her wedding day appal us, and Latif), is the presence of British actor, Dominic Cooper. His seriousness as Latif, undergoing the transformation at great personal cost, his attempts at mimicking Uday, especially for morale-boosting at Basra, his conscience, make Latif an admirable character. But Cooper also performs as Uday, squeaky voice, gap-toothed, vain, selfish, deluded, a fascinating monster, and makes him completely credible, especially as the two characters spend a lot of time on screen together.. It is a great tour de force.

The production values are quite lavish. Ludivine Sagnier appears as an ambiguous woman in both men's lives. Philip Quast is Saddam himself.

Uday is a completely repellent character but the film certainly makes you think.

LES FEMMES DU SIXIEME ETAGE (THE WOMEN OF THE SIXTH FLOOR/ SERVICE ENTRANCE)

(France, 2011, d. Philippe Le Guay) (COMPETITION)

National and cultural identity is a concern in 21st century Europe. Who are all these migrants? Where do they come from? What are they doing here? Is it just economic migration? Does it threaten the national culture? According to this entertaining comedy, the questions have been round for a long time. In fact, in France, 1962, there was a huge influx of Spanish maids.

This comedy (like *Almanya – Welcome to Germany*, concerning Turks and Germans) is an entertaining and often telling

way to make a point about migrants and their being welcomed or not and their trying to live within a different culture. Fabrice Luchini tends to take serious roles, often villains in historical pieces. Here he is effective as a comedian, but mainly in his reactions to what is going on around him, often a performance of double takes. He is a financial adviser who has lived in his apartment all his life, inheriting his company from his father. He has an ambitious socialite wife (Sandrine Kiberlain) and two insufferable young sons. He has a maid who has worked for 25 years with the family. When she leaves, his wife takes her friends' advice to employ a Spanish maid, Maria (Natalia Verbeke) and you know the scene is set for his loosening up, even falling in love, his becoming more Spanish as he gets to know all the Spanish maids who live on his top floor, and his wife getting her comeuppance.

It is generally bright and breezy, the group of older maids (moving out of Franco's Spain, so providing a subtext for the film) are a lively and devout lot and Maria, of course, has a secret. While it does work out, on the whole, as we might expect, it is the funny moments, the sentimental moments (and the satirical moments at the expense of gossiping Parisian women) that carry it along as an entertainment and as a film with a cultural message,

THE FORGIVENESS OF BLOOD

(Albania, 2011, d. Joshua Marston) (COMPETITION)

It is not often that we see an Albanian film. It is not often that we see films about Albania. It was one of the most cut off countries of Communist Eastern Europe, so it is intriguing to wonder how Albania has adapted to the fall of Communism and the changes of the 21st century. This film gives quite an effective opportunity to experience something of life in that country.

What makes it more interesting is that it is the work of an outsider. Writer director, Joshua Marston, is an American. While he has directed quite a number of episodes for television, he has not made many feature films. His claim to fame is Maria, Full of Grace, the 2002 Oscar nominee, about a young girl recruited as a drug mule from Colombia to the US. Marston has an eye for unusual stories outside America. He visited Albania a number of times once he had read articles about the continuation of blood feuds into the present. He enlisted the help of Andamion Murataj, an Albanian American, to travel through the country, translate and, finally, to collaborate on the screenplay (which is in the Albanian language).

We are introduced to a family which ekes out a living by farming and for selling milk and other goods around the village. There have been disputes about the ownership of the land where the family works. What develops is a violent fight and death for which the father is blamed and, according to tradition, becomes the target of a feud along with his family. The father goes into exile, coming back home infrequently in the dead of night. The mother manages with the smaller children, but the son who is in his final year in high school (a 21st century feel about the school with the students, their attitudes, clothes, mobile phones, flirtations), is confined to home. So is his little brother – the teacher comes from the school for some home education.

The feud traditions come from oral lore from the later Middle Ages and are interpreted with some forcefulness (with some professional brokers in the town making money out of the situations). The teenage son wants to break out and wants mediation. Eventually, he is given leave to come out but the 'offended' family resents this and so he offers to sacrifice himself for the family and go into exile. This contrasts with his younger teenage sister who has to carry on the sales in the village and comes into her own with responsibilities, even to the selling of their horse.

With persuasive local actors, Marston has created an interesting story with strong character interactions and a critique of what is a cruel tradition, the blood feud.

THE FUTURE

(US, 2011, d. Miranda July) (COMPETITION)

While artist Miranda July received quite some acclaim for her idiosyncratic first film, Me, You and Everyone We Know, some thought it a little fey. More so this one.

Hamish Linklater and Miranda July are Jason and Sophie, a couple who have been together for four years. They are 35 – and wondering about the future. He works from home with calls for computer help. She is a dance teacher. They just carry on – until they decide on a project, to adopt an injured cat and help it recover. Actually, the cat has already entered the film with its own comments about its life, the dark, about Jason and Sophie. (Paw Paw is the cat's name, and is scratchily voiced by Miranda July.)

Well, it doesn't quite work out that way. The cat makes its own comments...

When they give up their jobs, Jason becomes environmentally concerned and sells trees. Sophie, unpredictable, takes up with the father of a young girl. What will happen? Perhaps the audience is not as concerned as all that to wonder for too long. The film then enters the realm of fantasy, Jason having the power to stop time, Sophie imagining (or really living her affair and leaving it), and Jason getting advice from the moon which, since it governs tides and seasons, ought to be able to deal with human fate! So, there we are, sometimes real, sometimes fey, sometimes twee.

GRIFF THE INVISIBLE

(Australia, 2010, d. Leon Ford) (GENERATION AND PANORAMA)

More than a touch of whimsy in this inner Sydney fantasy.

If Bruce Wayne can become Batman and The Green Hornet can send up this idea of an ordinary citizen (though they are both ultra-rich) becoming a superhero at night, cleansing a city of crime, then I suppose that Griff can dream about it even if he does not succeed at it.

Griff is a simple soul who lives quietly at home – except that he has developed some surveillance cameras and screens and looks out on the dark city streets to see what criminals are lurking and goes out to do battle with him. Not all those rescued appreciate it and they report him to the police who are on the lookout for a vigilante.

In the meantime, Griff has a desk job, is bullied and imposed on by one of his co-workers, the girls in the office laugh at him and the boss is losing his patience. So is his brother, who has come over from Adelaide, and has protected him all his life.

But, when his brother meets a charming but seemingly light-headed young girl, Melody, who is a firm believer in science (and how matter can be formatted and manipulated), she falls for Griff instead. Griff finds that it is her father who runs the store where he buys stuff to make invisible suits and the like.

So, what is reality and what is not? Melody is a firm believer in other dimensions, so she is prepared not to see Griff in his invisible suit while others can see him plainly. For a while, Griff becomes ‘normal’, but this is the kind of film where it is best to leave Griff to his imaginary life.

Ryan Kwanten (star of TV’s True Blood and of Red Hil) is nicely fey as Griff. Maeve Dermody is a very likeable Melody.

A younger audience may enjoy it and make allowances for Griff. An older audience might not be so tolerant.

THE GUARD

(Ireland, 2011. d. John Michael McDonagh) (PANORAMA)

A good opportunity for Brendan Gleeson to strut his stuff. And that is what he does as Gerry Boyle, a member of the Garda in Connemara. He is really a small fish in a small pond. But that does not take away anything from his sense of duty, his pride in his uniform, his shrewdness in administering the law. But, he is not pompous, though he does have a bit of a superiority complex.

Life is ordinary for him. While he lives alone, he cares for his mother (a salty-tongued performance from Fionnula Flanagan), ribs his new assistant from Dublin, is cheeky to his superior officers, is not against visiting prostitutes in Galway from whom he catches a sexually transmitted disease. When he discovers a corpse and connects it with a drug running gang, he sets to work, especially when his assistant disappears.

But, the FBI has been called in in the form of Don Cheadle. He is the ultra-serious, suited agent who lacks a sense of humour, which puts him at odds with Gerry Boyle. Gerry, of course, takes pride in taking the mickey out of the Yank.

The trouble for the FBI agent is that, concerning the drug delivery, he is wrong and Gerry is right.

Writer-director John Michael McDonagh (who wrote the screenplay for the 2002 Ned Kelly) says that Gerry Boyle is a figure out of the Westerns. And this how the showdown occurs, even though it is at night on a pier on the coast, Gerry confidently striding out like every screen sheriff, guns blazing, bullets missing him, confronting the villains and sending them off to the next world. The FBI agent is his back-up.

While the idea of Gerry as a Western sheriff is entertaining, it is the dialogue and the humour that make The Guard entertaining. Naturally, there is a lot of swearing (seems an Irish custom) but there is a great deal of wit and deadpan humour which makes it quite an enjoyable portrait of a 21st century Irish garda.

IF NOT US, WHO (WER WENN NICHT WIR)

(Germany, 2011, d. Andres Veiel) (COMPETITION)

The title could also be translated idiomatically like the song title, 'Who else but us...?'

Made for a German audience which remembers or knows about the movements of the 1960s, it also has a narrative for audiences beyond Germany.

It could be watched as a piece of history without much detailed knowledge of the period and the personalities involved. The screenplay, focusing on author and publisher, Bernward Vesper and his relationship with student then revolutionary, Gudrun Ensslin, especially after she teamed up with Andreas Baader, offers a study of their development and the background to their stances. Knowledge, however, of the real life characters and having some background before seeing the film makes it more relevant to continuing world politics. (And, watching the 2008 Baader Meinhof Complex offers different angles on situations and characters, especially comparing Moritz Bleibtreu's portrayal of Baader with that of Alexander Frehling's here.)

One of the theses of this film is that the generation of Germans born prior to World War II or in its early years, carried an enormous psychological burden which could be either acknowledged or repressed. Vesper's father wrote for Hitler and expressed anti-Semitic statements after the war. Gudrun Ensslin's pastor father fought in the war though he did not approve.

This legacy made its mark as the 1960s progressed, after the stability in West Germany with Adenauer and Erhard. But, 1961 brought the Berlin Wall, the succeeding years brought the Cuban missile crisis, the assassination of President Kennedy and escalation of the war in Vietnam.

As groups of students and young adults became more socially conscious and active in Paris, in Prague, in the anti-war protests in the US, Germans dissatisfied with what they saw as complacency and labelled 'fascism', set them up to be more daring and reckless. The danger was that ideology became a passionate crusade that blinded the true believers' to the human and inhuman consequences of their rigid commitment to mission.

Bernward Vesper published political tracts and essays (and Stokely Carmichael's incendiary speeches, one of which is re-enacted here) and wrote rather than turn to violence. Gudrun Ensslin, on the other hand, had an almost savage personality and, despite giving birth and experiencing maternal tenderness, gave in to self-sacrificing brutal activism. August Diehl and Lena Lauzemis give rounded performances as Vesper and Ensslin. Andreas Baader was a conceited conquistador who was at home with disruption in the name of his chosen cause, no holds barred.

That was the 1960s. These principal protagonists killed themselves. The pendulum swings and history has its ups and downs - as it does almost half a century later.

INVISIBLE

(Israel, 2011, d. Michal Aviad) (PANORAMA)

A film for justice. Although the focus of this film is on crimes of rape, the effect on victims and the processes of law, it opens with sequences of Palestinians picking olives in the groves along with left-wing Israeli protesters, then an attack on the workers by Israeli militia – it is all being filmed by Israeli film-makers.

Nira, the director (Evgenia Dodina), recognises one of the protesters as Lily (Ronit Elkabetz), a fellow victim 20 years earlier of a serial criminal nicknamed the Polite Rapist by police and media because of his manner and his talking to his victims during their ordeals.

Lily finds Nira's approaches intrusive but realises that she can no longer repress the memories. They have affected her relationship with her husband and her adult children who feel alienated by her. Nira is more settled with her husband and young daughter.

The film shows the growing friendship between the two women, their tracking down documents about the cases, finding the rapist has been released after ten years of a thirty year sentence and judged to be no longer a threat to the public by a psychiatrist and a magistrate. The women gather testimonies from other victims and plan to make a film.

While the issue is a burning one, the treatment here is that of measured passion, ending with dismaying statistics about the incidence of rape worldwide. Ecumenical prizewinner in the Panorama section of the Berlin Film Festival.

LATE BLOOMERS

(Belgium, 2011, d. Julie Gavras) (SPECIAL SCREENING)

An unfortunate title despite the references to flowers and plants because many of us, including the stars of the film, come from the day when people wore those rather voluminous undergarments. Actually, that's the kind of joke that would be at home in this rather old-fashioned comedy.

Old is the operative word.

Mary (Isabella Rossellini resembling her mother, Ingrid Bergman, even more than before) is approaching the big 6-0. She has memory lapses, is physically out of condition and starts to buy house phones and baths with handles, anticipating old age. Her successful architect husband, Adam (William Hurt) is commissioned to design state of the art future homes for elderly residents. He is annoyed and refuses to acknowledge Mary's fads but decides to work with a young group of architects designing a modern museum (airports of the 1980s were his former specialty). He even affects a leather jacket to work with them.

Adam and Mary have three adult children who decide to do something about all this, especially as they see their parents drifting apart.

Also around are Doreen Mantle, excellent as Mary's elegant but wisecracking mother, Simon Callow as Adam's trendy boss though replete with artificial knee and hip, pacemaker, hearing aids..., and Joanna Lumley as an activist charity benefactor with her squad of militant ageing 'grey leopards'.

Quite contrived, dialogue often clunky and a lot of it rather silly. But, probably those at the big 6-0 plus or minus may well enjoy it, trying to avoid seeing it as a mirror – as might their 30 something children who will recognise plenty of the images up there on the screen.

MARGIN CALL

(US, 2011, d. J.C. Chandor) (COMPETITION)

Most people were astounded by the revelations of financial mismanagement in US banks and companies during 2008. World finance experienced meltdown. Banks and their representatives bore the brunt of criticism and the benefits of government bailouts. Bankers, in the face of criticism, still awarded themselves huge bonuses over and above their seemingly excessive salaries and benefits. Capitalism running rampant was a demolition ideology.

Oliver Stone took audiences back to Wall Street and Gordon Gecko told us that greed was now not only good but legal. Here were have two critical days in 2008 where a company overextending itself completely and officials not heeding risk management advice, approach disaster. The day begins with extensive sackings on a particular floor of a Wall Street building. They include the expert who is on the way to discovering the truth. He is played by Stanley Tucci, which gives the film a firm foundation to build on.

On the floor are two eager young men, Penn Badgely preoccupied with salary size and bonuses, and Zachary Quinto, skilful but with some humanity. The latter is given the risk file and asked to complete the task.

Most of the action takes place over night, with a top cast bringing personalities to life and building up the drama: Kevin Spacey as the floor manager with 34 years of loyalty to the firm; Paul Bettany as a successful self-centred, somewhat cynical salesman; Demi Moore as a self-satisfied adviser and Simon Baker, underestimated because he looks younger than he ought, a ruthless intermediary.

And there is Jeremy Irons as the chief executive, shrewdly manipulating his staff and at ease chairing meetings (Rupert Murdoch comes to mind) and proposing radical action that has little regard for people or their lives.

Written and directed by J.C.Chandor, this is a timely look inside a company, simplified enough for most to understand, and powerful enough to prove that greed is not only good and legal, but flourishing.

MEIN BESTER FEIND (MY BEST ENEMY)

(Germany, 2011, d. Wolfgang Purnberger) (COMPETITION)

Audiences may be expecting a serious look at the Third Reich and anti-Semitism. Well, it is but better to suggest first, Jack Higgins, *The Eagle Has Landed* and those entertaining adventures and action novels which dramatise what might have been.

This one has at its centre a Michelangelo sketch of Moses stolen from the Vatican in the 16th century and now in possession of a Jewish gallery owner in Vienna. It is 1938. The SS arrive to confiscate the sketch and send the family to the concentration camps. As the war goes on, the idea is to strengthen the axis alliance with Mussolini, to consolidate the agreement with the gift to Italy of the sketch.

But, their copy is a copy, a fake, and the Italian delegation for protocols walks out. Only a short time to recover the sketch! The Kaufman family has been interned. The son of the Kaufman's maid who grew up as part of the family is now proving himself as an SS officer, complicit in the confiscation and the imprisonment of the family. He is commissioned to find the Kaufman son and get the sketch in time for Hitler's meeting with Mussolini.

There are some good twists half way through as the tables are turned with Rudi, the SS friend, and Viktor the internee, in control. There is some Chaplinesque mockery of the Third Reich. And there is quite a nice twist at the end with a Hitchcockian McGuffin suitcase (which many will see coming, though it is entertaining nonetheless).

An entertaining show rather than history. Moritz Bleibtreu stars as Viktor. Georg Friedrich is Rudi and Marthe Keller has a good role as Viktor's mother. The (mainly paying) audience at the Friedrichstadt Palast screening not only applauded but cheered vigorously at the table-turning at the end.

UN MUNDO MISTERIOSO (A MYSTERIOUS LIFE)

(Argentina, 2011. D. Rodrigo Morena) (COMPETITION)

Not too much a mysterious life, really. Boris is what the US calls a 'slacker' – although he is a more enterprising and

slightly more interesting than his American counterparts. He is an Argentinian. No evident work, little evident source of income, long scenes with his girlfriend wanting time out and his lack of comprehension. He stays in a hotel, reads best-sellers, buys a Romanian car. It runs out of petrol in the countryside. He meets friends in a book shop, goes to a party (a rather long sequence though there is a funny game of naming celebrities and adding another name to continue the series – the Tom and Jerry, Lewis, Carroll, kind of thing), meets a girl, goes to Uruguay, returns and meets up with his girlfriend again.

Since he is Argentinian, this is a sometimes languid, occasionally active glimpse of a so far fairly meaningless life. Not much mystery.

NADER AND SIMIN: A SEPARATION

(Iran, 2011, d. Asghar Farhadi) (COMPETITION)

Winner of the Golden Bear, Berlin 2011, and winner of the Ecumenical Award. Iranian cinema at its best.

Iranian films have a strong tradition of showing children's issues and this film has a substantial amount of this. But, it is a drama that focuses on adults, their qualities and flaws, their planned and unplanned behaviour and the consequences they never imagined.

Tehran has an affluent middle class as well as a working class who see the wealthy people as privileged, as 'royalty', and as benefitting from life and they live in ways the poor could never expect.

The film opens and closes with Nader and Simin arguing their case before a judge. She wants a divorce, to have custody of her 11 year old daughter and to leave the country for a better life. He does not want a divorce, does not want to leave Iran and is dedicated to caring for his father who suffers from Alzheimers. At the end, they are back before the judge, but their daughter has to make a decision as to which parent she wishes to live with.

In the meantime, a broader drama, a drama of ethical arguments and more behaviour and decisions is played out with quite some complexity. In itself it is rather simple issue. Nader is upset with Rasieh, a poorer middle-aged woman who does the housework. A sum of money is missing and Nader believes Rasieh took it. Rasieh also goes to visit a gynecologist and binds Nader's father to his bed, but the restless father falls to the floor. The angry Nader ousts Rasieh, shoving her out along with her little daughter. Rasieh has a miscarriage and her unemployed, hot-tempered husband sues. The charge is murder.

The complications are very interesting indeed and mean that each character, even the children, is faced with telling the truth or lying. The final resolution revolves around religious principle and honesty as Rasieh is asked to testify on the Quran.

This is a fine production in every aspect – the ensemble of the cast winning the acting awards in Berlin as well.

ODEM (LIPSTIKKA)

(Israel, 2011, d. Jonathan Sagall) (COMPETITION)

An Israeli story of two Palestinian women. The action shifts from the present in London to the past in Palestine in the late 1980s (Lethal Weapon is screening.) We shift from the memories of Lara to those of Inam, finally realising that we have to be alert as to what is being truly remembered and what is being imagined.

Lara has settled into a life in London with a caring but unfaithful husband. She has a son. Inam suddenly turns up and intrudes as well as making herself at home at Lara's. It is clear that she is not welcome, though Lara's attitudes seem ambiguous - resolved rather more clearly in the final minutes of the film which makes a great deal of sense of what we have seen and might have puzzled over.

In the flashbacks, Lara is a quiet, heavy set girl, best friend of the ultra-outgoing Inam, a girl who easily gets herself into trouble with boys and with Israeli soldiers. Claire Khoury and are persuasive as the older women and the two younger actresses more than resemble the older versions of their characters.

Much may not seem so consequential while on screen, but gives rise to reflections afterwards.

OUR GRAND DESPAIR

(Turkey, 2011, d. Seyfi Teoman) (COMPETITION)

A rather grand name for what is essentially a small drama, neither grand, nor a matter of despair.

When a Turkish man from Germany is injured in an accident where his parents have been killed, he arranges with his two friends from school days that they take in his sister, a university student, and take care of her. They do. At first, it is something of an imposition but each of the friends takes to the young woman, one a more practical type, the other something of an intellectual.

In the meantime, the girl has a life of her own, a relationship, a pregnancy and the issue of abortion.

The focus, however, is on the two friends although there are a few other characters who come in and out of the story. The two men have a strong liking for each other, are very attached, do so many things together, have a domestic arrangement like a long-married couple. Whether the film has a sub-text about male-male relationships beyond friendship or is presenting bonding in a Turkish style, it is hard not to think of Western film-makers and their more explicit examination of male relationships.

The setting is Ankara, an interesting opportunity to see something of Turkey's capital.

PINA

(Germany, 2011. D. Wim Wenders) (SPECIAL SCREENING)

This is a film 'For Pina Bausch', the German choreographer, 1940-2009.

Director Wim Wenders had planned a film with her and about her and her dance theatre but she unexpectedly died in 2009. Although she appears in some archival footage, this film is about her work and her legacy.

It has been filmed in 3D, giving extraordinary depth to many of the dance excerpts. Wenders shows how 3D can be used effectively in documentary films (as has Werner Herzog in his documentary, Cave of Forgotten Dreams, exploring the art work in the caves in the Ardeche in France.)

This film is probably destined to be the visual equivalent of a text book for all dance schools and dance students. It shows the range of dance beyond traditional ballet or performing as white swans or black swans. The dancers rely on a sense of acting, on mime, on body language, on gymnastic techniques as well as a sense of poise, balance and creative movement.

It is all here in this film, excerpts from the Bausch choreography of The Rites of Spring and Cafe Muller as well as some brilliant and amusing contributions by individual dancers to jazz and to contemporary music.

The interviews with the dancers are arrestingly done, even if they do not say much more than how grateful they are to Pina Bausch and offer particular aphoristic pieces of advice, which mainly meant that the dancers themselves had to do the thinking and exploring. The interviewees are presented centre screen in live portrait fashion but do not speak. Rather, we hear them in voiceover which makes the comments more dramatically impressive. The dancers are mainly the veterans who worked for years in the dance company. There are some younger voices as well.

Part of the intrigue of some of the individual pieces is that they are danced outdoors in Wuppertal, the city where the dance company is located. We see streets and crossings, warehouses, gardens and the trolley that goes through the city suspended on rails on the roof.

Pina Bausch was not always instantly appreciated, some of her choreography considered too 'modern' or bizarre. By this stage of dance history, many audiences will take this kind of work for granted and respond well to it.

For those who might not consider themselves dance fans, Pina can be quite an exhilarating experience.

IL PREMIO (THE PRIZE)

(Mexico, 2011, d. Paula Markovitch) (COMPETITION)

Argentinian-born Paul Markovitch, but living for years in Mexico, has written the screenplays for the internationally seen *Duck Season* and *Lake Tahoe*, dramas with interesting themes but made with minimalist style.

For her first film as director, she has gone back to her childhood in Argentina, the time of the generals, a period of repression and abuse of civil and human rights, of informants and of danger to the families of those on wanted lists. The Prize has a great deal of autobiographical detail and is filmed in the village where she lived and on the often-wild Atlantic coast.

The film last almost two hours and much of it is filmed in minimalist style, long pauses for reflection and with a look of drab, grey winter. Many audiences who sympathise with the characters may find the style too austere and trying their patience.

Filmed with widescreen lenses, the film looks large and feels atmospheric. The plot, however, is much smaller. A little girl (wonderfully and naturally acted by Paula Gallinelli Herzog), Ceci, lives with her mother in a dilapidated house on the shore. Her father is a detainee. She can't tell the children at school.

While a lot of her time is by herself, she does make friends and they play in the dunes. In one crisis, she won't own up that she had given the answers to a maths exam to a friend – and she is denounced. The teacher offers a rationalisation of the reporting- to save the whole class being punished - and she effects a reconciliation between the two young friends. The second crisis concerns an essay for a military propaganda competition. Ceci writes against the military to her mother's horror... but...

A telling picture of a different time in Argentina, the film is also a portrait of a young girl, remembered by the director.

ROMEOS

(Germany, 2011, d. Sabine Bernardi) (PANORAMA)

There have been a number of films about transgender (*Transamerica*, for instance, or *Second Serve*, about the tennis player, Dr Renee Richards) but they are about male to female transitions. *Romeos* is concerned with FTM, Female to Male transition. This was also the subject of an Iranian film, *Facing Mirrors* (2011) which dealt with its subject more seriously, the personal repercussions as well as the social and family difficulties (even though such surgery was judged by Ayatollah Khomeini to be in harmony with Sharia Law).

The context here is contemporary Germany, social pressures and misunderstandings, but also a context of freedom of sexual behaviour and hedonism which puts the proceedings into more of a niche as the girl who is in process of becoming a man becomes involved in clubbing and relationships.

Miriam (played by Rick Okion) is undergoing medical transformation processes (and communicating by internet with others in similar situations) but has to do civil service. Placed in a home for the elderly and in a girls' dormitory, Lukas (as he is becoming) fights to be transferred to the male dorm. With him is his school friend, Ine, who is lesbian, Lukas is self-conscious but has an urge to go out and about. He encounters Fabio, one of those extraverted stud types who is gay. This brings most of the action into a gay context which is both confusing and distracting in terms of transgender. Lukas wants to be loved but is also comparing himself and his changes with the seemingly (physically) perfect Fabio. This means that a lot of the film is to do with relationships rather than identity. Since the action takes place over only a few weeks, it is all rather inconclusive, though triumphant in spirit.

As for realism, one wonders what counselling and psychological assistance and advice Lukas has been given to cope with the complexities. None seems to be in evidence.

SCHLAFKRANKEIT (SLEEPING SICKNESS)

(Germany, 2011, d. Ulrich Kohler) (COMPETITION)

Straightforward at first, then disorienting, then perplexing and finally puzzling, one wonders at first whether it is worth pursuing and reflecting on or not. It is.

After sorting out the two parts and the time distance between each part, one has a perspective on the central character. He is a German doctor, working in Cameroun, in charge of projects, especially one on sleeping sickness. He has been able to eradicate the illness to a large extent but funds come in, seem to disappear or are squandered.

In the first part, he is about to return to Europe with his wife. His teenage daughter is visiting from boarding school. A French friend tries to persuade him to stay. All normal enough so far – a European who does good in a developing country and is facing ordinary personal problems.

The jolt in part 2 is unexpected. It is three years later. The focus is now on a young Paris-born doctor of Congolese ancestry. There is some discussion about the value of aid versus trade in dealing with development issues in Africa. The doctor, Alix, goes to Cameroun to evaluate the medical projects for the World Health Organisation, especially the sleeping sickness project. Alix is bewildered by what he finds, with chaos and hindrances to his enquiries. The

German doctor is in a far different frame of mind, has stayed and taken up with a local woman who gives birth, Alix having to assist.

The end is both abrupt and symbolic, involving a hippopotamus. Is the doctor himself a victim of sleeping sickness and how it affects a European in Africa. And what (or who?) is the hippopotamus. We end with questions and puzzles.

SWANS (FORUM)

(Germany, 2011, d. Hugo Vieira da Silva) (FORUM)

No 'hereafter' or 'afterwards' in this story of cancer, coma, dying... It is an earthbound film with a strong focus on the body of the dying woman. It is a 'somatic' drama, according to the co-director.

A man and his son, living in Portugal, travel to a wintry and bleak Berlin to visit Petra, the man's former partner and mother of his eighteen year old son, Manoel, whom she abandoned when he was three.

The style of the film (minus musical score except for some records playing and a band) is long takes, long close-ups, attentive to minute detail that reflects life but will agitate a restless audience. We see the care nurses and doctors give the woman, medical care, massage and washing. The man is more reserved, tense but devoted, upset at the seeming indifference of his son. The boy is off-handed, visiting, keeping away but gradually curious about the woman and her body which bore him.

He seems introverted but hardly introspective. He is one of those alienated, self-absorbed young men, a top skateboarder (which occupies his time), likes rap music, indulges in graffiti and LP records.

The other character is Petra's Asian room-mate, a silent figure. While the father has some therapy for his tensions, Manoel rummages, becomes more sexually aware, realises vaguely that he ought to relate or bond with his mother.

And, as expected, the just stops rather than ends.

TAMBIEN LA LLUVIA (EVEN THE RAIN) (PANORAMA)

(Spain, 2010, d. Iciar Bollain) (PANORAMA)

Spain's nominee for the Oscar for Best Foreign Language film, 2010.

It was written by longtime collaborator with Ken Loach, Scot Paul Laverty. It was directed by actress turned director, Iciar Bollain.

Probably, the film is best described as three films in one.

The first story is the making of a film in Bolivia about Columbus, his reports to Ferdinand and Isabella, his attitude towards the Indians, benign at first, but the greed for gold led to exploitation and Indian retaliation. The proposed film is based on the life and pro-Indian work of Dominicans, Bartolomeo Las Casas and the crusading priest Montesinos. The culmination is the burning of a number of Indians fixed to crosses. These sequences are interspersed throughout the film.

The second story is the production personnel story, the idealism of the young director, Sebastian (Gael Garcia Bernal in a better role than in recent Hollywood comedies), inspired by Las Casas and Montesinos, wanting to condemn the Conquistador version of imposed Christianity and to show the more Gospel humanity of the Dominican friar. Luis Tosar appears as producer, Costa, pragmatic, a wheeler-dealer who is alert to trouble, aiming to forestall it.

The third story is that of the Water Wars in 2000 in the city of Cochabamba where the Indians dig a tunnel channel of seven kilometres to bring water to the villagers but were stopped by the right-wing government in favour of Anglo-American multinational interests and investments to control the water supply and, as the title indicates, control even the rain.

Protests led to demonstrations which led to riots which led to city blockades and armed attack.

Linking the stories is a shrewd Indian leader, Daniel, who has worked as a labourer in the US, sees through the producer's exploitative wage tactics and gets a significant role along with his young daughter. But, his high protest profile leads to TV coverage, his arrest and his daughter's being wounded in the attacks. There is a climax for both Sebastian, the idealist, and Costa, the pragmatist, when Daniel's wife begs the entourage leaving the city to find her daughter and get her to hospital.

Made in Bolivia, Even the Rain, re-lives the Water Wars (and many of the extras were re-enacting what they did in 2000).

Paul Laverty has been able to show his social conscience and awareness in his Loach films and often brings a Catholic sensibility (and some years of seminary training and admiration for Latin American Basic Christian Communities) to his screenplays.

This film is interesting in its portrayal of harshly imposed Catholicism and its more hopeful Gospel humanity – and in parallels the foreign invasive exploitation and greed of Columbus' day with the 21st century Water Wars equivalent.

TROPO DE ELITE 2 (ELITE SQUAD 2 – THE ENEMY WITHIN)

(Brazil, 2010, d. Jose Padilha) (PANORAMA)

Elite Squad was a surprise world success after winning the Golden Bear in Berlin in 2008. It was a huge success in Brazil. The Brazilian film industry had a succession of films about the favelas, crime, drugs, protection, police and government corruption. Some films, like City of God and City of Men looked especially at the young men attracted to this way of life and violent achievement. Lower City looked at the underside of the metropolis. Carandiru took its audiences into the squalor of the crowded prisons.

Elite Squad was focused on the police, on a special hit squad and the battles in the streets. This sequel continues the story of Roberto Nascimento (Wagner Moura), the head of the elite squad. And, the film made more at the Brazilian box-office in 2010 than Avatar.

This sequel is easier to follow with characters more familiar or more clearly defined.

The issues are a bit more ambiguous, raising questions. Are the right-wing (even Fascist) attitudes, speeches and actions of the squad repellent even if they clear the neighbourhoods of drugs? Are the attitudes, speeches and actions of the liberals highlighting human rights sometimes self-serving (for political advantage)? We see all sides here.

There is also human and family drama – Nascimento's ex-wife has married a rights' activist, Frago, who is elected to Parliament and campaigns hard for rights. Nascimento spends four years after violently quelling a prison riot at a desk job, cleaning up the city but failing to realise that, as the dealers were ousted, corrupt police demanding protection payment, have taken over.

With a dramatic finale, the film stirs feelings about crime and police – and is open to further sequels.

TRUE GRIT (OPENING FILM)

(US, 2010, d. Joel and Ethan Coen) (OPENING FILM)

The Coen Brothers seem to be able to turn their minds and imaginations to most genres - although their remake of The Ladykillers seemed a doomed project - and was. This time they have avoided the remake approach, a film that has become a classic Western and the Oscar-winner for John Wayne as Rooster Cogburn in 1969. The Coens have gone back to Charles Portis' novel and written their own interpretation. And it works very well, a solid western in the classic tradition, and a humorous, sometimes witty comic atmosphere.

The casting directors must have been delighted to find Halle Steinfeld to play Mattie Ross. She is completely persuasive as the strong-minded 14 year old who sets out to complete her father's business, to bury him and to begin a justice process to find his killer. She is motivated by a deep desire to avenge him. When she seeks out a US Marshall to employ for the hunt, she is directed to the one-eyed, hard-drinking, former Quantrill raider, Rooster Cogburn. This time he is Jeff Bridges, who has a roistering time, impersonating a larger than life character of the West.

Wary, and trying to avoid Mattie, he comes to admire her and they go off on their quest. There is a complication with a Texas Ranger, LaBoeuf, who is also pursuing the killer (Josh Brolin). As played by Matt Damon, LaBoeuf is a very serious, loquacious Ranger, who is prone to exalt the Ranger ideals but pompously. His involvement in the quest is well worked out and he and Cogburn have a number of encounters with gangs and criminals. Barry Pepper is also good as Lucky Ned, another outlaw leader.

The Coens bring some biblical tones to their storytelling with a quote from Proverbs to open, about guilt and pursuit; a reference to Ezekiel and the valley of bones; and a quotation from Mattie that the only thing that is free in this world is the grace of God.

Which means that anyone wanting an old-fashioned western will like this True Grit. Anyone wanting a 21st century take on characters and plot should be satisfied.

UNKNOWN (SPECIAL SCREENING)

(US, 2011, d. Jaume Collet-Serra) (SPECIAL SCREENING)

Based on a French best-seller, this is action thriller time, enjoyably so. The author is Didier van Cauwalaert and the novel, 'Out of my Head'.

For those who know the city of Berlin, there is the extra thrill of seeing so much of the city, recognisable landmarks, as well as lots of atmosphere and detail. Berlin in winter, just the right time for this kind of conspiracy tale.

When an agreeable couple from the US arrive in Berlin for a biotechnical summit, financed by a Middle Eastern prince, and promising to make announcements about crops that will alter the prospects for world hunger, it all sounds good.

But, before you can say Liam Neeson, we and he realise that a bag has been left behind at the airport and he rushes to a taxi (driven by Diane Kruger as a Balkan illegal). A spectacular crash ensues, the taxi goes into the river and the driver rescues the scientist and she disappears. He lies in coma for four days. Nobody looks for him. He doesn't seem to have lost his memory but when he goes back to the hotel, his wife does not recognise him and there is a man who has taken his place, name, identification, memories and all.

The film is the protagonist's fighting to prove he is who he says, despite several attempts on his life, the enlisting of a former Stasi agent who regrets all the changes in Germany (Bruno Ganz in a scene-stealing performance), tracking down the taxi driver, and a climax with assassination attempts and explosions.

You probably have to be working overtime if you guess what the twists are going to be. But they come. Once they are revealed, it all fits into place, even some episodes and behaviour which you might have thought impossible.

With Liam Neeson as the beleaguered hero, it means that we identify strongly with him and share his anxiety. January Jones is his wife. Aidan Quinn the man who takes his place. Frank Langella a colleague.

Of course, it is far-fetched. Isn't it?

(The advantage of seeing Unknown at the Friedrichstadt Palast screening during the Berlinale and not at the critics' show was seeing it with hundreds of paying patrons who thoroughly enjoyed it and clapped and cheered at the end. After all, some of it was set just near the theatre and we had come through one of the stations shown on our way.)

UTOPIANS (FORUM)

(US, 2011, d. Zbigniew Brymek) (FORUM)

A slice of unusual, odd Brooklyn life. At 84 minutes, it is a sketch portrait of three rather dysfunctional individuals.

It sounds rather improvised at times and we watch episodes of interaction – are asked to observe and, if possible, respond sympathetically. Roger teaches yoga to a rather indifferent small class, hesitant in speech (and a past of drug addiction). He meets his army daughter, Zoe, a tough, butch-mannered woman who is in love with Maya, a schizophrenic who is institutionalised.

The three then live together, loving but with prickly episodes and tensions as they promise to do renovations in a friend's house.

So, brief case studies which may or may not be of interest.

VAMPIRE (PANORAMA)

(US, 2011, d. Iwai Shunji) (PANORAMA)

A generic title in a trend that has been very popular in cinema and on television.

Writer-director, Iwai Shunji, is Japanese and toys with the vampire conventions in an idiosyncratic way, incorporating them into stories of depressed and suicidal American teens.

That's how it starts. High School biology teacher, Simon (Kevin Zegers), has a rendezvous with a young woman (Keisha Castle-Hughes who appears for only 15 minutes) and proceeds to drain her of her blood. She dies. He drinks. Needless to say, all is not normal in this part of the American Pacific North West. After all, it is Twilight territory. Simon's mother (Amanda Plummer) has Alzheimers. He keeps her inside their apartment with a brace and helium balloons. A friendly police officer is impressed and takes Simon fishing along with his sister, Lucy (Rachel Leigh Cook) who proves to be a do-gooding intrusive nuisance.

In the meantime, there are some more suicidal youth, and a very unpleasant episode where a member of a club for horror-struck nerds acts out a violent rape which Simon denounces.

So, is Simon a serial-killer nicknamed the Vampire? In realistic terms, maybe. In terms of discussion about dreams and wish-fulfilment and whether you can die in your own dream, maybe, maybe not? Or is he just a would-be vampire?

V SUBOTTU (INNOCENT SATURDAY) (COMPETITION)

(Russia, 2011, d. Alexander Mindadze) (COMPETITION)

For the record, this is the kind of film that this reviewer finds almost unendurable. Receiving a fair amount of negative response, it nevertheless pleased those who are more interested in creative film techniques than in narrative, or who are fascinated by the excessive behaviour of Russians or want to explore the uses of hand-held cameras (more here than in a Dardennes Brothers' film plus The Blair Witch Project).

This is a film about the day the Chernobyl nuclear power station exploded in April 1986. It starts intensely enough with the news, the beginnings of cover-ups, party discussions, the desire not to cause panic. The central character is a young party member who works at the plant and who runs (at some length) to get to the plant. He rushes to a dorm to get his girlfriend to run to the station and get a train out of Chernobyl. A series of incidents (starting with the girl's heel being broken) takes us further and further away from the train and deposits the young man and the girl into what turns out to be a raucous day at a wedding.

Most of the film forgets about the plant and what was happening or not happening, and offers us instead a kind of Emir Kustirica frenzied drinking party, lots of drinks plus songs, an 'eat, drink and be stupidly merry' avoidance of any of the real issues. Of course, that does make a point, but whether this is the point that we want to experience is quite another matter.

WIND AND FOG (GENERATION)

(Iran, 2011, d. Mohammad Ali Talebi)

During the 1990s, Iran made quite a number of films that focused on little children. They had an international appeal as well and won many awards. They included The White Balloon, Children of Heaven and The Colour of Paradise. Wind and Fog seems a throwback to those times, but is welcome nonetheless.

The setting is the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, a harsh and traumatic time for Iran, and still a subject for so many of the films coming from that country.

The basic plot here is timeless. A widowed father (from the war bombardments) brings his two children to stay with their grandfather in the mountains. He had previously worked on the gasfields. The little girl is bright and is solicitous for her younger brother who is not quite right mentally. He is bullied at school where she stands up for him. One day, during the hunting season, while the grandfather takes them fishing, the little boy comes across a wounded goose and is fascinated. Watching her brother and the goose is the occasion for flashbacks to their previous life where the little boy was also bullied as the children flew kites on the harsh and hot surroundings of the gas pipes. Later, the girl is welcomed back at school, but the little boy goes off in the night to search for the goose and he becomes lost. His sister and a girl who had been hurtful search for the boy – aided by the flock of geese. So, a film of charm as well as of people's insensitivity, inviting audiences to be understanding and compassionate. The mountain and forest scenery is beautiful, a refuge from the war that has devastating effect elsewhere (and on the national psyche and memory).
YELLING TO THE SKY (COMPETITION)

(US, 2011, d. Victoria Mahoney)

It is a great disadvantage to this film that Precious was released in 2009 to Oscar nominations and wins and successful box-office. Yelling to the Sky is too similar and, all in all, not as interesting or involving as Precious.

Both are the stories of young Afro-American girls in New York neighbourhoods. After Precious, we now have Sweetness, Sweetness O'Hara (Zoe Kravitz). Her life is not as miserable as that of Precious despite her attempts to make it so. Her mother is a weak woman opting out of life. Her father has an Irish background and is a drinker who can turn to violence. She has a pregnant older sister who is not afraid to take on gangs to defend Sweetness.

So, we have home scenes, some of which are happy, most of which are not. Sweetness has a hard time at school even though she is clever. She is also bashed by the leader of a gang (played by Gabourey Sidibe who actually played Precious). In rebellion, she goes to a rather nice drug dealer and starts dealing herself. This leads to more violence - and eventually a wake-up call that she could do much better with her life and go to college.

Partly based on the experiences of the writer-director, this is a personal film. Whether it finds its target audience is a moot question.

SIGNIS FILM REVIEWS FEBRUARY 2011

127 HOURS
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127 HOURS

(UK/US, 2010, d. Danny Boyle)

127 hours means time going into a sixth day. That was the amount of time that climber, Aron Ralston, was in a crevasse, trapped when he fell and a large stone pinioned his arm.

One of the main features of this true life film (the author wrote of his ordeal in a book titled *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*) is that it shows the irrevocability of an accident. No amount of anger, not the least bit of wishful thinking can change what has happened. It's the precariousness of the accident that comes across as well. Aron Ralston was climbing alone in the mountains, with a limited amount of food and, more importantly, water.

While there are many lyrical moments in the film, this is a story that is visceral and does not hesitate to indicate the reality of the physical pain, especially when Aron decides that amputation of his trapped arm is the only solution for his survival. Not that the film offers too many graphic close-ups, just enough for us to see and for the camera movement and the editing to make the suggestions more powerful.

James Franco plays Aron Ralston and brings him alive as an eager young man who loves the mountains, has a zest for living and finds that his life might be suddenly coming to an end. We are introduced to him cycling hard, climbing vigorously and helping two hiking girls to enjoy the spirit of the climb (and an exuberant freefall into a cavernous pool). These memories will come back to him – and he can also watch them as he has his video camera with him and leaves it on over the days of his suffering. He remembers his family, past episodes (some with joy, some with regret). He is also encouraged to persevere, especially during the amputation, by his vision of a young boy smiling at him.

The director is Danny Boyle, filming after his Oscar-winning *Slumdog Millionaire*. (Boyle has shown great versatility and a wide range of interests: *Trainspotting*, *The Beach*, *28 Days Later*, *Millions*, *Sunshine*). He has worked with *The Full Monty*'s screenwriter, Simon Beaufoy. The atmospheric (sometimes pounding) score was composed by *Slumdog* Oscar-winner, Indian A.H. Rahman.

Boyle has always shown great flair in his visual style, much more evident here with time-lapse photography, split screen shots, and a heightened colour palette for mountains and desert.

As with so many stories of real people, the actual Aron, with his wife and baby son (the premonition fulfilled), appears smilingly at the end – and still climbs though, as the caption reads, he always leaves a note to say where he will be.

AFTERWARDS (ET APRES)

(France, 2009, d. Gilles Bourdos)

From France, a film about death and the afterlife, then from the US Clint Eastwood's *Hereafter*. The two films could serve as companion pieces.

Afterwards opens with a death and a resuscitation, a little boy who is hit by a car trying to get help for a little girl who has had an accident. He seems dead, but comes out of coma to grow up into a father but also a rather ruthless insurance manager. The question of why he is alive is raised in black and white flashbacks: a doctor who asks the boy why he came back from the coma.

Romain Duris plays Nathan, the man who came back. When a visitor to his office, Dr Kay, wants to talk to him about his health and caring for himself, he is disturbed. This is exacerbated when the doctor tells him that a man on the subway (the setting is New York) is going to die within minutes. And he does. Dr Kay sees an aura around those who are destined soon to die.

It emerges that Dr Kay really is an authentic doctor and does care for people, especially those who are dying. He comforts their families. Once again, he gives Nathan an indication that someone else is going to die. Nathan mostly believes him and follows through with the doctor's suggestion.

But, the experience so disturbs him that he assumes the doctor is warning him about his imminent death. He decides that he must alter his life and mend the breaks, especially with his estranged wife (who was the little girl at the opening of the film) and daughter. Some moving flashbacks explain why this has happened.

There are many contemplative moments in the film, the languid opening on a lake, fields of puffballs, the desert and a beautiful flower that dies the day it opens.

The film is not exactly about the hereafter. Rather, it presumes the hereafter but wants to emphasise that the important place for healing and forgiveness is here, before death.

Romain Duris is a versatile French actor, very popular in France and in Europe. Dr Kay is played by John Malkovich in a performance that is quite restrained compared with many of his other, rather eccentric, performances and is the more affecting for it.

While the questions of afterlife, of afterwards, are important, Nathan discovers that it is in life that the important choices are made, actions done. He also discovers why he really came back from his coma.

ARCTIC BLAST

(Australia/Canada, 2010, d. Brian Trenchard Smith)

Since the icy blast which powers down through the ozone layer to produce a mammoth freezing originates south of Hobart, the title seems anomalous by a full hemisphere. Surely Antarctic Blast would not have been box-office poison! Actually, it wasn't the box-office takings since this film was released straight to DVD.

It is a close relation to *The Day After Tomorrow*, with the world freezing, not just North America. And it is a close relation to all those disaster films where the lone hero has the solution to the global problems (this one seems remarkably close the explosions at the end of *Armageddon*) and the obtuse superior wants to go his own way. But, it is not a close relation to *The Day After Tomorrow* or *Armageddon* in terms of budget, special effects or cast. These are quite minimal.

That being said, and allowing for all the impossibilities, coincidences, heroics and challenges to physics laws and action, it is a passably undemanding 90 minutes disaster entertainment. If you are demanding, let it pass.

It's not many films that can boast of being filmed in Hobart – and there are many attractive shots of the city and of Tasmania (before the 'arctic' blast arrives and ices up everyone and everything).

Our hero is an American working in Tasmania (Michael Shanks), married to a wife who feels he is work-preoccupied – there is nothing like a global disaster problem to put paid to this difficulty! He has a teenage daughter who feels neglected and has the touch of rebellion (though she survives but her two friends are iced). Meanwhile his boss in Philadelphia (Burce Davison) is not too sympathetic and wants answers, wants data – and wants them now.

But, it is not only Hobart which bears the brunt of the blast, which as it gathers pace, looks like a pursuing tsunami – and there is a certain amount of morbid enjoyment in seeing it overwhelm popular world landmarks like Big Ben and the Eiffel Tower.

Brian Trenchard Smith, who has made a long career of making this kind of film, directs a cast, mainly of Australians, who do their best to co-operate with the hero and save the world.

Old-style matinee material – with a sparing use of modern effects.

BARNEY'S VERSION

(Canada, 2010, d. Robert J. Lewis)

We all have our own versions of our lives, whether they be accurate or not. Those who have shared our lives with us, or those who have been influenced by us, will have their versions, possibly, even probably, quite different.

Montreal Jewish novelist, Mordechai Richler, chronicled stories of his home city in novels, stories and essays. He was not always a benign critic. *Barney's Version* came later in his career, many noting the autobiographical connections. Film versions of his novels include Ted Kotcheff's fine *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1974) with Richard Dreyfuss and *Joshua Then and Now* (1985) with James Woods. *Barney's Version* stars Paul Giamatti, who won a Golden Globe award for his performance.

The place is Montreal, with some excursions to New York City. The time settings go back to the 1970s and move through the ensuing decades.

However, *Barney's Version* is not a straightforward, linear narrative. The audience is invited to share Barney's memories, the memories of an older, sardonic, gruff and blunt, disappointed, alcoholic man who may not be able to hold on to his memories for much longer. Giamatti shows his ability, first of all in making an on-paper unpleasant character interesting to watch, and, secondly, in portraying the changes that the decades and his experiences make on Barney.

A major focal point for the storytelling is Barney's marital experiences, illustrating the kind of person he was at particular stages of his life. While we are introduced to him as a curmudgeonly older man, stuck in his TV work (a serial that has gone on for years), pestering his ex-wife's husband, cared for by his daughter, we are taken back to his rather more carefree days in Rome, a kind of bohemian life with artistic friends and a sudden marriage to a pregnant

girlfriend (Rachel Lefevre) which does not last long. We are also introduced to his best friend, a frequently drug-sodden writer, Boogie, (Scott Speedman) – and are puzzled by the arrival (in the present) of an aggressive detective (Mark Addy) who has written a book accusing Barney of the murder of his friend. Enough questions and enigmas to keep us wondering.

Barney's second marriage is to a dominating 'Jewish Princess', played with presumptuous verve by Minnie Driver. She has one of the most disapproving fathers in movies. His disdain of Barney in so many scenes is very entertaining in a morose kind of way. But, at the wedding, Barney glimpses Miriam (Rosamund Pike), falls in love and continues over time to pursue and hound her. Eventually, they do marry and spend years together. And, even more eventually, Barney ruins things. Rosamund Pike is a standout in the film. She portrays Miriam with sensitivity and charm, making the audience appreciate how Barney can be infatuated by her, love her, marry her and remain married to her for years. She is a good and patient woman.

But, the actor playing Barney's father, a rather outgoing, randy former policeman not noted for tact, is Dustin Hoffman – a solid reminder of what a scene-stealer he can be. (It is not only older actresses who play mothers on screen, now it is older actors who play fathers, Hoffman and Jack Nicholson in *How Do You Know*.)

This is a Canadian production and three prominent directors have cameos: Atom Egoyan and David Cronenberg as directors of the series and Ted Kotcheff as a train conductor. Bruce Greenwood is the producer who later marries Miriam and Jake Hoffman (Dustin Hoffman's son) plays Barney's son.

The film is over two hours long and not all audiences will be enthralled by meeting Barney and becoming involved in his life. But, for those who do, the story is intriguing, the ending moves towards a pathos we were not anticipating, the performances are of top quality. It is a portrait of a flawed (very) human being, warts and all – but, ultimately, not irredeemable.

BRIGHTON ROCK

(UK, 2010, d. Rowan Joffe)

The new film version of Graham Greene's 1939 novel, *Brighton Rock*, brings some Catholic themes into prominence. A BBC/UK Film Council production, it is directed by Rowan Joffe, who wrote the screenplay for *The American*, a Greene-like drama about a burnt-out hitman. His father, Roland Joffe, directed *The Mission* and *City of God* as well as the forthcoming film about St Jose Maria Escriva, *There be Dragons*, all films with Catholic themes.

Greene himself wrote the screenplay for the Boulting Brothers' 1947 version of *Brighton Rock*, imbuing it with his frequent themes of sin and the possibilities and impossibilities of redemption. His central character, Pinkie (played with force by Richard Attenborough and now by a sullen Sam Riley) is one of the nastiest of Greene's villains, young, brash and ambitious, the opposite of that other Greene arch-villain (all smiles and sinister calculation), Harry Lime, from *The Third Man*. The other central character is the naive young waitress, Rose, who becomes the target of Pinkie's scheming so that she will not turn a police witness against him for the murders he committed.

The setting of the present film is 1964 rather than Greene's original 1930s. It is the period of thugs and gangs, of Mods and Rockers and riots, the time just before the abolition of capital punishment in Britain. The film recreates the period and offers the visuals of Brighton, the dark swirling water, the Pier, the Pavilion, the blocks of waterfront flats, streets, tea rooms and bars, as well as dilapidated houses and estates.

It is not usual to have Catholic characters and themes in British films. However, they are a staple of adaptations of Graham Greene novels. There is no shirking of them here. But, what they do show is how little touched by the depth of faith so many Catholics are. Pinkie says he is 'Roman' but doesn't practise, though he says that atheists have got it all wrong denying God and, especially, the existence of Hell. But, there is a moment when he is being chased along the beach, when he drops to his knees and starts reciting the Hail Mary. Rose is devout in a junior primary school kind of way. She is pious, prays the Rosary, goes to Church, lights candles, kneels before the Crucifix.

These depictions could serve as an indictment of the frequent lack of adult follow-up in faith development for so many Catholics – which Greene wrote about in the 1930s, in his screenplay in the 1940s and which is again presented here.

The convert Greene always struggled with the teachings of the Church, not only the moral issues, but the theology of sin, grace, forgiveness and redemption. He believed that literature had, of necessity, to be about sin.

The person of grace in the film is the blowsy Ida (Hermione Baddeley memorable in 1947, Helen Mirren in the current version). She is not a person of faith in any way, except in some goodness in human nature, in her trying to protect Rose, and in a sense of justice that evil should be punished. She is no saint, even at the end, but she does good.

This version of Brighton Rock brings an old way and style of Catholicism centre screen in a drama that is powerful. Audiences might wonder and question. It is not the core Catholicism of believers whose focus is not just on the Passion and death of Jesus but on the Resurrection (a criticism made of Mel Gibson and The Passion of the Christ).

THE GREEN HORNET

(US, 2010, d. Michel Gondry)

This superhero comedy drama has been something of a sign of contradiction.

Diehard devotees of the now so many versions of the superhero on screen have lamented the fact that Seth Rogen is nobody's idea of a hero let alone a superhero and that the action and effects don't match up to other high-tech blockbusters – even though it is made in 3D. Fair enough. But, this viewpoint does seem to miss the point of the movie and the treatment.

Certainly, Seth Rogen (even with a bit of weight loss) cannot compete with Batman, Spiderman (though Green Hornet keeps an eye on the storylines and activities of these heroes) and certainly not Superman and co. And that is how The Green Hornet ticks. It is a tongue-in-cheek romp, a send-up of the conventions of the genre while putting them to amusing use. When we notice that Seth Rogen and his writing partner, Evan Goldberg (Superbad, Pineapple Express), are responsible for the screenplay (with plenty of dude, cool and four letter language), then we should not be expecting po-faced action. When we notice that the director is Frenchman, Michel Gondry, whose projects are never quite straightforward (Eternal Sunshine, Human Nature, Science of Sleep, Be Kind Rewind), then anything is possible.

Which is rather a long introduction to a favourable review of The Green Hornet.

Britt Reid (Rogen) has been treated severely as a boy by his newspaper tycoon father (Tom Wilkinson). He grows up to be a partying spoilt brat (superbad style) who is confronted with responsibility at his father's sudden death. Not that he undergoes a full conversion. He is still vain, petulant, cowardly and so on, despite his undergoing a kind of Bruce Wayne-Batman² experience after, by accident, routing a group of thugs. So exhilarated is he (and he has the money to finance the weaponry and cars) that he pushes the paper to promote his new identity as The Green Hornet (much humour about his choice of name and mask).

He actually can't do it at all without the help of his father's mechanic, Kato (Jay Chou in a role that was once Bruce Lee's), who does all the work while Britt takes all the credit (and believes his own publicity). Shades of Inspector Clouseau and his Cato.

Cameron Diaz comes on board the paper and does research on how The Green Hornet is going to act – which, of course, Britt puts into action. Except that he wants everyone to think The Green Hornet, unlike Spiderman, is a baddy: doing good by looking superbad. But... the city's criminals and the crooked DA (David Harbour) then set out to get rid of the Hornet – in a series of amusing (except for those who want it all to be serious) bouts of mayhem, chases and action (not least a knockout brawl between Britt and Kato).

Lots of scenes are stolen by the old-fashioned local gangster chief from Russia, especially our first view of him confronting an upstart Armani-suited would-be criminal boss, James Franco (uncredited). As he goes along, exasperated by the Green Hornet, he wants to look more up-market, dressing in red and changing his name from Chudnofsky to Bludnofsky. It is to the credit of Christoph Waltz that he is able to make this character both funny and ludicrous as well as sinister. It takes a moment to realise that it is Waltz who looks and sounds so different from his Oscar-winning role in Inglourious Basterds.

A superhero tale for those who enjoy more than a touch of the absurd.

HEREAFTER

(US, 2010, d. Clint Eastwood)

An impressive film for audiences who like to reflect on the themes of their movies.

The credentials are impressive. The screenplay was written by Peter Morgan, best known for his political dramas like The Queen, The Special Relationship, The Last King of Scotland and Frost/Nixon. He has gone in a very different direction this time, a more meditative approach to his storytelling.

Very interesting that Clint Eastwood should choose to direct the film – and was in production when he turned 80 in

May 2010. It is movie-making by an old man who is control of his skills but is thinking thoughts beyond this world. He is exploring themes of near-death experience, the possibilities of an afterlife and of communicating with those who have died.

Clint Eastwood has been directing for over 40 years as well as developing a screen personal for longer: an iconic western figure in the spaghetti westerns, the Dirty Harry policeman in that series as well as the symbolic gunfighters in his 'religious' westerns. He brought this acting career to a close with his coach and issues of assisted suicide in Million Dollar Baby and his gruff Walt, a dirty harry figure who finds self-sacrificing redemption. (After that, he made the tribute to Nelson Mandela, Invictus.)

The opening of Hereafter is quite overwhelming, action before the reflection. The re-creation of the tsunami in Thailand received an Oscar nomination. But, the film settles down to tell three very different stories.

The structure of the film is quite schematic. Sections of each story are told in regular turn until, in a pleasing way, the three central characters are brought together in London.

It should be said that Hereafter has quite a European feel to it rather than a glossy Hollywood style. That and the seriousness of the subject of the Hereafter might account for the film not doing very well at the US box-office.

The first story is set in Paris and concerns a TV journalist and host (Cecile de France) who tries to come to terms with what she experienced in almost drowning. It affects her relationships, her work and sends her to Switzerland to consult an expert on near-death (Marthe Keller).

The second story is set in San Francisco. Matt Damon works in a factory. We learn that he has powers, mysterious to him as well as to others, whereby he knows matters about a person by touching them. He regrets these powers and the effect they have had on his life and resists the attempts of his brother (Jay Mohr) to make a business out of the phenomenon. There is an episode where a young woman (Bryce Dallas Howard) who does a cooking course with George and she finds out more than she anticipated or wanted.

The third story is set in London. Twins live with their addict mother, trying to shield her from social workers. When one of the twins is killed in an accident and the other is sent to foster care, he wants to know more about his brother whom he senses is always with him. Frankie and George McLaren play the twins as recognisably ordinary boys.

It might seem impossible for the three central characters to meet but they do, not in an overtly contrived way, but satisfyingly. George's love for Charles Dickens' novels is an important factor. He listens to tapes of the novels (read by Derek Jacob whom he meets at the London Book Fair).

Clint Eastwood shows great sensitivity in dealing with the themes and in the performances he gets from the central figures.

This is a film to surrender to and it will be richly rewarding.

(The French film, Et Apres...? (Afterwards, 2009) with Romain Duris and John Malkovich, would serve as an interesting companion film to Hereafter, different but touching on similar themes.)

HOW DO YOU KNOW

(US, 2010, d. James L. Brooks)

Given the strong cast and the Oscar-winning writer and director, James L. Brooks (Terms of Endearment, Broadcast News, As Good as it Gets), it is very surprising how less than involving this romantic comedy actually is.

The premiss is the familiar one: how do you know you are in love?

The centre of the film, and the character asking the question, is a softball champion who has been forced to retire because she is over 30 and a few seconds slower in responses than up and coming players, Lisa (Reese Witherspoon). She suddenly is involved with a baseball player who is narcissistic, with too much money and too exploitative of women, Matty (Owen Wilson). By chance, she encounters business executive, George (Paul Rudd) who is being indicted on fraud – the blame for which is on the father who brought him up, Charles (Jack Nicholson).

Plenty of ingredients, but...

Lisa tends to know her own mind and is really living with Matty on the rebound of her disappointment in not being

picked for the softball team. She thinks George is flaky. George falls in love with Lisa, but is tangled in her problems and his own financial difficulties and his relationship with his father. His secretary, the pregnant Annie, (Kathryn Hahn) who is devoted to him, wants him to know the truth about his father.

What is fairly obvious from early in the film takes a long time to work itself out.

Since Reese Witherspoon is so attractive, we are prepared to put up with her dilemmas. Paul Rudd is so nice, we are prepared to be patient until everything is sorted out. Owen Wilson does another variation on his screen persona – and is prepared to send up the naivety and sometimes earnestness of his self-absorbed character. And there is Jack Nicholson, playing a father whom you really couldn't trust.

Some of the speeches seem overwritten and overwrought.

What a pity.

THE MECHANIC

(US, 2011, d. Simon West)

Once upon a time, British Michael Winner used to direct Charles Bronson action dramas like *The Stone Killer*, *Chato's Land*, the *Death Wish* films and, in 1972, *The Mechanic*. But that was four decades ago. Now the sons of the original producers have decided that a remake of *The Mechanic* is in order and desirable, the original having achieved some cult status among the fans of the 70s actioners.

The Mechanic is someone who fixes problems. But, the mechanic's employers are in the business of business and eliminating rivals and threat. The mechanic is a hit man.

This means that this version is a 21st century, glossy 're-imagining' (as they say) of how hit men work and the techniques they use to make a murder seem like an accident or a suicide. This version is so glossy and fast-moving that it could serve as a recruiting film for the profession.

It also presents its audience with something of a moral dilemma (as distinct from the problems concerning hired killers in the first place). Arthur Bishop is an absolutely ruthless hit man. But, as his story progresses and despite his protestations to the contrary, he seems to be gaining some kind of conscience and some moments of remorse. This means that he becomes something of a hero for the story, especially when his employers are unscrupulous tycoons and the son of his best friend (whom he is persuaded to kill) becomes his apprentice, a disreputable young man who is in it for anger release, some risky thrills and some revenge.

Whether the fans who will be following the set-ups and double crosses, along with the skills in murder and cover-ups, will notice the moral dilemmas is another thing.

This is compounded by the casting. Who could be Charles Bronson in the 21st century?

The man who has made a niche for himself and garnered a big group of fans is former Olympic diver, Jason Statham. From *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, through *Transporter* and *Crank* films and a lot of others to *The Expendables*, Statham who does not claim to be much of an actor but is quite a distinctive screen presence, finds that the Bronson mantle has fallen on him, and seems quite comfortable. Not much of a smiler, in fact not much of a user of facial expressions, he nevertheless, in his silence and abruptness, conveys the feelings of the hit man who knows he should retire and get a life.

Ben Foster (so persuasively evil in *3:10 to Yuma*) has no difficulty in conveying the ambiguous character of the apprentice (played by the more genial Jan- Michael Vincent in the original). Donald Sutherland is the father and Tony Goldwyn (so effective as the villain in *Ghost* twenty years ago) is the ruthless boss.

The film achieves what it sets out to do, tell a moral tale about amoral characters without providing easy answers and peppering it with action and hit men activity along the way.

THE NEXT THREE DAYS

(US, 2010, d. Paul Haggis)

Have you had the experience while watching a film, a new film, that you have actually seen a lot of it before but can't remember where? Fans of French films who have not checked where *The Next Three Days* derives from may well have

this sometimes alarming déjà vu. It was a relief at the end to find that it is based on a French drama of only two years ago, *Pour Elle* (Anything for Her) with Diane Kruger and Yvan Attal.. No wonder it was familiar.

France has been replaced by the US, Pittsburg specifically. Paul Haggis (*Crash*, *In the Valley of Elah*) has adapted the plot well and Americanised it very satisfactorily.

It begins as a drama and ends as a thriller, probably quite far-fetched, but suspenseful as the last part unfolds.

Russell Crowe plays a loving husband and father (real life mellowing him?). Elizabeth Banks plays his wife. Suddenly, police intrude into their home and arrest her, charging her with murder. Circumstantial evidence brings a guilty verdict and a long sentence. Her husband visits her faithfully. Her little son affects indifference because she doesn't come home. Can anything be done?

This is a story where a fairly laidback and genial teacher devises a plan to effect his wife's escape from prison. He studies various ways this might be done. He interviews a man who escaped many times and has written a book about it (a solid cameo from Liam Neeson). Gradually, after a long time of hit and miss experiments and testing possibilities, he does make a plan. The question, of course, is, once it is under way, will it work, will the unexpected happen (it does) and can they possibly get away.

While the first part of the film is fairly measured and spends a lot of time building up the characters and showing how the plan might seem a folly, the execution of the plan is effective and tense. Part of the effectiveness of the film is that the family seem fairly ordinary (with Brian Dennehy as the grandfather along with other relatives). Audiences can identify with them, with the shock of the arrest and the prospect of ruined lives.

Entertaining even if you have doubts afterwards that this kind of thing could really happen.

RABBIT HOLE

(US, 2010, d. John Cameron Mitchell)

This is a drama focusing on a couple who have lost their son, hit by a car outside his house. He is their only child and was four years old. Each of them tries to deal with their grief in their own way, but this sets up great tensions because they have reacted so differently. How can they come to terms with what has happened to their son and to them? Can they?

This is a well-written and well-acted film. It offers strong opportunities for Nicole Kidman and Aaron Eckhart to show their dramatic skills. They work well with and against each other so that the audience is drawn into their conflict. Members of the audience will respond in different ways to the husband and to the wife, liking one and disliking the other, judging one and excusing or making allowances for the other.

Nicole Kidman is Becca. Her way of coping tends to suppress too much emotion and to move to a more cerebral stance. Aaron Eckhart is Howie, who is far more emotionally expressive, regretting Becca's moves to eliminate what he values as memories of his son, his dog, the clothes and items in his room, even the suggestion to sell the house. He accompanies Becca to a help group but she is alienated by their outpourings and, especially, of their reliance on religious comfort and their talk of God. She laughs. She walks out. Howie continues to go and befriends Gaby (Sandra Oh) whose husband has walked out on her. Can she supply comfort and support for Howie? Comfort for herself?

What sustains Becca is tracking down the high school student who was the driver of the car. He is also living with regrets and a scruple that it may have been his fault, although the little boy had run out on to the street after his dog. The young man, Jason (Miles Teller) is finishing school but is a sketcher and is composing a graphic comic-book, *Rabbit Hole*.

Becca is also handicapped by her irresponsible sister, Izzy (Tammy Blanchard) and handicapped and helped by her rather simple and homespun mother (Dianne Wiest) who is still grieving the death of her adult son by an overdose. Becca resents her mother's comparing the two deaths and the motherly grief.

While the film is serious, there are some humorous touches, which enable the audience to stay with the drama, with their own thoughts and feelings. The film derives from a play and part of the success of the film is that it has some very strong dialogue and speeches which express the inner life of each of the central characters.

The film is directed by John Cameron Mitchell, better known as a director of some sexually provocative features, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* and *Shortbus*. He makes a very effective transition to more mainstream material with *Rabbit Hole*.

RAMONA AND BEEZUS

(US, 2010, d. Elizabeth Allen)

Definitely for its niche market, younger girls.

Joey King makes a feisty and articulate 9 year old Ramona. She lives in Portland, Oregon, with her older sister, Beatrice (who has become Beezus because Ramona could not pronounce Beatrice properly), Selena Gomez, as well as a little baby sister. Her father is very nice (a genial John Corbert). Her mother is very nice and caring (Bridget Moynihan). And she has a very nice aunt, Aunt Bea, Ginnifer Goodwin. In fact, despite some mischief from Ramona and her frequently getting into trouble, along with bad report from her teacher (Sandra Oh), it is mostly very nice.

This is American wholesome family entertainment – but the boys may be wanting to watch something else (especially if they have sisters and may see all of this in real life).

There are some complications, of course. Dad loses his job and goes out for interviews but you know something will turn up – it does and it is very nice too. Aunt Bea used to have a crush on neighbour, Hobart (Josh Duhamel who must have been wondering at times what he was doing, with his movie reputation, in a film like this). He is back after wandering round for ten years but now realises he loves Bea. One of Ramona's more egregious mess-ups (loads of paints over his vehicle) brings them together.

There is a lot in the film about Ramona growing up and taking responsibility. Her mother handles Ramona's decision to run away with some wisdom. And, an ending with wedding bells, and the family all settled, with Ramona promising to be better behaved, means that all's well that ends very nicely well.

THE ROMANTICS

(US, 2010, d. Galt Niederhoffer)

There is some passing reference to the literary romantics of the 19th century, but this film is a long way from the literature (in some instances it might be more related to their behaviour in real life).

This is a take-it-or-leave-it romantic comedy, based on a novel by the writer-director.

The set-up is this. Several friends from college days, now in their 30s, travel to a wedding. There will be a rehearsal, a pre-ceremony dinner with lots of drinking and lots of rather silly speeches, the anguish of the night before and then the wedding itself. That seems to be straightforward, but it is not. The main visitor, Laura (Katie Holmes), has always been in love with the about-to-be groom, Tom (Josh Duhamel), but they have broken up long since. But, given the characters' expressions and behaviour, it is quite clear that the romance is still smouldering not too far under the surface. So, why has Tom proposed to Katie's old roommate, friend and rival, Lila (Anna Paquin)?

If that sounds interesting, then The Romantics might be worth a look. On the other hand, Laura's angst is obvious. Lila's determination is pig-headed with a variety of motivations. And Tom's behaviour still seems incomprehensible.

Candace Bergen turns up for older audiences as Lila's mother and organiser of the wedding.

SANCTUM

(Australia/US, 2010, d. Alister Grierson)

James Cameron gives his name to the publicity for this action adventure which is not in the blockbuster vein, despite the settings and the 3D. It is rather old-fashioned matinee stuff. Not that Cameron's films aren't a bit in the matinee style, especially in their often prosaic dialogue. (This one has the same kind of dialogue but it is peppered with a lot of Australian slang and the touch of crass.) Not that Cameron is not interested in water stories from The Abyss to Titanic and documentaries on the Titanic. His cameras are employed here as well. Cameron and the writer, Andrew Wight, who was a diver in caves in the Nullabor in 1988 and had a similar experience, have worked together on all Cameron's films in recent years, especially his underwater documentaries.

Why this film is called Sanctum will have to be one of those mysteries. Perhaps it's the inner sanctum of the last vast unexplored cave and cavernous underground system. But it is no sanctum for the characters who disappear one by one, victims of the elements, the remote and deadly dangers and human flaws and clashes.

The plot? A group of caver-divers are in Papua New Guinea (Queensland and Dunk Island standing in) exploring the vast caves and underground lakes and rivers with a mixture of high current technology and old-fashioned derring-do. As they prepare for going beyond their limits, a cyclone with torrential rains comes down on them and it is a matter of escaping. (Unlike *The Descent* films or *The Cave*, there are no mysterious spirits or demons – just the hazards of nature.)

This may mean that the film is really of interest to cavers and divers, perhaps a bit tedious for those who prefer their armchairs or for those who want slambang action. *Sanctum* is something of a spelunkathon.

While the caves are spectacular (filmed in South Australia's Mt Gambier), the 3D techniques are a little disappointing and (testing with removing glasses throughout) many of the scenes look exactly the same in 2D.

Richard Roxburgh as the tough explorer who finds his identity in spelunking rather than in marriage and family and who barks out orders constantly brings a stronger performance than the script and plot might warrant. Rhys Wakefield is his alienated teenage son – who will come to know and admire his father. The rest of the cast is Australian and allowed to keep their accents and their rough and ready language, except for Alison Parkinson who becomes an American climber who accompanies her boyfriend, Welsh Ioan Gruffudd sporting a broad American accent as a spoilt and self-centred playboy billionaire (we hiss his villainy).

Two cultural elements: a PNG highlander in full regalia, including nose bone, sitting like an icon, but also playing cards; and the quoting of Kubla Khan and Coleridge.

Sanctum offers adventure, B-grade, until the next one comes along – which it will pretty soon. And then the next... and the next.

STONE

(US, 2010, d. John Curran)

It can be safely said that *Stone* is not a crowd-pleaser. At first glance, it might seem like a thriller, a parole officer confronting a bizarre prisoner and audiences expecting the worst between them. Well, something of the worst does happen but not in a thrilling way. Rather, this film, the screenplay based on his play by Angus Mc Lachlan, is strong on verbal interactions, often a two-hander between officer and prisoner, between officer and prisoner's wife, between officer and his wife.

So, this is a psychological drama, a drama of tests of integrity as well as of manipulative game-playing and seduction. It is not a pacy drama. It requires attention from its audience, demands that they get over their fidgets. Attention to the wordplay and verbal jousting means a deepening awareness of (very) flawed characters, not really sympathetic personalities who have made messes of their lives or who have messed others' lives.

The director is John Curran who is at home with this kind of material, who does not compromise in presenting harsh realities and relationships. His films include *Praise*, *We Don't Live Here Anymore* and his powerful version of Maugham's *The Painted Veil*. Curran's direction is unhurried and he uses the camera to help us focus on particulars (the characters' eyes and gazes, trapped and crushed insects), long takes, careful framing. Curran also tinkers with the sound engineering, a lot of sounds, noises (which the prisoner becomes conscious of) and regular snippets of religious radio and rather literal biblical moralising.

There is also an alarming prologue concerning the parole officer, his young wife and his baby daughter which sets a violent tone to what will develop. Then the film moves forward two decades or so. The officer is at home with his wife, church-going, scripture reading, she particularly religious and emotionally damaged. At work, he has to be tough, but he is about to retire. He wants to keep his last case-load before leaving. And that is where he encounters the prisoner.

The officer is played by Robert de Niro, a more subtle performance than many of his recent turns, yet with a range of moods at home and at work. He is not really a nice man but he looks as if he has learned some integrity. Edward Norton is the prisoner, reminding us of how extraordinarily deceiving he was in his first film, *Primal Fear*. He wants to get out as does his schoolteacher wife who sets out to work on the officer. The seduction is well written and well played, with Milla Jovovich acting more effectively than all the *Resident Evil* performances combined. And, at home, Frances Conroy gives a fine performance as a complex, wounded woman.

The interactions become dramatically intense at times as integrity is tested. Where can it end? The finale here is not a cut and dried American ending. Life will go on but how?

Stone (the nickname of Norton's Character) will not draw big audiences, but it may find a following for audiences

interested in offbeat dramas and the work of John Curran and his cast.

THE TAKERS

(US, 2010, d. John Luessenhop)

Nothing subtle about the title of this heist action thriller. The central characters are real takers. They commit armed robberies and have no scruple in taking what they want to be theirs.

Maybe nothing particularly new here – but who says that everything has to be new? Yes, this is a gang of thieves. They work together. Some of them fall out. (Come to think of it, there is more than a resemblance to *The Town*, which was in fact made after *The Takers*.) But, this is a rather affluent group of seeming gentlemen who act thuggishly. They dress smartly, speak well, live in the best hotels and wear tailor-made clothes which, of course, they can afford. Idris Elba is the leader with some suavity and brains. Paul Walker look as if he has gone further out in defying the law than in the *Fast and Furious* series. Hayden Christensen is meant to offer brawn, though he still looks scrawny. Somebody mentioned he is acting-challenged and there seems to some truth in this. Chris Brown (who does the longest and most complicated run from the police chase in movies and doesn't seem too much out of breath) and Michael Early are two brothers. They are joined by a former member of the gang who is coming out of prison (Tip Four of the gang are African Americans).

And the law? We are initially surprised to find that two characters whom we may have thought were part of the gang are LA police. Matt Dillon gives strong performances these days and is the tough cop, full-time committed and vigilant (divorced with a young daughter whose parental visits are spoiled as he follows leads instead of taking her out). His partner is the pleasant Jay Hernandez who finds problems of his own. Zoe Saldana has a brief role as a girlfriend and Jonathan Schaech is the respectable seeming money manager for the thieves.

There are two major heists, one brief and efficient, the other something of a fiasco (but not quite).

Thus the plot and characters. The rest of the review needs to emphasise that this is pretty much a non-stop actioner, fast, handheld camera work to remind us that it is real. Pounding score with music, editing, dialogue and performance all aimed at adrenalin pumping. *The Takers* does what it set out to do (which was not to be a masterpiece but a robbery genre piece).

SIGNIS FILM REVIEWS MARCH 2011

ADJUSTMENT BUREAU, The

BIG MOMMA, LIKE FATHER LIKE SON

CONVICTION

GNOMEO AND JULIET

HALL PASS

I AM NUMBER FOUR

INSIDE JOB

LITTLE BIT OF HEAVEN, A

NENETTE

NEVER LET ME GO

NO STRINGS ATTACHED

SEASON OF THE WITCH

SECRETARIAT

WASTED ON THE YOUNG

WAY BACK, The

THE ADJUSTMENT BUREAU

(US, 2011, d. George Golfi)

When the credit for this film being based on a story by Philip K. Dick, The Adjustment Team, then the tone of the film fell into place. However, it was not quite doing it while the plot was unfolding. Dick is famous for being the author of Blade Runner, Total Recall and other stories on which films have been based like Minority Report and Paycheck. The world of Philip K. Dick had many dimensions, explored the reality of human nature (both of humans and replicants) and took its fans into different futuristic worlds and different moral choices.

The world of The Adjustment Bureau does not look like a different futuristic place at all, even despite mysterious doors which open directly into locations some distance away in terms of realism. This is New York as we have come to know it, American politics, campaigns and dirty tricks as we have come to take them for granted, romance as we might expect it in the movies. Then strange men wearing hats appear and start to control the protagonists' lives, even with digi-books. But, this seems so casual that we don't realise that we are in a Philip K. Dick world and are forced to juggle the realism with the fantasy.

Not that the theme is not interesting in itself: the nature and exercise of free will. This takes the audience out of its comfort zone (although we are lagging a bit in appreciating where and how we are being taken) and raises questions of transcendence in terms of destiny, fate and free choices. There is talk of the chairman, who seems to run a bureau which determines people's lives. But, there are some rebels even amongst his guardians (angels?) with their electronic books of life, everything mapped out for all of us. But, many science fiction films have reminded us that love can overcome everything. And this is the key here. Is that what the chairman hopes we all will do, move out of the seemingly predestined plan, discover love and make free choices?

I am not so sure that many audiences leaving The Adjustment Bureau will want to spend this kind of time musing over what they have seen. They might simply say it was interesting enough, that the actors were good, but it was a bit of a misfire.

The actors are good. Matt Damon, rather ubiquitous at the moment, is a genial politician with a quick temper who falls in love with a dancer, played by Emily Blunt. And Terence Stamp, brooding looks and diction, is one of the chief underlings of the Chairman.

A science fiction romantic oddity.

BIG MOMMA, LIKE FATHER LIKE SON

(US, 2011, d. John Whitesell)

There were obviously enough fans out there, especially in the US, for Martin Lawrence to don fat suit, wig and mammy dresses to do undercover work in Big Momma's House 2. There must have been enough again for this Big Momma Three. However, Malcolm, the FBI agent, has now acquired a stepson whom he wants to study at Duke University, whereas the son, aged 17 (a year older than Justin Bieber when he launched his career) already has his music contract to be signed by Malcolm for his first CD.

You think - how can they both get into the fat suits and the wigs (and the son's appalling sense of fashion) so that the film combines parental clashes, FBI investigation, comedy of mistaken identity and the possibility of a school romance? Step by step they do, making it seem almost plausible at times. The quick answer is that a USB stick the FBI needs for evidence has been hidden in a music box in a girls' art school in Atlanta. Malcolm's opportunity for an arrest has gone wrong and his son has witnessed a murder. So, a variation on St Trinians, with Malcolm becoming Big Momma the house mother and the son becoming Big Momma's grandniece.

It all plays out much as we might expect but that's the nature of this kind of comic action concoction. The gangsters, Eastern European, of course, are really nasty. However, this is meant to be a cheerful movie so, during the final credits everyone in the cast, gangsters included, have the chance to join in the rap song and move with the rhythms. No real

reason why Big Mother couldn't come back again.

CONVICTION

(US, 2010, d. Tony Goldwyn)

In the 1980s, Kenny Waters was convicted of a brutal murder of a woman in Massachusetts. It was considered an attempted robbery. Kenny had a reputation for being a troublesome child, an irresponsible young man. The police were out to nail him, especially a female officer on the force who was intent on proving herself among her male colleagues. At first, the charges did not stick. After some years, his former girlfriend and his partner testified against him and he received a life sentence.

Kenny was very close to his sister, Betty Ann. She decided to study law in order to prove his innocence.

This is one of those stories of dogged perseverance, of someone enduring prison life while innocent, and the repercussions for the family. Familiar enough, but stories of courage and stick-to-it-iveness always draw an audience. This American story is told in the American way, hearts on sleeves, emotional appeal, orchestrated score, spirit of triumph over all odds.

Hilary Swank has shown over the years (and two Oscar wins) that she is more than adept at strong female characters. This is true of her Betty Ann, tested by her love for her brother, tested by her uncomprehending husband, sometimes alienated from her sons, enduring the long years of study. It is Sam Rockwell, who is an actor of quite some skill in diverse roles, who portrays Kenny. Minnie Driver offers moral support as a fellow student. Melissa Leo is the hard and determined police officer. Juliette Lewis is good as the perjuring girlfriend.

The factor which changes Kenny Waters' appeal is the development of DNA technology, not available when he was found guilty but developing during the 1990s. (Another tension arises as to whether regulations have allowed the destruction of evidence after a certain time period.)

Films like this encourage an interior almost-rage at the awareness of injustice perpetrated on the innocent as well as a feeling of helplessness in the face of conspiracies against the innocent. Not that Kenny Waters is an admirable character. His behaviour in prison is disruptive – but, given his innocence and his being framed, why wouldn't he be disruptive? It is the principle which is the important thing in stories like this – and the reminder, which is spoken by Betty Ann, that in a state with capital punishment, Kenny would be long dead.

Since the trial, Betty Ann has been involved in an organisation that works to prove the innocence of the condemned – its representative is played by Peter Gallagher.

Certainly a worthy film with a significant subject but given standard treatment.

GNOMEO AND JULIET

(UK, 2011, d. Kelly Asbury)

The only little girl in the very small audience one Thursday afternoon was obviously caught up with the drama of the modern Montagues and Capulets (the human neighbours and the Blues and the Reds, their gnome equivalents) that at one stage she wondered out loud where was Gnomeo. This time the littlies might enjoy a variation on Shakespeare while those a bit older might hesitate: garden gnomes?. After all, the characters (except for some humans now and then) are garden gnomes in the yards of English homes. We know this is England because we glimpse a bus whose destination is Stratford on Avon.

Anyone wondering about this transposition of 17th century tragedy to modern suburbia may enjoy the discussion between Gnomeo and the statue of Shakespeare in the park (voiced by Patrick Stewart) with Gnomeo who is, naturally, wanting to be re-united with Juliet, dismayed while the bard argues in favour of his own death-centred drama. When it seems that the end is tragic, Shakespeare nods, 'Told you so!'.

These gnomes have obviously been sneaking off to the movies while their human owners were not looking. And they have been watching the Toy Story series because they do the same thing, have a life of their own but go into their expected poses as soon as humans turn up.

What might make this film more enjoyable for film buffs is the strong voice cast. (And a nice trivial pursuit question: what film did Maggie Smith and Jason Statham appear in together. Here it is, she Gnomeo's mother and he the rather typecast Tybalt.) James McAvoy and Emily Blunt are the starcrossed lovers and Michael Caine is plain to hear as Juliet's father. You have to listen quickly to catch Julie Walters and Richard Wilson as the human Capulets and Montagues. There is a monstrously huge mower, called the Terrafirmanator, obtained by a computer savvy gnome, Benny (Matt Lucas) – and it is 'voiced' by wrestler Hulk Hogan. Someone for everyone! Even a Hispanic-sounding flamingo from the garden.

Yes, we know what is going to happen, but it is entertaining to see how this entertainment for children incorporates Shakespeare. And, yes, the soundtrack replete with familiar melodies is a collection of Elton John and Bernie Taupin songs because the film is a product of Elton John and David Furnish who have turned their attention to children.

HALL PASS

(US, 2011, Peter and Bobby Farrelly)

Nobody ever accused the Farrelly Brothers of using good taste in their comedies. For more than 16 years they have been making films which marketing has to apologise for or capitalise on. Words like 'crass', 'gross', even 'disgusting' come up – not for the films as a whole, but rather for the humour, the jokes and the visualising of bodily functions that are not normally shown on screen (or with such detail and shock value).

That being said, they belong to comic satirists who revel in showing the dark side of human nature while ultimately pitching a resolution of personal crises that is basically traditional and moral. The Farrellys are getting older, partly milder – though they are not against breakout sequences for shock and/or comic sake.

Hall Pass is an American term for a school student who is allowed out of class and can wander the corridors while everyone else is confined and living up to disciplinary expectations. As explained by a psychologist character in the film, it could be used by wives for therapy, to see what their husbands really believe and what they would really do, were they to have a hall pass, say a week away from marriage – and what they themselves would do. So, that's the premiss. Question, what would two ordinary husbands, who are prone to some leering and ogling as well as a lot of explicitly direct talk about sexuality, actually do were they to have a hall pass.

First of all, the two husbands are played by Owen Wilson and Jason Sudeikis. This is probably the pleasantest Owen Wilson character on screen for some time. He does have a wandering eye at times but he is essentially a decent man, a loving and caring husband and father. Sudeikis has the crasser role and gets himself far more tangled as the week goes on. Jenna Fischer is nice as Wilson's wife. Christina Applegate is tougher and more complex as the other wife.

There are some oddball characters in the cast, especially the men's poker group who want to observe how the hall pass week goes – British Stephen Merchant, co-writer of *The Office*, has a lot of funny moments, especially for those loyal few who stay for the final credits and scenes after the credits (a reward for not joining the mass exodus which is oblivious of the credits given to people who have worked on a film for a long time).

Nikki Whelan turns up as a lively and sympathetic bartender. Fans of that talented character actor, Richard Jenkins, will do a double take when they realise he is playing that randy friend and adviser who seems to have modelled his appearance, face and tan, and hat, on Freddy Krueger.

So, is a Hall Pass an excuse for no limits on sexual behaviour for a week? Obviously, self-indulgent and exploitative spouses don't need a hall pass for breaking out. The Farrellys, from their basically moral standpoint, send up the would-be roués, their inflated opinions of themselves, their frequent faux pas and misjudgements of how women wish to be treated, their handling of temptation, and their realisation that there is good green grass on their side of the fence.

So, quite a number of good jokes and satiric moments, some disgusting moments (which anyone with a fastidious sensibility should beware of – but fastidious sensibilities do not go to Farrelly Brothers' films anyway), some very traditional romantic moralising. Which means that the Farrellys can have their cake and eat it as well – inviting the raucous audience in for a farcical and crass comedy, then getting them to stop and think at the end (or at least one hopes so).

I AM NUMBER FOUR

(US, 2011, d. D.J. Caruso)

As this science-fiction cum high school romance for teenage audiences continued on, I found that my inner adolescent was touched and I rather enjoyed it.

By now, there must be theses being written all over the world on the popularity of the teenage action/romance movies and what are the ingredients for this popularity. The Twilight series comes to mind while watching this one, though ethereal vampires are much less exciting than the rugged Number Four (John Smith among many other names). 2010 saw Tomorrow When the War Began and I am Number Four could stand some comparisons with the battles against intruding troops, real in Tomorrow, Aliens in Number Four. Director D.J. Caruso made some adult thriller like The Salton Sea and Taking Sides. However, he moved into this current genre with Eagle Eye where the young Shia LaBeouf is being pursued by ominisurveillance enemies.

Apart from an eerie opening where menacing aliens dispose of a young man, the early part of the film is high school stuff, parties on Florida islands, high school hijinks, rivalries, bullying, attractions and misunderstandings and a potential rotter of a smug campus villain (whose father is the sheriff). You know there is going to be action, but this goes on for rather a while, establishing character, of course, and setting up the final confrontation.

Actually, this is rather like one of those films which have Soviet sleepers nicely ensconced in small town America waiting for the day that they are activated. But, this time, the sleepers are isolated youngsters from another planet, ten in all, who have the power to resist the evil aliens from their planet who are ambitious for, yes, world domination. The opening of the film is the death of Number Three, so our story is about Number Four and his guardian.

Number Four is played with some vigour by Alex Pettyfer. He is fit and strong-jawed, the opposite of Robert Pattinson's pasty and vapid vampire, Edward. It is easy to see why Sarah, whose hobby is photography, should fall for him. He also befriends Sam (Callum McCauliffe) whose father has disappeared, probably abducted by the vicious aliens who felt that his researches were getting too close to them. Timothy Olyphant is Number Four's very serious mentor and guardian. And there is a nice dog.

Then, the action starts, rather computer game like, but quite engrossing in its expected way. To the rescue comes an Amazonian heroine, blasting everyone in her way – these youngsters have increasingly superhuman powers (think The Fantastic Four). She is Jane Doe, Number Six, played with all stops out by Teresa Palmer. She sounds and looks like a young Naomi Watts (as she has in her other appearances) but could have called herself Nellie Melba or some such because she has retained her Australian accent – great to see the Australian alien coming to the rescue of the American alien, and female to boot. It becomes a touch ludicrous when animal monsters appear (including the pet dog) and scuffle, growl and bit to the death. But, monsters and monstrous aliens all immediately disintegrate when they are destroyed, so there is not much blood around.

Based on a novel by Pittacus Lore (now, there's a name), this adventure has the potential for a movie franchise. Spoiler: the good aliens go up to Number Ten!

INSIDE JOB

(US, 2010, d. Charles Ferguson)

For most of us, the world economic meltdown of 2008 seems incomprehensible as it raises so many questions as to how alleged financial experts could have been so wrong, so deceitful, so greedy, so amoral if not immoral, in their playing with, unscrupulously gambling, with people's, institutions' and nations' money.

I would not like to have to do an exam on what I learned and remember from watching Inside Job, the details and the intricacies, let alone the terminologies, were too much for me. But, I am glad (in a morbid kind of way) that I have seen the film.

For those in the money know, there is a lot of information about how the American banks, especially, the bankers, the financial advisers to the Bush, Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations got their positions and maintained them,

despite the upheavals. While many of the top people involved declined to be interviewed for the film, there are enough interviews to explain what went on. (The academics from American universities who sit or sat on bank boards, wrote highly paid papers and acted as government consultants, come across as an alarming group of mercenary types as well.)

Interestingly, the film opens with the crisis in Iceland and its bankruptcy in 2008 offering some background as to how this could come about. This gets us in the vein to explore the American situation and its consequences. As we listen (without always understanding the detail and keeping abreast of the events), we realise that we are not looking at a group of naive innocents who were doing their best in terms of honesty and open fair dealing. We are looking at a culture that fostered greed and risk, that was made up of many men (more than women) who aspired to a lavish, sometimes decadent, lifestyle, many of whom still do not have the decency to be honest and who remain in positions of power and influence. Statistics about bonuses (to which we have become accustomed, perhaps) are still appalling in the huge (sometimes ultra-huge) amounts that individuals walk away with even as Lehman Brothers, Goldman Sachs, AIG and so many others are in dire straits.

Communism collapsed at the end of the 1980s. Capitalism has been thoroughly shaken by this global meltdown. While human nature remains corruptible, we owe a debt to the media (which does not always avoid corruptibility either) which can produce articles which analyse and warn, interviews that alert us to dangers as well as showing confessions of wrongdoing, documentaries that assemble facts and figures which can inform and influence for change. This film could be a companion piece to Michael Moore's 2009 *Capitalism: A Love Story*. (And for those who prefer a movie story that dramatises these issues, *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* (with Gordon Gecko's reminder, 'I once said, 'Greed is good'; now it's legal'.) and the drama of investment risk, *Margin Call*, with Kevin Spacey and Jeremy Irons.)

A LITTLE BIT OF HEAVEN

(US, 2010, d. Nicole Kessel)

Usually, a little bit of heaven refers to something here on earth. It does do this with this romantic comedy, but there is also some anticipation of life after death. We do not have many films from the mainstream which openly acknowledge the reality of death.

We are introduced to Marley (a bright Kate Hudson), a successful advertising executive with a wide range of friends, living a rather frivolous out-of-hours life with more than a touch of hedonism. She seems stressed but soon discovers she has colon cancer. How does she face the prospect of death? What must she do to make her life complete?

She has a comedy version of a near death experience, imagining God looking and sounding like Whoopi Goldberg (genial at least). Marley has lived a self-centred life, unable to make commitments. Her progress towards death is marked by some angry outbursts against friends and family, but she is moved to fall in love and to make steps towards reconciliation with everyone.

Kathy Bates and Treat Williams play her parents, bitter towards each other, but finding ways to share in their daughter's final months. The doctor is played by Gael Garcia Bernal (not one of his best roles) as a joke-free specialist who succumbs to Marley's love and changing for the better.

This plot is very similar to a Filipino film, *100* (where the dramatising of the final ritual is anointing of the sick and communion followed by the central character watching her wake contrasts with the more secular ritual of a Little Bit of Heaven where family and friends gather and have a New Orleans party – with *When the Saints go Marching in* – and Marley and God look on and Marley joins in the dance).

NENETTE

(France, 2009, d. Nicolas Filibert)

Nicolas Filibert has a strong reputation in France for his documentaries. He achieved international notice with his film about primary education, *Etre et Avoir*. This time he has visited a zoo.

Nenette sounds a pretty name for a little girl. But, this time it is for a 40 year old gorilla from Malaysia who has been living at the zoo all these decades, partnering three male gorillas over the period and giving birth to four offspring, one of whom is still at the zoo.

What are we doing looking at a gorilla for 70 minutes? Are we like the crowds of adults and children who come to watch the gorillas, chatting, laughing, wondering, enjoying? Something like that. Are we like the film-maker who tends to hold his camera for long takes on Nenette's face, contemplating her, the difference between gazing and gaping? Much more of the film is like that.

As we contemplate Nenette, we wonder about her life in captivity (the cage does not look in any way attractive), her bored look, her limited intelligence (as explained by the voiceover), her eating yoghurt from cartons and opening bottles of water, unscrewing the lids.

There is commentary from experts on gorillas, their history and evolution, their life in the wild, their intelligence and behaviour. Gerard, who has worked with Nenette for 35 years has many ideas but also acknowledges how much we do not know of how gorillas tick.

Nenette offers an opportunity to think as we watch, about the lives of animals and about human treatment of animals.

NEVER LET ME GO

(UK, 2010, d. Mark Romanek)

One of the things that *Never Let Me Go* does is to make an audience realise the difference between much British and most American film-making. This British production, based on a sombre novel by Kazuo Ishiguro (who also wrote *The Remains of the Day*), shows a quiet, sometimes restrained British sensibility, suggestions of character and action rather than expansive explanations and the avoiding of a happy ending. It is in many ways a grim film, even a dour film.

The story is the reminiscences of Kathy (Carey Mulligan) who is watching a patient in a hospital. The rest of the film is principally flashbacks to her childhood and early adulthood. She belongs to a group of special children in a very British boarding school. They are sheltered and protected although so much of their life looks like the familiar styles of the 1940s and 1950s. They remain fearful of rumours of what the outside world is really like. They receive pep talks from the principal (Charlotte Rampling), although they are told something of what society has in mind for their lives by a sympathetic teacher (Sally Hawkins in a more serious role than usual). Kathy is friendly with Ruth and with the artistically inclined Tom. They form something of a trio.

As they grow up in the school, they prepare to go out into the world, their possibilities being carers or part of organ donor programs. That is their destiny. Which means that the science fiction elements of the narrative gradually creep up on the audience rather than being presented blatantly or sensationally. The opening information on screen is quietly statistical and sober.

Tom (Andrew Garfield) goes through adolescent issues and is attracted to Ruth (Keira Knightly) though he is quietly devoted to Kathy. He has given her a CD present with a song, *Never Let Me Go*, which she treasures. However, she is reticent in her responses and wittingly or unwittingly allows Ruth to manipulate Tom's affections and behaviour. This continues as they go out to The Cottages, awaiting what their lives are meant to be.

Then, years pass as Kathy becomes a carer and loses touch with Ruth and Tom. When she does re-connect, situations have changed drastically. Ruth is making an assessment of her life and wants to make good the damage she felt she did to Kathy and Tom in the past. Tom clutches at the possibility of making something of a life with Kathy. But, given the destiny of their lives, is this possible? A visit to the principal and to the art teacher of their school provides pessimistic answers. They tell the two youngsters that the art that was collected in their school days was not to look into their souls and understand them, but to see whether they actually had souls.

This means that *Never Let Me Go* is a more subtle drama than we usually see, taking a rather indirect approach to characters and themes. This means it may be too low-key, even boring, for audiences who expect films to be more keyed up. For audiences who appreciate something different and quietly persuasive, this may be a satisfying and thoughtful, and rueful, experience.

NO STRINGS ATTACHED

(US, 2011, d. Ivan Reitman)

Ivan Reitman used to direct some punchy comedies, *Ghostbusters*, *Dave*, *Junior*, *Twins* and *Kindergarten Cop*, and he

brings some of that punch to what is essentially a variation on the contemporary romantic comedy conventions. And, this is a 21st comedy, so few inhibitions about sexuality and open expression and language.

While most of these films start by immersing the audience in the contemporary secular, sometimes values-free zones of modern relationships, they usually show the infatuations, the sexual activity, the mess-ups, the regrets and, then, the final acknowledgement that true love and commitment are what really matters. Older audiences, even parents who might have acted like this in their younger days, may feel a bit judgmental, even censorious. The younger audiences are being taken through something of their own free-wheeling experiences and being led to some awareness of a more authentic loving relationship. The title explains it – and, of course, at the end, denies it. Unattached loneliness versus committed attachment.

This film has the advantage of its stars. While Ashton Kutcher is often mocked for his performances, he keeps coming back and often proves himself a genial screen presence. This time he has what used to be the more feminine role. He is the one that is looking for love, is easily hurt by lack of commitment, and really wants fidelity in love. Natalie Portman has been a strong actress since she was a child (and now has an Oscar to affirm this). She takes on what has been the more traditional masculine role. She is the busy professional (he merely works at a television station on a school soap) and is a doctor. She says she is not the feeling type. It is she who proposes a rather cold and detached, even mercenary, arrangement for their sexual encounters (not even companionship).

We know the rest. How will she become more human? How will he deal with rejection? How will they discover what a more authentic love really is? It is useless to say that this has all been done before, and many times. The theme is universal and perennial. Whether we like the stars, the script and believe them is what matters.

SEASON OF THE WITCH

(US, 2010, d. Dominic Sena)

Back to the Middle Ages. We might never have expected to see Nicolas Cage there, but sure enough, he is a crusader serving God by sending as many infidels to the other place as he can. We have seen Ron Perlman in the Middle Ages, in *The Name of the Rose* (with which this film has some similarities of plot, monasteries and manuscripts) and here he is again, ditto re crusading and dispatching the enemy. While Cage and Perlman are in the 14th century, they have disconcertingly out of place 21st century American accents and slang. Even British actors, Stephen Campbell Moore and Stephen Graham, have some American twanging.

But, this is one of those medieval adventures which rely on ecclesiastical gobbledigook, the execution of witches (hanging here), Latin incantations to break spells and illuminated manuscripts which demons want to destroy (before the prayers destroy them).

After the death of the witches, we are treated to some computer generated computer battles, all in the name of the Church, which Cage and Perlman rebel against after the deaths of women and children. They go AWOL. But, this leads them to a village where the population is dying of the plague, especially, the Cardinal leader (Christopher Lee under same large boils make-up). The only solution seems to be taking a witch to a monastery in the mountains and find the last remaining copy of the book with the spell-breaking prayers.

This leads to something of a medieval road movie, foggy forests, attacks by wolves with supernatural teeth and jaws and, quite excitingly, having to get horses, knights and a wagon with the witch, across a long rotting bridge across one of the deepest chasms you have seen.

The finale is a battle against the demon who had possessed the alleged witch and the bodies of the dead monks in the scriptorium were busy speedily copying the precious manuscript.

Director Dominic Sena had worked with Nicolas Cage in *Gone in Sixty Seconds* and is more at home in contemporary dramas, *Kalifornia*, *Swordfish*, *Whiteout*. They all don't seem to be quite at home in the 14th century, which means that the film is something of a tongue-in-cheek costume time-passer.

SECRETARIAT

(US, 2010, d. Randall Wallace)

Not a film about bureaucracy. Secretariat is the name of an American racehorse of the 1970s. It was a great champion. Secretariat was not the name the owners wished for it. It was imposed by the racing regulations for naming horses. Modern US audiences may not know the horse. Non-American audiences may well never have heard of it. The film joins the list of films about champion horses and jockeys like National Velvet, Phar Lap and Seabiscuit.

While writer-director Randall Wallace wrote the heroics of Braveheart and directed The Man in the Iron Mask and We Were Soldiers, this is a fairly standard picture of racing, training, opposition and rivalries and the emergence of a horse which won the Triple Crown of the Kentucky Derby... and was the horse of the year.

Not that Secretariat showed its qualities from the start. It was also idiosyncratic, staying at the back and then making spectacular runs to the finish. The human story involves Diane Lane as the horse's determined owner and, of all people, John Malkovich as its French trainer. Dylan Walsh is the husband who tends to agree with his brother-in-law, Dylan Baker, that it would be better to sell the horse to pay off family debts. James Cromwell is a potential buyer. Nestor Serrano is a very loud-mouthed, vain and misogynist owner who is particularly offensive during press conferences.

So, while there is domestic drama in the background, the family learning to support their mother, the main action is how Secretariat fares in the initial races and the question whether it has the capacity to take on longer distance races, let alone win. But, because we are sitting watching a film called Secretariat, we know that the horse will triumph before the final credits. There is quite some excitement, as always, in watching the actual races and seeing how the horse triumphs.

WASTED ON THE YOUNG

(Australia, 2010, d. Ben C. Lucas)

We all know that youth is wasted on the young. This look at high school students (in Perth) seems to prove that this is the case, especially when they themselves become 'wasted'.

It was something of a surprise to find that the students we are watching are not from poor homes or inner city slums. They are from quite wealthy homes (which boast of their affluence) and attend an expensive private school – demonstrating very little credit for their educational abilities. As with films like Larry Clark's quite scathing look at New York youngsters and their behaviour (especially with drugs and sexuality), Kids (1995), there are no adults to be seen in this film. Parents are mentioned but absent. The principal's office is seen but not the principal. There seem to be no teachers or supervisors, especially when brutal fights (signalled by instant multiple text messaging) break out in the school grounds. No police.

So, is this a film for the kinds of characters shown in the film? Or, is it a film for parents or teachers? It certainly would be interesting to be a fly on the wall were students, parents and teachers to watch the film together and then discuss it. And to hear how 'realistic' it is. Come to think of it, variations on this kind of story make their way to newspapers and television reports.

The audience has to be alert at times as the narrative is not simply linear, especially with the opening and three boys leaving a girl on the hills near the sea (our initial suspicions are later justified), then the plot building up to this episode (with some later sequences clarifying what happened). In fact, there are a number of sudden, without warning, shifts in time.

Basically, this is a story of two boys in their final year at school who become stepbrothers as their parents marry. Zack (Alex Russell in a credible interpretation of high school arrogant bullying, presumption and untouchability) is the swimming jock, centre of popularity and unscrupulous sexually. Darren (Oliver Ackland, looking a bit too old for his high school age but presenting a serious and brooding, basically decent young man) is preoccupied with his computers and science project. The other central character is Xandrie (Adelaide Clemens who has the difficult role of being nice but then a very hard done by victim) who is keen on Darren but is set on by Zack and his swimming champion buddy, Brook (T.J. Power who does arrogant and nasty, especially in his violent attack on Darren, all too obnoxiously).

There are a number of other characters, friends and girls, who show how shallow young people's outlooks can be, keen on the good time, voyeurs of brutality, gathering like sheep at the ring of their mobiles. (The film is constantly reminding us that we live in a technological age and the young are dependent on social networking.)

Finally, there are echoes of the Columbine High School shootings and the inherent violence underlying arrogance and exploitation even at high school level. Some commentators have said that the writer-director is too pessimistic about

today's young people. Maybe, but his drama is meant to mirror and to warn.

THE WAY BACK

(US, 2010, d. Peter Weir)

Peter Weir has always been a careful film-maker. It is almost eight years since he made his previous film, *Master and Commander*. He is attentive to detail and chooses only projects that interest him. This is a story of endurance and survival, a tale of a gruelling and physically demanding journey that may take its toll on audience patience and endurance. It is not easy viewing.

It seems that the author of the book on which the film is based did not actually make the journey he described. It was made by someone else. The central character is a young Polish patriot who is arrested by the Soviets in 1940, interrogated and denounced by his wife (under torture). He refuses to sign any document incriminating him and is transported to a gulag in Siberia where, as the commandant explains, nature itself imprisons the inmates.

Life in the gulag is one of slave labour in the freezing and blizzard-prone forests and in the choking mines. Janus, the young Pole (played by Jim Sturgess) is determined to escape and is encouraged by an actor inmate (Mark Strong). An opportunity arises and a group begin their hazardous long way back. The group consists of Janus, an American engineer, Mr Smith (a grizzled Ed Harris), a Russian criminal with tattoos of Lenin and Stalin on his chest (Colin Farrell playing non-heroic), a priest, an artist, a chef and a young man who has contracted night blindness.

The aim is to reach India where the British are in control. We share the harsh details of the trek of 4000 miles, through Siberian forests in winter, through a mosquito infected lake area in summer, across the Mongolian border into the deserts, then into the mountains, through Tibet into India. Hunger, dehydration, cold and heat almost defeat them but they don't. Not all survive. Along the way, they encounter a young Polish girl who has fled a communal farm (Saoirse Ronan). She brings a touch of humanity to each of the men, drawing out their stories and enabling them to realise that they do not know each other very well at all.

Weir is also interested in the motivations of each of the men. The criminal, who had dreams of escaping to America, finds that he really cannot leave his homeland where he feels secure. Mr Smith is to make contact with an American delegation and go home. It is Janus who has to find his way back home – the significant question of the title is the way back to what and to where – to meet his wife again and be reconciled with her. His is a quest for forgiveness and peace. It takes a long time.

The film ends with a recapitulation of the Communist decades from the end of the War until the collapse of the Soviet Union and Poland's freedom. Watching the film is not an easy experience but the themes stay with you and are well worth reflecting on.

Continental films, *In a Better World* (Oscar-winner, Best Foreign Language Film), *My Afternoons with Margueritte*, *Potiche*, *The Day I Wasn't Born*, are worth considering. *The Tempest*, with Helen Mirren as Prospera, is an arresting version of Shakespeare's play. For entertaining courtroom drama, *The Lincoln Lawyer*.

SIGNIS FILM REVIEWS APRIL 2011-03-04

BATTLE LOS ANGELES

BUTCHER, THE CHEF, THE SWORDSMAN, The

COMPANY MEN, The

DAY I WASN'T BORN, The (DAS LEID IN MIR)

GIRL WHO KICKED THE HORNET'S NEST, The

GOETHE!

HEARTBEAT AWAY, A

HOWL

IN A BETTER WORLD
JUST GO FOR IT
LIMITLESS
LINCOLN LAWYER, The
MY AFTERNOONS WITH MARGUERITE (LA TETE EN FRICHE)
POTICHE
RANGO
RED RIDING HOOD
REEF, The
RITE, The (see the SIGNIS Statement)
SUCKER PUNCH
TEMPEST, The

BATTLE LOS ANGELES
(US, 2011, d. Jonathan Liebesman)

This is not a close encounter of the friendly kind.

Aliens have been targeting earth in the last few decades, and not with kind intentions. Think War of the Worlds, think Independence Day, think Monsters, think Skyline. In fact, this looks and sounds like a bigger and louder version of Skyline.

As the film opens, we are in mid-battle. The Marines are on the go, then on the run, as mysterious craft are attacking not only Los Angeles but a dozen key cities around the world. It is all go, rendered all the more vivid because of the camera techniques, hand-held, television reporting style, so that we, the audience, are right there in the melee. As a reminder of this, CNN broadcasts are glimpsed throughout the film.

But then we are taken back 24 hours and introduced to members of the marine squad we will be following, lots of names on screen, close-ups and detail – though many of us will find it difficult to remember who is who. We see glimpses of ordinary lives: a marine farewelling his pregnant wife, friends shopping for a wedding, some playing golf with rowdy sex chat... But, we are introduced to the important character, Staff Sergeant Michael Nantz who has finished tours of duty in Iraq (and lost some heroic men in action, which rankles others) and is about to leave active service where he trains the recruits. He is played with genial conviction by Aaron Eckhard getting his chance as a screen action hero (heroics described as ‘that John Wayne action shit’ – with the inevitable response from the juniors, ‘who the hell is John Wayne?’).

Like the old World War II films, like Platoon and Black Hawk Down, the action focuses on one small representative group, their mission, their team work, their rescuing civilians, their encounters with the enemy, suffering losses as well as outwitting the invaders. It is all done with the ‘Oo-ra’ enthusiasm and dedication of the American forces.

Speaking of the American forces and given the 21st century involvement in Iraq, Afghanistan and troubled countries in the Arab world, the zest with which these young men give themselves and sacrifice themselves to ward off the attack and save the threatened, this film seems like something of a live recruitment poster, an appeal to macho gung-ho dedication and patriotism.

Interestingly, we don't see any aliens for about 30 minutes. They are of the mechanical look variety, more than a touch of the robot. However, when the marines, with the help of a vet who is part of the rescued group (Bridget Moynahan), examine the physiology of the aliens, we realise they have muscular and organic intestines.

Some have complained that the action is repetitious and the hand-held camera work disconcerting. Maybe, but this is how this kind of action goes. It is slow, dangerous, people die, people use their wits, people are daring. Three of those rescued are children. There is a boy who loves his father who joins in the action which leads to tears and emotions all round.

Also joining the group is Michelle Rodriguez (seen lately as a pilot in Avatar) who has the info as to the control space ship (seemingly a replica of that in District 9). Fortunately, she and Nantz get the chance to use the information for a battle climax.

Easy to dismiss as another action show, but it can stand as a symbolic movie of popular American hawkish stances of our times.

THE BUTCHER, THE CHEF, THE SWORDSMAN

(China, 2010, d. Wuershan)

Maybe the bizarre aspects of the title offer a guide to what you might expect from this Chinese movie (well, it's not exactly the Chinese movie we are used to). A couple of years ago there was a very offbeat Korean film called *The Good, the Bad and The Weird*. This one goes beyond that and could have been called *The Good, The Bad, The Weird and the Absurd*. The absurdity is intentional. (The IMDb blurb uses the words 'brash' and 'wild'.)

Not easy to get into the film, a lot of it visually dark. We are introduced to three symbolic characters whose stories eventually become intertwined – all connected by a cleaver made from swords which goes into action throughout the film.

Personally, I found the Chef story the most coherent and interesting. A group of novice cooks fail their practical exams. However, a mute young man shows he has skills – derived from his grandfather who had to cook a grand banquet for an important court eunuch. Visually, the different courses, with their exotic names, are sumptuous. The cook is a master chef, almost a culinary magician. The eunuch has been eating too many banquets for too long and is enormous (with some hand gestures like Mike Myers' Dr Evil, and then we realise he is a variation in make-up, look and windbreaking like Mike Myers' Fat Bastard, whose destiny is, politely putting it, a vile dunny).

The Butcher story is slapstick with a not very attractive character at all, who is in love with a young woman forced into prostitution. In the background are classical excerpts from Bizet and others. It is a bit long and a bit gross. It moves towards a romantic ending, with *The End* on screen, only to be postponed for a happier ending.

The swordsman is a dark figure as well.

There are many tongue-in-cheek devices to keep the audience aware that this is meant to be absurd – a diagrammatic replay of a sword slitting accident. A confrontation that is visualised like a computer game.

Probably best seen at one of those late night cult screenings.

THE COMPANY MEN

(US, 2011, d. John Welles)

The Company Men is set in 2008. However, while it is set in the context of the global financial meltdown, its focus is less on the financial complications than on redundancy, downsizing and unemployment.

Craig T. Nelson plays a self-made tycoon who has built up his ship-building company. With downturns in manufacturing in the US, he decides to downsize, laying off thousands of workers. He is not troubled by feelings or ethical scruples, and, finally, prefers to boast about his wealth status. The film shows how the downsizing affects three company executives. This is not a film about the workers and their struggles. Rather, the attention is on middle class professionals and the repercussions of their unemployment on them.

Ben Affleck has proven himself a more substantial actor and director in recent years. He is able to sustain interest in his character, a genial, rather proud man, who never anticipated being let go. His attempts to maintain self-respect and look for jobs (often frustratingly) reflect the experience of many similar men in their late 30s. Fortunately, he has a strong and loving wife (Rosemary de Witt) who can stand up to his tantrums, continue to support him and make him realise the sobering realities of less income, not only on extras but on mortgages, possessions and even their house.

Kevin Costner appears as her brother, who is in the construction business and offers his brother-in-law temporary manual and carpentering jobs.

The second focus is on an engineering expert played by Chris Cooper. Nearing 60, he stays on in the company but is victim to the second round of sackings. His life becomes miserable and he does not have the energy or credentials to get back into the workforce.

Tommy Lee Jones is the centre of the third story, the co-founder of the company, who has been able to speak his mind at board meetings. He too is let go. He has difficulties in his private life, estranged from his wife and having an affair with one of the tough executives responsible for making the lists for sacking (Maria Bello).

While the images and stories of financial and industrial life in the contemporary US are grim (images of dilapidated factories contrasting with lavish office blocks, speeches about the fine old days of enterprise and pride in manufacture and an honest day's work), the film opts for some hope, some opportunities with a touch of humour. The philosophy is that of pulling oneself up by one's own bootstraps so is a story of the able rather than those who are in situations where they can't help themselves.

THE DAY I WASN'T BORN (DAS LIED IN MIR)

(Germany, 2010, d. Florian Micoud Cossen)



The English title is much more serious than might be first thought. But, the German title, *The Song Inside Me*, is an effective one – the central character is a young woman in her late 20s, a champion swimmer, who begins a quest to find out who she really is and who her family is. She hears a woman singing a song at an airport and it evokes long hidden memories and sets her on her journey.

This would be interesting enough in itself, but the story takes us from the comfort of growing up in affluent Germany to memories of the dictatorship in Argentina and the fate of those who were called ‘The Disappeared’. This has been the theme of a number of Argentinian films, *Lamb of God* and *Cautiva*. In the latter, there is a school girl who discovers that she was adopted and that officials at the time of the dictatorship had taken possession of her.

This means that films like this are not simply about the search for identity. They have repercussions for the adopting parents, especially if the paths to the adoption were not entirely legal or moral.

Jessica Schwartz holds the audience attention as the young woman deciding, on an impulse after missing a flight connection to Chile, to go to Buenos Aires instead. Michael Gwisdek is the devoted father who has not revealed the past to his daughter and, even flying to join her in Argentina, is still more than hesitant. With the aid of a local policeman (who had wheedled a bribe from her when she reported her passport missing but with whom she has a relationship, meeting his genial father who was in the police at the time she was born), she discovers another family and relishes their company.

Approaching thirty, she already has a full life but has to work out how to incorporate this new awareness, of her murdered parents, of her new relations, into the life she has been used to.

The film has been made with deep feeling and deep concern. The audience shares this.

FRANKENSTEIN

(UK, 2011, National Theatre UK Live, d. Danny Boyle)

During its season at the National Theatre in London, the roles of Victor Frankenstein and the Creature were performed alternately by Benedict Cumberbatch and Jonny Lee Miller. This review is of the Cumberbatch as Creature and Miller as Frankenstein performance.

The filming of live performances from London for overseas viewing has proven a very successful program. The advantage for the cinema audience to compensate for the experience of not being actually in the theatre is that of close-ups of actors, of differing angles of photography, including overhead, making for a strong impact.

The credentials for this play are very good (as explained in a documentary preceding the screening with interviews, discussions of Mary Shelley and her work with scenes from the 1931 film version). Nick Dear has written a strongly verbal play which requires attentiveness for the richness of the themes. Danny Boyle, collaborating with cast and an arrestingly elaborate staging, has brought the 19th century into the 21st.

Benedict Cumberbatch is a somewhat gangly actor. He capitalises on this in an extraordinary opening where he mimes being born, struggling to find his feet and balance, finally being able to stand and face life. He continues this ability to present a very physical creature but one who grows in capacity for reflection, for education, for cultural awareness, for acknowledging his loneliness and his need for a bride like himself. There is a great deal of pathos in his characterisation. When all seems to go well for him and the Doctor creates a bride and then destroys it, the Creature seeks and wreaks revenge, acknowledging that he has truly become a man because he has learnt hatred, lying and shocking, violating violence. Nick Dear and Danny Boyle point out that in the Frankenstein films, the Creature does not or cannot speak. This play restores his voice.

Jonny Lee Miller comes more into his own as Frankenstein in the latter part of the play. The first half is more devoted to the Creature, his self-discovery, the friendly encounter with the Blind Hermit, the fear and loathing of ordinary people. His encounter with little William we can acknowledge as sad. But it introduces us to the proud, yet cowardly, Frankenstein, who does not know how to relate, even to his family, to his fiancée, Elizabeth (Naomie Harris), or to love anyone. He is reclusive, obsessive, arrogant in the name of science, going to Scotland and finding corpses to create the Bride, defying the Creature maliciously and returning to marry only to find that the Creature has destroyed his future. By the end of the play, the audience understands Frankenstein more but can feel little sympathy for his fate.

Ideas were important for Mary Shelley, coming into the Romantic era of the 19th century after the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason of the 18th. Can a mere human, no matter how brilliantly intelligent, have the right to create life? Is this not God's role? And what is the result of this hubris? Only destruction. The Frankenstein story, which has become a significant myth or archetypal story, is always cautionary about the potential for science and its claims for bettering the world and the human condition (but at what physical, mental, moral and religious cost?).

All these issues are voiced in the play. In the context of the drama, they can be heard from the different points of view. Interestingly, it is Elizabeth who does not recoil in horror from the Creature but admires what her husband has achieved, but it is also she who raises the God and hubris question. They seem more important, as Nick Dear and Danny Boyle discuss in the initial documentary, because of the increasingly less presence of God in modern discourse, especially about science. Mary Shelley's work is even more relevant in modern times.

THE GIRL WHO KICKED THE HORNET'S NEST

(Sweden, 2009, d. Daniel Alfredson)

The main reason, of course, for seeing this third film in the Millennium trilogy based on the novels by Stieg Larsson, is to find out what happens to Lisbeth Salander and whether her persecutors get their comeuppance. This is what happens.

Many readers of the novels (and there are more than many) have expressed dissatisfaction with the film versions of Larsson's novels. From the point of a view of a non-reader, the first film was arresting and interesting, not only for the intriguing character of Lisbeth Salander and the investigations of Mickael Bolmqvist which lead to a strong drama about neo-Nazis and sexual aberrance.

The second film was rather more straightforward, interesting again, but focusing more on Lisbeth and the confrontation with her father.

This third film recapitulates some of the preceding events during the credits and throughout the film furnishes further information for those whose memories are not quite as clear as they would liked. So, we see Lisbeth in prison for the assault on her father and preparing with a sympathetic lawyer and the continued work of Mickael Bolmqvist and the

Millennium staff. The shadowy group which protected Lisbeth's father and his later criminal kingdom emerges more clearly, especially with their attempts to thwart the case and justice and threaten Millennium.

But, there is some sympathy this time for the critics. The film does not seem to be particularly cinematic, except, perhaps, for the final 15 minutes or so. It is very much a film of close-ups and talking heads, in hospital, at the Millennium offices and in the court room. The director, Daniel Alfredson, was the director of the television series. *Hornet's Nest* might be more exciting and gripping on the small screen with the focus on persons which seems somewhat flat on the big screen.

This brings the trilogy to a thematically and dramatically satisfying close but, thinking back to the *Dragon Tattoo* and the different director, this might have been more adventurous and challenging.

GOETHE!

(Germany, 2010, d. Philipp Stolzl)

It's the ! at the end of Goethe's name that indicates the tone of this portrait of one of Germany's most celebrated intellectuals and writers. And somebody else remarked that it was really *Young Goethe in Love*.

We are in the latter part of the 18th century, the era of the Enlightenment and rational thought in Western Europe – which was already sowing the seeds of a reversion of attitudes that would mark the romanticism of the 19th century.

Goethe as a young man was studying (a euphemism) law and, outrageously improvising about philosophy and human nature, fails his oral examinations, though tickling the humour of his examiners. Whether this happened or not – as indeed for quite a number of incidents in this film – is not quite the point. This is a light entertainment showing what might have happened. A number of commentators have been at pains to tell us that the key events of the film, his working as a legal clerk, the suicide of his friend, Wilhelm Jerusalem, and his encounter with Charlotte Buff are not historically correct – but neither was a lot of *Shakespeare in Love*.

Alexander Fehling is exuberant as the young Goethe though he finds his wings considerably clipped when his father makes him go to work filing legal papers – and this under the watchful and critically stickling eye of his superior, Albert Kestner (Moritz Bleibtreu). Goethe also encounters Charlotte Buff and her family but – and the film does not quite convince on this point – she succumbs to the very proper attentions of Kestner. Goethe had enjoyed the company and shared apartment of his friend Jerusalem and is shocked at his death. (Moritz Bleibtreu and Alexander Fehling can be seen to great advantage in the World War II adventure, *My Best Enemy*, *Mein Bester Feind*.)

Held as a reprehensible blackguard by Kestner, rejected by Lotte, sad about Jerusalem, what is Goethe to do? Obviously, sit down and write about his feelings in novel form, *The Sufferings of Young Werther* – and to be rejected by publishers. But Goethe, at 23, could overcome his woes because Lotte has had the novel published and Goethe is feted as a celebrity. Seriousness was to come later.

The film takes us into the period, costumes, decor, the towns, the countryside, the wealth, the poverty – a pleasant PR exercise for Goethe!

A HEARTBEAT AWAY

(Australia, 2010, d. Gale Edwards)

Old-fashioned storytelling and film-making that may seem to much of the past to the intended audiences. Since it is aimed at the young as well as the old, it might be fairer to say that it misses its mark with the young but might well entertain the older who enjoy a feelgood movie.

The setting is Queensland, a country town. In 1990, a tempest rivalling that of Shakespeare's, has wreaked havoc for the local marching band. During the opening credits in downpour, with thunder and lightning and rolling clouds (the film-makers liked these effects and use them again later), the musicians slip and slide in the mud and lost the competition trophy. Life has been humdrum since, though they gather to rehearse rather half-heartedly and are getting older. Some of them bicker.

The conductor (William Zappa looking angrily sullen most of the time) has a teenage son whom he is continually putting down, bemoaning his son's waste of musical talent. Kevin (Sebastian Gregory) leads a rock and roll band.

How will these two stories combine? How will the generation gap be bridged, because we know it will?

Well, keep an eye on *Brassed Off*. Get the conductor knocked down by a truck and then stuck in hospital. Let Kevin gather the players together. Let him succeed, especially with his friend Mandy (Isabel Lucas) who teaches aerobics and can put the band through a few paces they never thought they would be performing.

In the meantime! Mandy's father is the mayor (Colin Friels) who has ambitions for a huge re-development to revive the town now on hard economic times. The barrier to this (apart from the fact that he is a nasty, scheming, do-badder) is that, of course, the hall for the band's rehearsals is slap-bang in the middle of the land.

You know that all will have to end well and you know that there will be a lot of hurdles before that. But, the feel good is seeing how it all pans out and (spoiler!), Kevin leads the oldies to victory. A light old-style story for a rainy day.

HOWL

(US, 2010, d. Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman)

Howl is a very brief film that contains a great deal, of poetry, of changing standards, of the nature of literature, of personalities and the context of the US in the middle of the 20th century. It is directed by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, who won an Oscar in 1985 for their documentary, *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*.

Howl was a poem by Allen Ginsberg, read at a gathering in 1955 and then published in San Francisco by Lawrence Ferlinghetti. It was under attack in an obscenity case in 1957. The screenplay of *Howl* is a mosaic of section of the reading of the poem, testimony in the court case as well as a long interview with Ginsberg about his life, his poetry and his philosophy of life. The readings and the case are in black and white, the interview in colour.

James Franco offers a tour-de-force performance as Ginsberg. His appearance is similar to that of the poet. He is young, fresh-faced during the readings. He is older, bearded, during the interviews. He explains that he chose not to attend the court case as it was Lawrence Ferlinghetti rather than himself who was being prosecuted.

The poem itself repays listening to and several of the passages are repeated. It is written in rhythmic free verse and Franco is able to bring out both the rhythms and the meanings. Its language is replete with literary references and quite a number of biblical references (and to Jesus on the cross). It is a mixture of the literate and the colloquial. It is both existential in its questions and emotional and psychological in its imagery and the focus on Carl Solomon who was kept in a mental institution.

A special feature of *Howl* is the extensive inclusion of animated sequences to illustrate *Howl*. They are based on the work of Eric Drooker who contributed illustrations to Ginsberg's publications.

As might be expected of the poets and writers of the time (who became known as the Beat poets), the experience of drugs and open sexuality (and homosexual orientation, emotions and behaviour) permeate the poem. This comes to the

fore in the court case where the necessity versus the relevance of themes and word choice is argued. Mary Louise Parker and Jeff Daniels appear as critics of Howl arguing that it has no literary merit. Alessandro Nivola appears as a San Francisco critic who argues in favour of the poem. Bob Balaban is the judge, David Strathairn the prosecutor who does not understand the poem and finds his task distasteful, Jon Hamm the defence lawyer.

During the interview segments, there are flashbacks, also in black and white, to Ginsberg's earlier life, his declaration of love in his poems and in real life to Jack Kerouac who does not respond and to Neal Cassady, with whom he travelled across America, who does. Ginsberg is very frank about his sensitivity towards his father's opinions of him, of his coming to terms with his sexuality, and about his long-term relationship with Peter Orlovsky.

While community standards have long since changed, the issues of what is acceptable in art, of what true art is and how it is to be assessed, are still very relevant.

IN A BETTER WORLD (HNAEVEN)

(Denmark, 2010, d. Suzanne Bier)

In a Better World can now introduce itself as winner of the Golden Globe and then the Oscar for the Best Foreign Language Film of 2010. And an interesting and entertaining piece of film-making it is.

Suzanne Bier has made some arresting films at home, Brothers, After the Wedding, and, in Hollywood, Things We Lost in the Fire. She likes to take on serious themes and emotional conflicts.

The Danish title means 'Vengeance' and that is at the core of the story. However, the hope in the English title, that we could live in and make a better world even though we don't highlights the ultimate message that revenge is only destructive.

We are introduced to two quite diverse worlds at first. In the first, filmed in Kenya, Michael, a Swedish doctor who has married in Denmark, works with local doctors and nurses for the large population who through to the surgery. Many of the women are the mutilation victims of a brutal warlord. In the meantime, Christian reads a poem about a nightingale at his mother's funeral. She has died after a long fight with cancer. He returns home to his grandmother's house with his father whom he blames for his mother's unhappiness and death.

Christian then takes centre stage as he begins in a new school finding a boy continually bullied because of his teeth braces and his face shape which is a touch rodent-like. He is Michael's son. When Christian himself is at the receiving end of a punch, the film's title really comes into focus. Christian, a pleasant looking and quiet young boy, surprises us by revealing that he is bitter, angry and ready to take out his vengeance on anyone who stands in his way. And he does, drawing Elias into his plans (actually bullying his friend with psychological and emotional pressure).

When Michael returns from Africa, he has to deal with Elias and his problems. He is separated from his wife but Elias is devoted to him. But, Michael has to return to Africa and, after a gruelling encounter with the warlord, is too weary to realise that Elias has contacted him for advice about Christian's plans. Michael had already shown the boys a readiness to turn the other cheek when he has been insulted and hit and reminded them that wars begin with these small attacks and small revenges.

There is more tragedy but the film, while acknowledging the hardness in the human heart, is not without some hope in forgiveness and the resilience of the human spirit.

The performances are excellent and the two boys (who have had little screen experience before this) are most convincing and compelling. This is a truly intelligent drama which offers satisfying viewing and a great deal to reflect on human values.

JUST GO WITH IT

(US, 2011, d. Dennis Dugan)

It might come as a surprise to older audiences who may have strayed unwittingly into an Adam Sandler movie to find that it is based on the 1969 film with Ingrid Bergman, Walter Matthau and Goldie Hawn in her Oscar-winning performance, *Cactus Flower*. It follows the key characters and plot devices of *Cactus Flower* but turns them into a 21st century romantic comedy (with touches of 21st century innuendo and straightforward sex jokes – though most of them could probably go straight through to the keeper!).

Despite the jokes and some ogling of the Goldie Hawn equivalent (swimwear model, Brooklyn Decker) and some visual humour at the expense of those who indulge in plastic surgery and the ridiculous consequences, this is quite an amiable film. And Adam Sandler, now in his 40s, has mellowed for this role, from a serial womaniser who pretends to be married to preserve himself from any commitment, to a middle aged potential committed husband and stepfather. He does this quite genially.

Which means that Jennifer Aniston has the Ingrid Bergman role. Critics and audiences were surprised in 1969 when they saw Ingrid letting her hair down (somewhat). Critics and audiences will not be surprised to find Jennifer Aniston here, but they might be surprised to see her in one of her best performances. She is fully in the spirit of the film, the loyal assistant to the plastic surgeon, divorced mother of two, pretty but pretty dowdy who does not expect her life to turn out the way it will. As with Ingrid (who had one on her desk), she is the cactus who flowers.

The gist of the film is that Palmer (the blonde bombshell that Danny proposes to – who teaches maths at school!) thinks that Danny is really married and wants to meet his wife – and then discovers that he has children. After a shopping spree, Katharine really flowers (and has some good lines in repartee while pretending to be Danny's wife) but then has to deal with a trip to Hawaii where Danny's brother Eddie poses as Katharine's boyfriend and joins the extended family where Palmer hopes they will all bond. (It is very hard to bond with Eddie; he has all the innuendo and more.) *Cactus Flower* was itself based on a French farce of mistaken identities and this is how the Hawaii episodes are played – so that, we know it of course, Danny will realise that he really loves and likes being with the constant Katharine, and also likes her children, one of whom does drama classes and speaks most of the time with a British accent that is beyond Dick Van Dyke's in *Mary Poppins*, the other of whom he teaches to swim as a real Dad should. A lot is played for laughs and mostly it is quite amusing.

Then we are offered a special treat. Katharine has always disliked her snooty college room-mate Devlin (and has used her name as a euphemism for a bodily function for her children). Danny in panic has called Katharine Devlin in talking with Palmer. So, who should turn up in Hawaii but Devlin herself. And she is more than snooty. She is garrulously snobbish, always wants to be first and win (which gets tested with Katharine in a hula contest) and is an all-out gushing phony. The reason for saying all this is that Devlin is played with a great sense of humour, relishing playing such an obnoxious character, by Nicole Kidman. She should do more comedies. She has good timing and delivery of her unpleasant lines.

While it is another Adam Sandler comedy, it is nicer than usual and an entertaining pastime.

LIMITLESS

(US, 2011, Neil Burger)

The meaning of the title becomes apparent very quickly as the rather ordinary would-be writer, Eddie Morra (Bradley Cooper), explains it as he contemplates suicide on the roof of a skyscraper. He wants to communicate how he got to that point and what drove him to it. We go to flashback and see him trying to get going on his book, relate to his reluctant girlfriend (Abbie Cornish), encountering the brother of his ex-wife. What happens is that he is persuaded to take a designer drug, NZT – and the rest of the film follows.

Limitlessness is what the drug offers Eddie. There is talk about our using only 20% of our brains. NZT activates the brain 100%. This is not just a high, it is a sky high where the sky is really a limit and Eddie can go further and further. He smartens up, finishes his book, finds that he is an instant expert on everything and is able to summon up all the memories of his past and connect them. What can hold him back?

That is not a question that he considers while his stash of the drug lasts (which he had purloined when his brother-in-law is killed – and he is a suspect). What does happen is that with his knowledge of the financial markets, his investments and his making millions, he comes to the attention of a millionaire businessman Carl van Loon (Robert de Niro) who uses him to vet the details of a takeover of a company from another instant self-made tycoon.

And reality steps in. The supply of NZT is coming to an end. Gangsters are after the stash and money and violence is no obstacle. Eddie is tricked by a crooked lawyer and everything begins to fall apart. His girlfriend tries to help... And Eddie is back on the roof ready to jump.

Actually, the whole film might be called ironic and immoral, amoral at best in its portrait of Eddie and the consequences of his NZT transformation. It is not a story of a man seeing the evil in his ways. Rather, the opposite. Eddie vanquishes all before him and enters the world of politics and not even the experienced pressures and influences of van Loon can provide barriers to his rise and rise. Ruthlessness triumphs. Which means that, at the end, we have to do more thinking about issues than we might have thought when we first saw Eddie on the roof. (And part of the thinking will be about the parallels – by means of modern fable – with bankers, financiers and politicians, and make us think suspiciously less of them.)

THE LINCOLN LAWYER

(US, 2011, d. Brad Furman)

A screen adaptation of a novel by popular crime writer, Michael Connolly - and this reviewer has read all Connolly's books so was in a high state of expectation for the film. Expectations more than fulfilled!

The Lincoln Lawyer is Mike Haller, a self-confident and shrewd (even devious) lawyer who takes on any case he can chase and get, though he does have his antennae up for who is guilty and who is not. Having lost his driving licence (he is prone to drinking), he has hired a driver for his Lincoln and works from the back seat as he is chauffeured around Los Angeles.

Mike Haller is played by Matthew McConaughey (not one of this reviewer's favourite actors) and he brings his character to life vividly and convincingly. It is, perhaps, McConaughey's best role. He looks the part, sounds the part and the screenplay (a very good adaptation from the novel by John Romano) enables him to display his skills as a wheeler-dealer par excellence in the opening sequences – very cocky with a mixture of suavity and smugness. It is no wonder that he gets the job of defending a young real estate agent, Louis Roulet, who is accused of assault and battery. And the audience gets the chance to consider the case with Haller as we see two versions of what might have happened, the defendant's plausible explanation and the police theory.

There are complications, of course, and Mike Haller finds himself in a position where he has to draw on some moral principles, investigate the justice of a case he had previously defended, and exercise his shrewdness to make justice do right at the end (which he does in a fascinatingly intricate performance, giving the impression that the course of events has nothing to do with him). McConaughey is also convincing as a man surprised to have to be wrestling with his conscience.

Director, Brad Furman, not only keeps the action going, but he directs a large cast, each of whom is essential to the plot. Sometimes they appear in only one or two sequences but they are given enough to do by the screenplay to make an impression and for us to appreciate how they are part of the Lincoln lawyer's plan. They include, Michael Pare as a detective who despises Haller, Michael Pena as a man imprisoned for murder, Margarita Levieva as the assaulted prostitute, Frances Fisher as Louis Roulet's demanding mother, Bob Gunton as the family legal counsel, Trace Adkins as a very hairy biker who becomes involved with the case and Shea Whigham as an addict snitch giving testimony in

court.

While Marisa Tomei is good as Haller's wife and Josh Lucas as the inadequate prosecuting lawyer, it is Ryan Philippe as Louis Roulet who is a match for Haller, the role of a man from a cushioned life who finds he has to protest his innocence. The other fine performance, as always, comes from William H. Macy as Haller's investigator and friend.

All the threads seem to be tied together well at the end so, all in all, a superior example of this kind of crime, investigation, court proceedings movie.

MY AFTERNOONS WITH MARGUERITTE (LA TETE EN FRICHE)

(France, 2010, d. Jean Becker)

A deeply humane film that repays viewing.

The English translation of the title might suggest far more than the film delivers in terms of trysts and romance. But, in terms of a friendship between a 60 year old man and a 95 year old women who encounter each other in a public park, it is very rich indeed.

In looking for a google translation of the French title, I came across 'Fallow head'. Doesn't sound so elegant but it suggests a major theme. Margueritte (her father could not spell and wrote this version of her name on her birth certificate and the family liked it) is an elegant lady, a reader whose eyesight is failing. Germain seems a rather pleasant but oafish man who does odd jobs and lives in a trailer. He is genial and has friends at the local bar and has a relationship with a pleasant younger woman who drives one of the local buses. An unlikely pair, Margueritte and Germain. But, they begin to talk, count the pigeons who come each day (Germain has given them names). Margueritte reads aloud from Camus' *The Plague*. Germain does not understand much, but he imagines (vivid on screen images) the rats and their fate. Germain does not read, finds it too difficult and does not understand the words. (Another title of the film, used in Germany, is *Labyrinth of Words*.) Germain's is the fallow head, ready for a new crop and growth.

There are some powerful flashbacks to Germain's life as a boy, a fat boy who is mocked by classmates because he is slow, ridiculed by teachers and mocked by his mother who says she never wanted him. It is something of a shock to discover that he lives on his mother's grounds. She has aged badly and still ridicules her son.

Germain is touched by his meetings with Margueritte and encouraged very sympathetically by Annette. He ventures into a library for the first time and replies to enquiries that he wants a book. A good librarian helps him out.

Although the film runs under 90 minutes, there are some fine plot developments: Germain and his bar friends and their loves, grief over spouse's death, and a tough sympathetic bar owner. There are emotional complications with Germain's mother's death and his discoveries about her real feelings. Margueritte's relatives take her away to an institution in Belgium.

Director Jean Becker, who has made a number of films about the French provinces has adapted a novel by and imbued it with sensitivity and emotion. The cast is excellent. Gaby Casasdeus was 95 when she filmed her role as Margueritte. But, the biggest tribute is to Gerard Depardieu. Looking bigger than ever, he brings Germain, oafishness, vulnerability, goodness of heart to wonderful life. Depardieu has to be one of the greatest actors of our times, able to be Danton, Cyrano, a gangster, a comic foil, a seemingly impossible romantic lead. Germain is one of his finest creations.

POTICHE

(France, 2010, d. Francois Ozon)

Potiche is the kind of comedy with serious undertones that the French do so well (with some Gallic behaviour, especially in relationships, that other cultures are more reticent about).

Director Francois Ozon has made some serious films in his time (Under the Sand, The Swimming Pool, Time to Leave about a man dying with HIV), but can let his hair down too. He made the upstairs-downstairs musical 8 Women. He is back with his main star of that film, Catherine Deneuve who, almost fifty years after her movie debut, is still headlining her films, making two films a year at least. Plenty of life – and, though more matronly, a striking and beautiful screen presence.

So, that is one reason for seeing Potiche. Another is her co-star, Gerard Depardieu who elicits quite a different vocabulary to describe his appearance but he is still making about three films a year and proving what a commanding presence he has on screen.

And, there is another reason, the not so well-known but very versatile French actor, Fabrice Lucchini, who tends to play the straight man in comedies, with a talent for double takes as well as uncomprehending doubt.

The film is set in 1977 at a time when French industry needed something of a worker's revolution. Lucchini runs an umbrella factory which his wife Suzanne (Catherine Deneuve) inherited from her father, a man beloved by his workers. Not so Lucchini who presents himself as a picture of Parisian respectability but who is arrogantly dismissive of his workers (but not his personal assistant with whom he is having an affair). He has a son who prefers art to factory work and a daughter who takes after her father in his fascist attitudes but whose marriage is on the rocks.

When the workers abduct the boss, Suzanne confronts Maurice (with whom she has something of a past) and takes over management. With aplomb and success. Her husband finds this intolerable and manoeuvres to have her ousted. Son and daughter have to take sides.

So liberating has the experience been for Suzanne that she decides to stand for political office against Maurice, with her son as campaign manager and her husband's assistant definitely on her side and working for her.

While the screenplay is quite serious about Suzanne and her new lease of life, her stands against her husband and her confrontations with Maurice, there is also a light touch, moments of froth, and enjoyment of feminist victories – and it all ends with song.

C'est la vie!

RANGO

(US, 2011. D. Gore Verbinski)

An animation (often quite animated) film for an adult audience rather than for children (with a PG13 rating in the US). Children might enjoy the action but it requires some sophistication, there is a lot of dialogue (more dictionary-oriented than popular) and there are frightening elements as well.

We are led into the ballad and legend of Rango by a Mariachi-group of four owls who sing and narrate throughout the film. Rango is a lizard, not the most handsome of desert creatures, who is a would-be actor, an actual fantasist who performs with a toy fish and a broken doll's torso – and none too convincingly. And he is voiced by Johnny Depp, a rung more coherently up from Jack Sparrow, Mad Hatter and Willy Wonka. And he has a gift for adapting from faux pas situations, quite an affected vocabulary, as has much of the screenplay, an amusing indulgence in words and meanings.

Stranded on a desert highway, Rango encounters a mentor, Roadkill, (Alfred Molina) who gives him advice about crossing to the other side. What does happen is that he lands in a town, boasts that he is a legend, and is made sheriff. They have a crisis: no water, only a bottle preserved in the bank. When Rango gives a morale-boosting speech about keeping the water untouched just in case and not drinking it (while illustrating how devastating it would be if they all drank by downing three glasses himself), we see his skill in political spin.

The crooked mayor, a turtle in a wheelchair is voiced by Ned Beatty. The villainous rattlesnake enemy is hissed by Bill Nighy. The practical iguana heroine, Beans, is Isla Fisher. There are a lot of character actor voices (Harry Dean Stanton, Abigail Breslin, Ray Winstone) and Timothy Olyphant appears as The Spirit of the West, channelling Clint Eastwood in appearance and voice and The Man With No Name. And the final credits song owes more than a small debt to the theme from *Rawhide*.

Which means that *Rango* is something of a trip. It is a literal road movie. It is the quest of an ordinary lizard to discover his inner hero. It is something of a satire on the building of Las Vegas. And, most of it is a pastiche play on Western conventions. The villains who rob the bank for the water. The posse in pursuit (and then pursued themselves by villains on birdback to the Ride of the Valkyries). The crooked mayor and his henchman (playing golf while others thirst). The gunslinger snake. The high noon confrontation. The pilgrimage to the desert to seek advice from The Spirit of the West.

Director Gore Verbinski made *Mouse Hunt* and The Pirates of the Caribbean trilogy and has an offbeat sense of humour. Writer John Logan is even more versatile with screenplays for *Sweeney Todd*, *Gladiator*, *The Aviator* and *Hugo Cabret* for Martin Scorsese – and adapting Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* for Ralph Fiennes.

The animation is bold and vivid for the motley characters and the desert locations. For movie buffs, it is something of a wild hoot.

RED RIDING HOOD

(US, 2011, d. Catherine Hardwicke)

It is of little use for sophisticated adults to sniff and turn up their noses at this variation on the story of Little Red Riding Hood. It was not made or geared for them. This is a film with a niche market, the female audience who enjoy the *Twilight* series. It was directed by Catherine Hardwicke who made *Twilight* but who has specialised in telling stories about teenage girls, *Lords of Dogtown* and, especially, *Thirteen*. She also directed Keisha Castle Hughes as the young Virgin Mary in *The Nativity Story*.

Valerie (Amanda Seyfried) lives in an isolated mountain village in an era where religion and superstition governed life and attitudes and where werewolves could attack at the time of the blood moon. Valerie is something of a rebel and is in love with another rebel, Peter (Shiloh Fernandez, a woodcutter, whose cast of face and expressions suggest he would be more at home as a Mafia villain), but is to be betrothed to the nice and wealthy, Henry (Max Irons). She has a loving mother (Virginia Madsen) and a drinking father who is seen as something of a loser (Billy Burke). She also has a kind grandmother (Julie Christie) who gives her a red coat with a hood. In this village, everyone speaks with an American accent, including Julie Christie. The film is definitely American audience-friendly.

The adolescent romantic tangles have to take second place when a werewolf attacks and kills Valerie's sister. While the villagers track a wolf and kill it and celebrate their victory, the local priest (Lukas Haas) has summoned Fr Solomon, a strange mixture of priest, exorcist and inquisitor. He is played by Gary Oldman, reprising something of his celebrated *Dracula* performance in Coppola's film, middle European accent and all. The wolf appears, wreaks havoc – but communicates with Valerie who is accused of being a witch.

Of course, the unwary will suspect that the Inquisitor is the wolf. Not so, we soon find out. But it is someone in the village – and, to this reviewer's embarrassment, among the many possible candidates that the film suggests (strange eyes, strange talk, suspicious behaviour...), he did not pick the villain, a case of diverted attention.

If you accept the premiss and know that this interpretation will be grimmer than Grimm, it is enjoyable in its own teenage Twilight way. The acting quality is mixed (the heroes seem rather unconvincing). Gary Oldman is veering towards over the top. And there is an acceptable bit of cheating in the plot that enables Red Riding Hood to say to Grandmother what big eyes, ears and teeth she has. Sophisticated audiences can forget it and children can rent Hoodwinked or wait for Hoodwinked 2 which is on the way.

THE REEF

(Australia, 2010, d. Andrew Trauick)

Reefs, dangers and sharks.

Andrew Trauick wrote and directed a small-budget crocodile thriller, Black Water. Modest, but quite effective in its way. The same can be said for The Reef.

The story is quite straightforward (and resembles an American film, Open Water). A group begin a voyage off the Australian coast to deliver a boat. They spend a day on a reef. Then the bottom of the boat encounters something jagged and capsizes. What are they to do, sink or swim? Most swim, one stays with the boat.

The main part of the film is the group swimming towards the reef, finding that they are being pursued by a shark.

The advantage of the film is the stronger than usual characterisations of the principal characters. We get to know them. They are quite ordinary people except for the skipper, Luke (Damian Walshe-Howling) who seems a decent chap but who is able to exercise leadership in decision-making and in encouraging morale. Needless to say, not everyone survives.

Another advantage of the film is the photography, much of it at ocean surface level, emphasising the vastness of the empty sea. There is also quite a deal of effective underwater photography, initially of the beauty of the reef, but then the focus on the shark and Luke's need to continually look under water to assess the dangers. Filming was done off the Queensland coast at Hervey Bay and Bowen, with some Port Lincoln locations and quite an amount of circling shark footage.

Jaws has a lot to answer for! Audiences inevitably tend to move fairly quickly into apprehension mode when we see that ocean surface, when we see legs underwater, when the music suggests a shark is lurking. This works well here.

The film is not visually gory when the shark does attack. Rather, it relies on moods and fear, building up the suspense, understanding and sharing the terror of the individuals under threat. It is really scarier than any contrived slasher terror film because, while we might never be in such a situation ourselves, we know that it is more than possible for anyone. We identify with those in the situation, challenged as to whether we would stay with the boat or risk the seas to swim to safety and experience the unknown.

The Reef succeeds in what it set out to do.

THE RITE

(US, 2011, d. Mikael Hafstrom)

It should be said that *The Rite* is particularly Catholic-friendly. Christian believers will find the film interesting. Believers in the transcendent would be open to the events and the interpretations. Rationalists and sceptics would (and

have) dismissed the story as ecclesiastical mumbo jumbo and superstition, a variation on themes for horror movies.

The film makes a reasonable case for possession (without any explicit reference to Gospel stories or Jesus' own casting out of devils). It offers some plausible enough scenarios (though they are in Italian settings, more emotional than in Anglo-Saxon, Celtic traditions) and shows the rituals, the unpredictable nature of demonic behaviour, the energy demanded of the exorcist in praying and confronting evil.

The Rite has strong credentials. The Director is Swedish Mikael Hafstrom (whose credits include the thriller *1408* and the Swedish film, *Evil*, about a malevolent schoolboy). The writer is Michael Petroni who did the screenplay for *The Chronicles of Narnia, Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. It is 'inspired by' (not based on) material from a book on possession, exorcism and the story of Fr Gary Thomas, *The Rite: The Making of a Modern Exorcist*, by American Italy-based investigative writer, Matt Baggio.

The film is in two parts, each asking for a different response from the audience. The first part focuses more on theory, arguments pro and con possession; the second shows cases, which move the action into a more melodramatic phase.

The first part is more 'reasonable'. A young man, Michael Kovaks (Colin O'Donogue), helping his father in his mortician's business, decides to get away from home, receives a scholarship and goes to a seminary. At the time of his diaconate, he has doubts about his personal faith and asks to leave. When his seminary director slips in ice and causes a car to swerve and hit a girl on a bike, Michael, the young seminarian, is asked by the dying girl for absolution. He prays over her, very movingly. His superior (warning him that were he to leave he would forfeit his scholarship and would have to repay it – money and the American Church!) sends him to Rome for the course in Exorcism.

The scenes in the course, delivered by a Dominican, present the questions and queries an audience might have about possession and exorcism. Psychological arguments about mental illness are put forward and whether psychotic behaviour could be confused with possession.

Michael is sent by Fr Xavier, the lecturer (Ciaran Hinds), to visit an old Welsh Jesuit who lives out of Rome, a former doctor, who has performed many exorcisms, Fr Lukas. Anthony Hopkins, giving an intelligent and generally restrained performance, is Fr Lukas. He invites Michael to observe and participate in examinations of the possessed (a pregnant 16 year old girl who had been raped by her father, a young boy who has mule prints on his back and torso, both of whom know secrets about Michael). Michael talks things over with a young woman (Alice Braga), a journalist who is doing the course, researching a feature article.

In the second part of the film, Fr Lukas himself is taken over by a demon, giving Anthony Hopkins some heightened histrionic moments. This is the challenge for Michael who has just received news that his father has died and has experienced hallucinations, including a phone call from his father. The possessed Fr Lukas uses this knowledge to torment, quite diabolical in its destructive insinuations, both Michael and the journalist about their lives and their families. (Choosing not to believe in the devil won't protect you from him, says Fr Lukas.)

As might be expected, this is the test for Michael, to perform the ritual despite his doubts and to recover the gift of faith. Given the recent crises in the American Church concerning priesthood, *The Rite* is remarkably respectful of priesthood and vocational choices.

SUCKER PUNCH

(US, 2011, d. Zack Snyder)

Move over Boys' Own Story. Here is Girl's Own Story.

Though, on reflection, how true is this? Certainly, the girls are the centre of the action. There is no romance in the air or on the screen. These girls are warriors. But, not all of them survive the film. Those who do and those who don't are the victims of male brutality and malice and the girls' final victory is not all that great. The story comes from a man, director, Zack Snyder, who wittingly or unwittingly (we can give him the benefit of the doubt, but...) places his leads in exploitative situations; they have to pander to exploitative men and then the screenplay turns on the girls. The only friendly man is played by Scott Glenn as a cross between guru, commander and your local bus driver.

Whether the audience will think about the film this way will be interesting to find out.

For those who see it and might feel they are not quite on the wavelength, especially with some of the early plot jumps (which make you wonder whether you missed something or weren't quite paying attention), just stay with it because it does all work out. You can tell there is something strange because the heroine, Baby Doll (Emily Browning, a mixture of the angry and the coy without as much zip as she might, especially compared with some of the other girls) is orphaned, the victim of a cruel stepfather, taken to an institution for the mentally insane (sic) and suddenly finds herself in a sleazy (very) club being trained to do exotic dances for gross wealthy customers.

Baby Doll meets Sweetpee (Abby Cornish who is much more vital than Emily Browning) and her sister, Rocket (Jena Malone). There is Blondie (Vanessa Hudgens from the High School Musical films). They are being trained by a weirdly exotic kind of KGB dance instructress (Carla Gugino) and a slimy club owner (Oscar Isaac, who has played both St Joseph and Jose Ramos Horta in his time). Quite a lot of parody of other films here.

When Baby Doll is asked to dance and the music turned on, she escapes into several alternate worlds, World War, a Kingdom of Dragons...) where she accomplishes tasks which she hopes will enable her to escape from this imprisoning club where it turns into a Junior Kill Bill.

And, then, it all makes sense, more or less, but not exactly the feminist triumph that we thought it was going to be.

Zack Snyder obviously loves exotic sets, decor, costumes, special effects, as we have seen in his Dawn of the Dead, 300, Legends of the Guardians – the Owls of Ga'hool, and Watchmen. They are quite elaborate and fantastic here which, along with an often pounding score, make Sucker Punch a film of the senses (not always of the sense).

THE TEMPEST

(US, 2010, d. Julie Taymor)

While The Tempest receives a lot of attention from Shakespearean scholars and aficionados, it is still overshadowed by the tragedies and some of the histories. It comes from Shakespeare's later career, a period of some melancholy and winter's tales.

For many, Julie Taymor's adaptation of the text and imaginative presentation will bring The Tempest alive. She did it quite spectacularly and frighteningly for her version of Titus Andronicus, Titus. The world of The Tempest is a more magical world, a world of tragic-comedy.

Julie Taymore has done another innovative thing. She has turned Prospero into Prospera – with comparatively little change to the text. This offers an opportunity for Helen Mirren to take on a traditional male role. And she performs

magnificently. She is a dominating screen presence. She articulates the verse both clearly and emotionally. She communicates the meaning of her character and the play, the experience of her being deposed in and exiled from Milan, her life on the remote island where she is able to perfect her magician's arts as well as care for her daughter, Miranda.

As the film opens, there is a huge, literal tempest – and one listened in dismaying anticipation because it was very difficult to hear and discern what they were saying. Would the whole film be like this? Fortunately, not. Once Prospera begins to speak, it is clear and meaningful.

The other advantage of a screen version is the possibility of special effects. The tempest is an obvious one, but there are moments when Prospera conjures up a mysterious sky with diagrams of stars and constellations, which means that we are in a magical world, not to be observed as naturalism or realism. But, the device of having Ariel as a fey white, naked creature who can be a will o' the wisp and dart around the island, be larger than the ship on which he is blowing and arrive with the speed of light, makes the magic world more credible. Ariel is played by the rather ethereal Ben Whishaw.

The cast for the nobility washed ashore is eclectic but effective: David Strathairn as the King, grieving for his drowned son, Chris Cooper as Antonio, Prospera's treacherous brother, Alan Cumming as the disloyal brother of the king – and an opportunity to relish the presence of Tom Conti and his distinctive voice as old Gonzalo, the sage.

And Caliban? This Caliban has been harshly dealt with by Prospera and is her slave. But this Caliban elicits some sympathy and some pity, played in a combination of the monstrous and the human by Djimon Hounsou.

We are not as fond of the humour in Shakespeare's plays of the comic figures who are introduced to entertain the 'groundlings'. They are rather good here, even if the humour sometimes seems quaint and silly. Russell Brand simply does his thing, accent, intonations, faces and all. And it works. Alfred Molina is also very good in bringing this comedy to life.

Felicity Jones is nice as Miranda but Reeve Carney seems too boyish (with a rather thin and reedy voice for his song) as Ferdinand.

One wonders where the film-makers found such varied landscapes of barren rock, craters and crevices, crags and shorelines. The answer is Hawaii.

Shakespeare's principal themes are all here: the state, power usurped and restored; romantic love and hope; and a figure who could be tragic but who draws on her heart as well as her mind, relinquishes her magical control and comes back to ordinary life after forgiving the wrongs against her.

This version of The Tempest opens up the play – and would be worth seeing (and listening to) again.

SIGNIS REVIEWS MAY 2011

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ARTHUR

(US, 2011, d. Justin Winer)

It's thirty years since Dudley Moore was the cheerful, alcoholic ne'er-do-well, Arthur, the New York billionaire. It's thirty years since John Gielgud's Oscar-winning performance as Arthur's butler and nanny, Hobson. No reason, not to have an update.

Russell Brand. After making his name as a comedian, Russell Brand has been appearing as an actor in films as diverse as *Get Him to the Greek* and *The Tempest*. He gave his voice for the central Easter Bunny in *Hop*. Generally, he sounds the same, a distinctive British accent and tone that often can get away with humorous murder. He uses it again in *Arthur*, but there is much more in his performance.

In fact, there is quite an amount of nice romanticism and sentiment in this version of *Arthur*. Brand has no difficulty in showing the irresponsible and indulgent side of Arthur. But, he is also convincing in showing an underlying intelligence (which he hasn't bothered developing) and the change from philandering nitwit to falling genuinely in love as well as showing a kindness to Hobson who (after her change to Prospera in *The Tempest*) is now played by Helen Mirren, Arthur's devoted but not exactly no-nonsense nanny.

Arthur's mother – a steely performance by Geraldine James – has had little time for her spendthrift son who embarrasses her no end. She offers an ultimatum: either he marry the ambitious Susan (Jennifer Garner) or be cut off from his inheritance. By chance, he encounters Naomi (Greta Gerwig), an illegal tour guide at Grand Central Station and is charmed and then falls in love. Will he marry and keep the money? Will Susan's father (a gnarled Nick Nolte) threaten him with his electric saw? Could his mother ever change her mind? Could Naomi really return Arthur's love?

Russell Brand is always good at one-liners or toss-away funny and ironic lines and there are plenty here to keep the audience amused and on-side. Helen Mirren clearly enjoys herself being strict, being indulgent, commenting waspishly on Arthur's behaviour – and instructing him how to make tea with a teabag. Luis Guzman is Arthur's amenable chauffeur (even to dressing as Batman and Robin and driving a batmobile). And the NYPD shows amazing tolerance and understanding.

Greta Gerwig has the difficult job of persuading us that Arthur is worth loving despite his fickle past. She does it very nicely and makes Naomi a pleasing, ordinarily down-to-earth character.

And Arthur's drinking and resolutions. After a failed AA meeting where Hobson strongly but gently chides him, he offers non-stop comment on his progress.

And then, final credits and a new version of Arthur's theme that won the Best Song Oscar way back then.

CATFISH

(US, 2010, Henry Joost and Ariel Shulman)

A documentary. What is a documentary these days? Is it an objective look at some event or issue? Try as the makers

do, it will always have the point of view of the writers and directors? Does this matter? And, are the makers at liberty to 'create' some of the characters and events you will see? These are the kinds of questions that Catfish raises. And somebody nicely remarked on an IMDb blog that the film demands to be seen because of the excellent arguments you will have during the drive home.

And then somebody else remarked that it is the downside of The Social Contract. How does Facebook work? How valuable and real are on-line chat rooms? And how gullible have we become with all the information made available to us by Information Technology, swallowing everything like fish, hook, line and sinker?

Which means that we have to approach this story of online connections with caution and, perhaps, some scepticism.

Nev Shulman is a New York photographer whose brother and friend want to make a movie. When one of Nev's prize-winning photos gets a response from an 8 year old in Michigan who has painted her own version of his photo, the flattered Nev follows up and becomes a regular communicator with the little girl (and her many paintings), her mother and her attractive and flirtatious sister, Megan. So far, so good for the social networks.

When Nev and co have to visit Colorado, they decide to visit Megan and surprise her. But, of course, it is they who get the surprise.

Caution with plot spoilers means that the narrative has to stop there and audiences interested will have to see Catfish in order to meet the family, get to know them and what the art work and the flirting all mean. This turns the film into more of a psychological study of the family – ultimately less dramatic than the first half of the film, but certainly interesting to those who puzzle over human nature.

So, a 'reality' documentary with more reality than anticipated – or less?

GET LOW

(US, 2010, d. Aaron Schneider)

One should not be put off or hesitate because of the title. There is nothing low about it. As Felix Bush, the solitary man at the centre of the film, says, 'It's time to get low' and he means that he should get down to business.

This is a film designed for an older audience who appreciate fine characterisations and serious themes. It moves at a measured pace with a secret at its centre, something the audience is interested in discovering, which keeps them attentive. It is set in the 1930s in the American south.

The film opens with a long take of a burning house with a man aflame escaping from it. We have to wait until the end of the film and the revelation of Felix Bush's secret to understand what has happened.

Robert Duvall, nearing 80 when he made this film, is Felix Bush. A bearded and gnarled old man who has lived apart from the local town for forty years. He decides that it is time to confess his guilt and shame for what he did those decades earlier. He will have a funeral party before his death so that he can attend and listen to the myriad stories that have been told, retold and embroidered over the years. He also wants to tell people what has kept him apart from them for so long.

Bill Murray is Frank Quinn, the mortician of the town (where people have not been dying lately), assisted by an earnest young married man, Buddy (Lucas Black). He welcomes Felix's proposal and eagerly begins the preparations.

Felix is spruced up and meets after many years a friend from the past, Mattie, played by Sissy Spacek. He still cannot bring himself to tell her the truth.

After some decision hiccups, the party goes ahead and moves to a great speech from Duvall explaining what really happened in the burning house and his blaming himself for what happened and why. He asks people's forgiveness.

For those who appreciate the story, the characters, especially Felix, and the situations and themes of responsibility, confession, atonement and forgiveness (although it indulges Felix a little in the final minutes), they will find it a rewarding film.

HOP

(US, 2011, d. Tim Hill)

This one is for younger audiences whose horizons for Christmas and Easter are bound by Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny.

While one does not want to be too sanctimonious about it, it is still a great pity that we read surveys being done about children's knowledge of biblical characters and stories and the findings that so many have no real awareness of them (a cultural lack even if religion is not involved). That being said, back to Hop.

While Santa has the north pole for his workshops, easter eggs are manufactured at, where else, Easter Island! Hop is the young son of the old Easter Bunny but would rather go to LA, where else, to play the drums. Off he goes and runs into, literally, slacker, Fred O'Hare (no relation!), played with cheerful oomph by James Marsden.

This is one of those interactive films, animation and live action (like the director's previous Alvin and the Chipmunks). Hop has his more than mischievous side (especially as voiced so well by Russell Brand) and causes Fred to miss appointments for jobs which his father (Gary Cole) is hounding him to get.

Wouldn't you know it, but Fred's ambition, since he was little and glimpsed the old Easter Bunny on his rounds, was to be, of course, an Easter Bunny.

Meanwhile, on Easter Island, a revolution is brewing. The chicks who fly the Bunny's sleigh, led by the dominating Carlos, are being marshalled into protest and revolt. After some adventures, both Fred and Hop arrive on Easter Island, are tied up (fortunately, Fred is tied with licorice and makes a bite-through escape) but overcome Carlos and his engagingly dumb sidekick (sidechick), Phil, who is ground control for the sleigh but is easily distracted and the revolution comes to a literal crashing halt. Since both Carlos and Phil are voiced by Hank Azaria, they are both amusing characters and are a foil to Hugh Laurie who voices the Easter Bunny.

Sounds a bit better than might have been thought – and it is, though strictly for the little child within for adults and for the real children.

THE HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGER

(Israel, 2010, d. Eran Riklis)

Eran Riklis made a very moving story about Palestinian-Israeli relationships, antagonisms and a fight for justice, Lemon Tree. This time his social concern takes him farther afield.

The manager of the title works in a large bakery in Tel Aviv. As the film opens, he faces a humanitarian and public relations crisis. A receipt has been found on the body of a foreign worker who was killed in a terrorist bomb blast. However, she had not been employed by the bakery for some weeks before her death. How does the owner of the bakery handle the bureaucratic complications? How does the manager handle the journalist (significantly known only as The Weasel) who sees a story with damning headlines and photos in the offing for his career? And how does the manager handle his family, estranged from his wife and promising his daughter he will attend her function in succeeding days?

Not smoothly is the quick answer.

A decision is made that the body of the dead woman be returned to her native Romania to be buried there. However, when the entourage arrives and has met the Israeli consul (with The Weasel who has succeeded in getting himself on board), a signature is needed. The woman is divorced and her ex-husband cannot sign. They track down the 14 year old son who is living on the streets after being kicked out by his father. He is full of resentment. He can't sign. He is under age. The only solution seems to be to travel up country (through rather ugly and desolate landscapes and ageing industrial areas) to find the grandmother.

It is a road movie with a difference. The car with the coffin is not in the best condition. Police are authoritarian and forbid their driver to proceed because his licence is years out of date. Villagers are sceptical, if not hostile (including the grandmother) and the dead woman is Romanian Orthodox. In the final stages, the group find an old army installation and travel in a veteran tank.

The comic touches are bleak and ironic. The serious side is important in terms of respect for the dead as well as for the living. The human resources manager is a kind of Everyman who has to cope with strange circumstances, make decisions that he knows will not please everyone. And he has his own family life to deal with.

Mark Ivanar does not look like a Hollywood star. Rather, he looks like anyone you might see on the street. He engages audience attention and, finally, audience sympathy as he struggles with the changing situations and people's moods and feelings. This is an interesting and unusual film.

INCENDIES

(Canada, 2010, d. Denis de Villeneuve)

An important film. Incendies (Scorched) takes us into the upheavals and civil wars in the Middle East and some of the human and inhuman consequences that can baffle, even frighten, those of us who live comfortable lives. While the country is not named in the film, it is based on events in Lebanon, civil wars, religious wars.

Incendies was the Canadian entry for the 2010 Academy Awards for Best Foreign Language Film (which was won by the moving Danish film, In a Better World).

Incendies is based on a play and there are many powerful dialogue sequences. However, the play is opened up cinematically, with a great deal of location photography (Jordan standing in for Lebanon) and local cultural atmosphere.

Initially, audiences have to keep their wits about them as the drama moves between two different time zones. A mother's will is being read to her twin children by the lawyer for whom she has been secretary for eighteen years since she arrived with her children in Montreal. She has letters for them asking them to deliver them to their father and to their brother whom they do not know.

In the present, the film shows the search, first of all by Jeanne, and then by Simon, helped by the lawyer. Modern Canadians unused to the Middle East, go on a journey of discovery and new cultural awareness.

In the meantime, we see the past, from the 1960s to the 1990s, the life of the mother which turns out to be surprising to the children as they piece together what happened to her – and to us, because it is a frightening story. It is a story of family shame and denunciation and killing in the mountains of Lebanon. It is a story of adoption and the hard and unexpected life of an orphan at the time of civil war and atrocities. It is a story of a woman who receives an education but who takes a stand in the civil unrest and acts on it leading to an atrocious prison experience.

We follow the past story step by step as the younger generation pursue it, Jeanne with intensity, Simon unwillingly. Where it leads we did not anticipate at all though as it unfolds, we might suspect what happened – and hope that it didn't. But it did.

The performances are persuasive. The writing of the play (the author collaborating with the film) has great intensity. The issues are important and raise our consciousness of events still being played out in the Middle East in a harrowing way.

INSIDIOUS

(US, 2011, d. James Wan)

A reasonable drama (well, reasonable may not be the right word because of the intricacies of the plot, haunting and demons), but enjoyable for those who like this kind of terror film. It has its scary moments and some jumps but on the whole its atmosphere is eerie.

Writer Leigh Whannell and director, James Wan, learnt their original movie craft in Melbourne. What they are famous for (very famous) is that they did the first Saw film. For Insidious, they must have listened to the comments that the Saw series is too horrible and gory, because this is quite restrained (a few fights and struggles with the ghosts but no blood and gore). But, they know what they are doing, writing an effective thriller and employing lots of camera movement and angles in drawing the audience into the mood of the family anxiety and the atmospheric house.

When those in the know see the name of Orin Peli amongst the producers, the Paranormal Activity link will be made.

Insidious has quite a lot of para-normal activity and, unlike the original film which posed as a documentary, this is a narrative fiction, no dates and times, no hand-held camera observing of the characters and their plight. In fact, this one offers explanations for the weird goings-on, the poltergeist activity and the haunting.

While a priest is called in briefly for some support when parents are alarmed at the mysterious coma of their son, and the characters say, 'for God's sake', God is particularly absent. In fact, this is a very secular ghost story and even more, the family calls in a kind of secular exorcist and her technology team to get rid of the ghosts – which is rather different in plot from what we might have expected. And, a shock ending.

The film-makers also have the advantage of an up-market cast. Josh and Renai (Patrick Wilson and Rose Byrne) and their three children have moved house and discover spooky things insidiously entering their happy family life. Their son, Dalton (Ty Simpkins) has an accident in the attic and goes into coma for months. The reasons are not as expected either.

Josh's mother (Barbara Hershey) has also been having some frightening dreams and calls in her friend, Elise (Lin Shaye) and the process of ridding the house of the ghosts starts and ups the fright quotient.

During the opening credits the musical score is not insidious, rather the extraverted loud opposite, outsidious, perhaps. Subtlety is not required as the film goes on.

So, a pretty good haunting story for ghost hunting fans.

THE LOST BLADESMAN

(China, 2011, d. Felix Chong and Andrew Mak)

An initial piece of advice for someone who is not Chinese or who is not familiar with Chinese history: check with Wikipedia or some information site to find some details about the central character and his place in the Chinese memory. Otherwise, the film might just be another martial arts period epic.

Actually, it is something of just another martial arts period epic. Other films have visited this era with more spectacle and panache (The Three Kingdoms, Red Cliffs). There is the expected costume, decor and production design. There are battles and special effects. There is a great deal of swordplay (not exactly play since the encounters are matters of life and death), designed and choreographed by the star, Donnie Yen.

But, Guan yun chang, the lost bladesman, is a central character in the history of these times. He has been remembered and the sources tell us that he has been revered by many as a deity. The Lost Bladesman is an opportunity to see him in his historical and military context.

The film opens with the quietly solemn ritual of his funeral. It then moves to flashback of his adult life and career as a professional soldier, coming back to his funeral at the end. The leader Cao Cao, who had tangled with, supported, and manipulated Guan, offers the key to understanding him. He says that there are wolves with lamb's hearts and lambs with wolves' hearts. Guan is a wolf with a lamb's heart.

We see him in his service to several lords and the emperor who rely on him, betray him, use him. All the while, he wields his sword (and he is mighty with the sword) in loyalty to those who employ him and to accompany a woman in safety to an arranged marriage.

The film is quite episodic making it difficult to realise how many years are passing as well as to recognise where Guan stands in regard to emperor and generals and who is ordering his death and for what reasons. There is a welcome respite when Guan is wounded and spends some recuperative time in a Buddhist monastery.

For some decades now, Chinese directors, many of their world-renowned directors, have been involved in this re-visiting of history, kingdoms, wars and dynasties – which means that Western audiences can be overwhelmed by them.

MAD BASTARDS

(Australia, 2011, d. Brendan Fletcher)

The title makes it sound Australian. And it is.

It's probably a fair thing to say that *Mad Bastards* should be seen by as many Australians as possible. It entertains, but it also reveals a great deal about aboriginal life in Western Australian communities in recent decades. (It could be seen in conjunction with *Murundak*, the significant musical documentary about the Black Arm Band, their concerts, their range of protest songs, and the narrative of life for indigenous people in Australia since 1788, the history, the stolen generation, political refusal of an apology and the final 2008 official apology.)

A distinctive feature of *Mad Bastards* is that the writer-director, Brendan Fletcher, spent a decade with the people of the Kimberleys, listening to stories, appreciating the oral tradition, collecting the episodes and fashioning a screenplay for a feature film out of these ingredients. He also has a cast of non-professionals – who are completely convincing in their dramatic performances. During the final credits, the main members of the cast are on screen being interviewed, speaking about their lives and their experiences, showing us how the oral traditions have been incorporated into the film.

While there are a few sequences in Perth, most of the film has been shot in the Kimberleys and in and around the town of Wyndham.

The striking opening sequence sets a tone. Some young lads make a firebomb and one of them tosses it towards a wooden building which goes up in flames. He stands mesmerised, watching it, but the camera highlights the anger in his eyes and face. His name is Bullet.

There are two other strands of the story which centres on Bullet (Lucas Yeeda in a performance that is impressive and convincing). The local chief of police is Bullet's grandfather, Tex (Greg Tait – who is also impressive in the end credits' interview and talk about character, criminals and police). Tex has brought up his grandson for his daughter, Nella (Ngaire Pigram, also worth listening to in the final interviews), who has been a single mother since Bullet was born and who struggles with drink and brawls. Tex is a good man, a powerful influence for order in the community. He points out that in the middle of 'all the chaos and bullshit' the community needs a strong person at the centre on whom they can rely.

The other key character is TJ, Thomas (Dean Daly-Jones, also impressive in the interviews which make us realise how much personal experience he brings to his role). TJ is Bullet's father. After a prison stint, and being rejected by his mother in Perth, he travels north. He wants to see his son. He seems desperate to make a new beginning after all the years of absence and neglect.

The drama of *Mad Bastards* is TJ's journey and struggle for some decency in his life and meeting his son as well as Bullet's ability to cope with this father-figure in his life. And the drama consists of a slugging it out fight in the desert between TJ and Tex.

Mad Bastards tells a lot of the story as it is. The making and releasing of it, the dramatising of what is wrong, what goes wrong, and indications that making good is possible means that the film is actually one of realism and of hope.

MAIN STREET

(US, 2010, d. John Doyle)

Sinclair Lewis once wrote an important American novel about an ordinary American town – what better than to call it *Main Street*? This is not a version of Lewis' novel, but it is in his spirit.

For 2011, this seems an extraordinarily 'old-fashioned film', 'classical film story-telling' if one prefers (with not a swear word or sex scene to be seen or heard). Yet, it is an interesting film all the way through. It has old issues and contemporary issues to explore. It has fine performances which hold the attention. It is well written and worth listening to. The writer is playwright, Horton Foote, to whom the film is dedicated. For fifty years and more, he has written fine films about the American south, adapting Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, writing *1918*, *On Valentine's Day* and *Tender Mercies* amongst many others.

Perhaps younger audiences and those who prefer life and movies at a faster pace may not be caught up by *Main Street* but an appreciative audience which values the American movie tradition will find it a worthy successor.

Behind the opening credits is news footage of earlier decades and prosperity in Durham, North Carolina. Much of it came from tobacco growing. Then we see the present. While there are tall buildings and offices, the centre of Durham

is becoming run down. Young people want to move on. The town council laments that few people turn up for parades. The spirit of the American town is seen to be dying – or on the move away.

Then we enter into the lives of some of the townspeople. Orlando Bloom plays Harris, a young policeman who is studying law at night, in love with school sweetheart, Mary (Amber Tamblyn), staying at home for his mother (Margo Martindale). Meanwhile, Mary has a job in a law firm in Raleigh and goes out on a date with her boss (Andrew McCarthy) but when she is warned that he is married with children, she is upset and is fired, determined to leave for Atlanta at once.

In an old 1920s mansion, Georgiana Carr (a wonderful performance from a near 80, Ellen Burstyn), daughter of a wealthy planter, is thinking of selling her house. She relies on the help of her niece, Willa (yet another understated performance from Patricia Clarkson). But, she has leased one of her warehouses, to an engagingly upbeat businessman (the business is disposal of hazardous waste), Texan Gus (Colin Firth, Texan accent and all).

Action takes place over two days or so.

The issues are those of the past. Miss Carr lives in the past (even her vocabulary and style of speaking and manners) and has to let go. The issues are also those of the present. Gus lives in the present and future and sees great prosperity for the town in undertaking delivery and processing of the waste. He is clearly attracted to Willa who has already recognised that he is just like her former husband, expecting anything he puts forward to be as enthusiastically taken up by others as he feels. What are her feelings towards him and helping her aunt with the dilemma about the warehouse and her selling the house? The issues are also the perennial ones of young love and prospects of jobs, improvement and marriage.

The screenplay brings these stories together and builds up to several climaxes. With the hazardous waste question, we hear strong arguments for the industry developments and what improvements it can bring to a town. We hear the caution about the waste and about safety. Neither side can claim the moral highground.

As with Robert Duvall in *Get Low*, *Main Street* is a film for experienced viewers who bring their own lives and questions to reflections on what the film offers.

MURUNDAK

(Australia, 2011, d. Natasha Gadd, Rhys Graham)

Murundak means ‘alive’ in the Woiwurrung language.

Murundak was also the title of a travelling concert in 2006 by the Black Arm Band. The band’s name derives from the Prime Minister, John Howard’s statement about not having a black armband view of history,

The band continues to tour Australia and this documentary film captures performances at various venues around the Australian states. The film offers opportunity for many of the members to perform individually. The band comprises:

- Archie Roach
- Bart Willoughby
- Dan Sultan
- Dave Arden
- Emma Donovan
- Gapanbulu Yunupingu
- Jimmy Little
- Joe Geia
- Kutcha Edwards
- Lou Bennett
- Mark Atkins
- Peter Rotumah

- Rachael Maza Long
- Ruby Hunter
- Shane Howard
- Shellie Morris
- Stephen Pigram
- Ursula Yovich

Their songs are protest songs from the past and from more recent times. Many have made their mark on Australian consciousness.

But, the film is not simply a selection of songs excitingly performed.

Murundak also narrates the history of indigenous Australia since 1788. There is voiceover information and commentary. There is historical footage (including John Howard's speech and Kevin Rudd's apology). There is a glimpse of Burnum Burnum on the coast of Kent taking possession of Britain on behalf of the aboriginal people – tongue in cheek but telling.

Many questions are raised, many of them the main ones like the Stolen Generation and the repercussions. However, one important question comes to the fore (also in the context of missions): when and how was the link broken for 19th and 20th century aborigines between them and their millennia-old heritage?

The performers speak genially and articulately. They value the songs. In recounting their history and life stories, the audience is impressed and moved – one would like to single out various singers but, then, looking at the list, they all offer a great deal that is worthwhile.

[The release of Murundak coincides with the release of the feature film, based on oral stories of the Kimberleys, Mad Bastards, featuring the music of Stephen Pigram, one of the Black Arm Band. Both films should be on the Australian, must-see list.]

ORANGES AND SUNSHINE

(UK, 2010, d. Jim Loach)

Oranges and continual sunshine were part of the enticing of young children to go to Australia from the United Kingdom from the 1940s to 1970. These children were orphans, children of unmarried mothers who had to give up their babies to save family shame, children of poor families who could not manage. There were thousands of them. The language used in this film is 'deportation to Australia'. Once in Australia, they were taken to institutions, governmental and religious, treated harshly, in many cases abused, and grew up with little education and not knowing anything about their families.

The issues came up, especially in the 1980s, when so many of the children were young adults and feeling a deep need to know something about their parents and to contact them or relatives.

Margaret Humphreys, a social worker in Nottingham, was approached by a young woman to make a search. Margaret was given time for two years to follow through with investigations which took her often to Australia, at some sacrifice for her devoted husband and children, and at some cost to her own health. However, she persevered, set up a trust, approached governments, received more requests from the children than she anticipated. Governments were reluctant to investigate and charitable organisations and religious groups and orders found that scandalous behaviour on the part of their members was being revealed.

The British and Australian governments issued official apologies in November 2009, almost a quarter of a century after Margaret Humphreys began her investigations. She herself received a CBE in 2011.

The film, Oranges and Sunshine, is based on her book and official documents on cases.

As a film, Oranges and Sunshine is both moving and disturbing. Emily Watson embodies Margaret Humphreys, a local social worker who is asked to do more in life than she ever anticipated. Once involved, she cannot let go and experiences the pain of the children, their emotional neediness as well as verbal and physical abuse from those who resent the criticism as well as impediments from governments. Emily Watson plays her with a combination of British

stiff upper lip and quavering heart rather than an out-there crusader. Richard Dillane gives solid support as her husband who gave her solid support in her work.

Several of the adults dramatise their memories of the past. Hugo Weaving, in a quietly moving and convincing performance, is a man who has longed to meet his mother, has failed in his marriage and as a father, discovers his sister in England and the truth about his mother. David Wenham, on the other hand, plays a cheeky lout of a man whose brash exterior covers his longing for his mother and who, after initial antagonism towards Margaret, becomes her ally.

The film was directed by the English director, Jim Loach, who has been quite prolific in directing episodes of many British television soaps and serials. His father is Ken Loach, whose films for over forty years have been part of the social conscience.

For audiences unaware of this history, the material might be shocking – another stolen generation. It was the subject in the 1992 ABC mini-series, *The Leaving of Liverpool*, and of a book by Sydney Catholic journalist, Alan Gill, *Orphans of the Empire* (1997).

PAUL

(UK/US, 2011, d. Greg Mottola)

Why Paul? Well, back in the 1940s when the aliens came to Roswell, one of them crash-landed in Wyoming in the yard where a little girl and her dog, Paul, were watching. She rescued him from the ship but the US authorities impounded the alien and he got the name, Paul.

Sixty years later, he escapes and is finding his way back to Wyoming, to the mountain of Close Encounters to meet a space ship to get him home. He does look like ET more or less, though we don't see him call home – however, in a flashback, we do hear him call Steven Spielberg in 1980 and explain that he should make a film about a stranded alien. He also claims that it was he who suggested Agent Mulder.

Paul is voiced in his cheeky, sardonic way by Seth Rogen. Paul seems not to have been isolated enough because he has absorbed a fair amount of US raunchy crassness and can be quite rude.

As you might tell, Paul is a spoof of science-fiction stories and movies.

It has been written by Simon Pegg and Nick Frost, who were able to spoof zombie films to great effect with *Shaun of the Dead*, and the police and sinister murders in a British village in *Hot Fuzz*. This time they have teamed up with American director, Greg Mottola (who made the Seth Rogen rude comedy, *Superbad*).

Pegg and Moran are Graeme and Clive, two moving-towards-middle-age-without-necessarily-leaving-adolescence-behind sci-fi geeks. They are on the trip of a lifetime attending a science-fiction conference in the US (where they meet their author idol, played by Jeffrey Tambor, who practically ignores them) and then go on the road to visit the sites of alien sightings and landings. People wonder about them and their relationship (not without reason and not without snide comment). But, off they go on a road movie, crashing into taunting rednecks' car, and then encountering Paul who has crashed his car on the highway. Clive faints and finds it hard to accept Paul and becomes jealous of his friendship with Clive and with Ruth, the daughter of the owner of the trailer park where they hide for a night. But, they make friends.

Some Christian groups have taken offence at the portrayal of the owner and his daughter. They are rabid fundamentalist, she wearing a T-shirt with Jesus blasting Darwin with a hand-gun and denouncing evolution, and spouting anti-science, pro intelligent design, bible text fanaticism rather than argument. Clive, Graeme and Paul are not keen on God explanations. What makes this seemingly anti-religious pot-shooting more complex is that Paul has powers to heal and to raise from the dead which parallel the Gospels. Since the Gospels are part of western culture, it is not surprising that non-believers can resort to them for metaphors while they are critical of fanatical biblical interpretations.

This may offend some sensitivities – but, then, some friends who are not religious realised that they had not really noticed this as a key ingredient of the film as they watched it.

Meanwhile, back on the road, *Men in Black* are in pursuit of Paul, with orders from The Big Guy (unseen until the end of the film, though heard, when she appears as Sigourney Weaver with nods to *Alien*).

For Graeme and Clive this is a life-transforming experience – a bit less even for ardent fans.

LE QUATTRO VOLTE

(Italy, 2008, d. Michelangelo Frammartino)

Some years ago there was a French documentary about life on a farming property in the French mountains called *La Vie Moderne/ Modern Life*. A director met a family and followed them in their ordinary lives and in their work, often letting what the audience was watching speak for itself – though sometimes the makers asked questions which required an answer of yes or no which, when given, made them sound more inarticulate than they probably were.

Le Quattro Volte is in the same vein except that the film-makers tend to keep their distance, even in close-up sequences. There is practically no dialogue (though we do hear a soldier in Roman dress for a Passion Play procession telling the local dog to scat: 'Via!'). And no questions are asked of the people we see and watch.

Looking at some reviews and blogs, I realised that many viewers were bored, finding the whole thing tedious. But, the film is a cinema essay, with documentary touches and with poetic touches. And, if that does not appeal, tedium ensues. But, if it does, the film is a quiet immersion in the life of a small, mountainous Calabrian town.

For most of the first half of the film, we accompany a lonely goatherd, for whom no jaunty song will be sung. He roams the paths in the woods and the goats graze on the hillsides. He takes them home, milks them in the morning and distributes the milk. We go to his room, a rather monastic room. He visits the church and gets some dust which he stirs into his drink, hoping for some kind of cure or healing (he never tells us). He dies. He is buried – and, later, one of the goats gives birth. Clearly, the audience is invited to watch, to contemplate, to reflect.

We see people arriving for the Passion Play, the procession itself with Jesus and the Cross and the Roman soldiers, the townspeople following on to a distant hill up the road where we can discern three crosses.

There is also a local festival. A tall tree is raised in the square. Someone climbs it and gifts fall out of the tree. The tree comes down, is chopped into pieces. Some of the men of the town are involved in charcoal making and we watch and contemplate the process as they form the wood into huge smouldering mounds.

And, the contemplation ends. We have been visual tourists in the town, gazing down at it, admiring the views of the surrounding hills – and, depending on whether we responded well or not, that is that.

LA RAFLE/ THE ROUND-UP

(France, 2010, d. Rose Bosch)

Most audiences will find this a very sad, even harrowing film to watch. It is the story of the rounding-up of French Jews in Paris in the summer of 1942. The Nazis had occupied Paris (seen in news footage during the credits) and Marshall Petain, hero of World War I, was governing in Vichy, an anti-Semitic authority, pleasing the Third Reich.

The film focuses on a particular quarter of Paris and three families living there. While we can identify with these characters, they serve as showing us the range of people who were rounded up – although many Parisians sheltered the Jews and helped them escape so that the quota promised to Berlin was never fulfilled. The sequences showing the authorities and the Petain government are chilling and are interspersed throughout the film as are enactments of Hitler, both his rantings and discussions with Himmler and his relaxing with Eva Braun and being filmed on his holidays in the mountains, a stark contrast with what was happening in Paris.

The round-up featured recently in the moving *Sarah's Key* although that film took the action beyond 1942 into the present (including the featuring of President Chirac's acknowledgement of France's shame for the events and the suffering). As with *Sarah's Key*, the handheld cameras immerse the audience in the confusion and struggles of the round-up, in the homes with the brutal behaviour of police and military (along with some sexual menace) and in the streets where they were 'following orders'.

The overwhelming section of the film is that where thousands of men, women and children, are hurried into the Paris Velodrome, with two days clothing and rations, and put into squalid and filthy situations (which the film does not spare us). The uncertainty is frightening as well as the dire prospects (which are what happens). There is a powerful

sequence in the Velodrome, where people are trying to cope, some reading, some playing cards, the children being rowdy, old men praying, where the firemen come in and their commander is appalled and defies strict underlings in allowing his men to produce the hoses and provide water for the people – and advises them on how they can safely post the many messages handed to them.

While the three families that we have met in the quarter and identified with, the Weismanns, the Zygler's (the mother is pregnant) and the Traubes, are in the Velodrome, our attention is drawn to the Jewish doctor who is trying to cope with the ordinary illnesses, the children with measles and chickenpocks, the dehydrated. He is played with a quiet devotion by Jean Reno. He is assisted by very few nurses. One devout Protestant nurse, Annette (Melanie Laurent) is assigned and exhausts herself with the constant work and care. The film shows respect to Christian help for the Jews with Annette, a priest who wears a Star of David and helps some to escape and nuns who bring food to the camps.

When the crowds are transferred from the Velodrome, they go to camps in the country and then comes the harrowing separation of men and women, the isolation of the children and the trains to the East – with the saddening final information of how very few (very few) adults and children ever returned.

The film does end with some hope and some reunions but they are desperately few. However, we experience a terrible story of extraordinary 20th century inhumanity which is both tear and anger inducing.

RIO

(US, 2011, d. Carlos Saldanha)

Rio is a lively animated entertainment that should reach across all ages. It is full of energy and colour (especially the opening with the range of birds, their plumage and their flight) and a nice contrast between the cold of Minnesota and the warmth and rhythms of Brazil.

The film has ecological undertones for the serious-minded with the critique of the illegal bird smugglers.

But, it is also quite funny.

Blu is a macaw who cannot fly. He is abducted by the smugglers and finds himself in the US, with a little girl called Linda who loves him like a brother. She grows up, runs a bookstore in Minnesota, and he is loved and pampered and has never had to fly. And he has adapted to the mod cons of the US.

When a scientist from Brazil tracks him down, he pleads with Linda to let him go back to Brazil to mate with Jewell, the only female of the species left. Linda is unwilling but does the right thing – and, of course, will find romance along with the adventure and the perils with the scientist.

In Brazil, the smugglers have not given up and before long, Blu and Jewell, chained together and not getting along at all, are imprisoned. So, the main part of the film is the captivity, the dangers, the rescue, and the repercussions of Blu's soft American life and his lack of skills, especially flying (despite attempts of friendly birds helping him try).

So, there is plenty of plot – and there are plenty of comic touches with this mismatched odd couple of macaws.

There are also a lot of characters who are entertaining in themselves. There are the smuggling bosses and the dopey henchmen who really want to dress up and dance at Carnivale. There is Nigel, an evilly glowering Cockatoo, who is the heavy in the smuggling business. There are a whole lot of other birds who fly in and out of the story.

For a few moments, it looked as though we were going to see only the sunny, Copacabana and beaches side of Rio, but soon we are in the favelas and looking at the social problems of the city. An important part of the plot is how a little boy is the pawn of the smugglers, a reminder of the exploitation of children in the city.

While the animation is lively and bright (from the makers of the Ice Age films), enhanced by 3D, and the musical numbers are more than expected but communicate the verve of Brazilian rhythms (and Sergio Mendez is one of the producers of the score), it is the voice cast which is outstanding.

Many will think that Blu may have invented Facebook because he is voiced in his idiosyncratic way by Jesse Eisenberg, while a lively Anne Hathaway is the dominating Jewell. Jermaine Clement (from Flight of the Conchords, Gentlemen Broncos) is an imposing Nigel. Various birds include Jamie Foxx and Will I Am floundering in their wisecracking

attempts to help, Jane Lynch and Wanda Sykes as two commenting geese, George Lopez as the friendly toucan, Rafael, who wants to teach Blu to fly. Leslie Mann is Linda, the bespectacled heroine who finishes up on a float in the Rio parade, and Rodrigo Santoro as the eager scientist.

Very enjoyable.

SCREAM 4 (SCRE4M)

US, 2011, d. Wes Craven

Writing a review for a Scream film is like preaching to the converted and, according to box office results, their name is Legion. Non-horror fans will see the title and move on.

So. Wes Craven is a professorial-looking type who has been making horror films for forty years or more. He obviously loves the genre and playing with its conventions. Not only did he make the Scream trilogy, it was he who introduced Freddy Krueger to the world (allegedly named for a boy who bullied Craven at school) to give everyone nightmares on Elm Street.

It is over a decade since Scream 3. So, why now for Scre4m (which is what the title does on screen, transforming from Scream to Scre4m)? Well, for one thing, why not? But, what has interested Craven over the years is playing with the conventions, drawing the audience attention to them and both utilising them and poking fun at them. But, this is the particular sphere of Kevin Williamson, the writer for the original films and the writer for this one, a clever movie buff indeed.

Most of the characters here are horror movie buffs, the high school students who are wizzes at horror trivia, the heads of the high school's movie club who hold an annual Stabathon marathon (the 7 movies based on the main character, Sidney Prescott, and what happened to her in the original Scream). Because it is the age of social networking, a Scream film of 2011 has to have internet broadcasting etc. So, there are loads of references to movies and stars (with a dying cop cursing Bruce Willis and the way he can survive police thrillers!) and lots of discussions about what the rules of horror films are and how they can be changed or broken.

Scream 4 is a very amusing exercise in horror cinema deconstruction for movie buffs.

The opening parodies the first film with murders of students who turn out to be watching a Stab film and discussions of the relative merits of Stab and horror before one girl dispatches the other (because she talks too much). We are laughing as the film begins.

For the fans, the main characters are here again (certainly looking a decade older too). Neve Campbell is Sidney Prescott, promoting the book which has served as therapy to get her over her Scream traumas. Former journalist, Gail Weathers (a still acerbic Courtney Cox) who wrote the original books on which the Stab series was based is not too pleased but is happy enough when there are more murders and she teams with the film club managers to solve the murders. Sidney's publicist is delighted at the increase in murders and potential sales until, of course, she goes the way of the victims. David Arquette is still Sheriff Dewey, married to Gail and trying to cope with the increasing number of deaths.

This time, the central victim seems to be Jill, Sidney's cousin (Emma Roberts) whom Sidney is at pains to protect – and there are plenty of suspects, especially Dewey's deputy or Jill's rejected boyfriend. (Unfortunately, this reviewer missed the main murderer completely! – which means that Williamson and Craven were very smart with their clues and where they were drawing audience attention.)

Not meant to be taken too seriously (except when we are analysing genres and their rules), there are some frights, some screams, some red herrings, some suspense – and prolonged endings which we may not have been expecting either.

Scre4m will reinforce the converted's faith.

SOMETHING BORROWED

(US, 2011, d. Luke Greenfield)

From a novel by Emily Giffen who wrote a sequel, *Something Blue* ... and at the end of this film, we read 'to be continued'.

That should be good news for the target audience of *Something Borrowed* (and I don't think it is a male audience unless they are accompanying wives and girlfriends). Men definitely take back seat in this one.

While Kate Hudson has top billing, this is really a Ginnifer Goodwin film. Kate is Darcy, an extravert and party animal off the page, the best friend since childhood of Ginnifer's Rachel, now a reputable lawyer. The film opens with Darcy hosting a surprise 30th birthday party for Rachel. And, the initial complication? Darcy is engaged to be married to Dex (Colin Egglesfield) in 61 days. Rachel has had an unadmitted crush on Dex since study days (we are treated to a number of flashbacks to appreciate this) and he is not really over her.

Rachel tries her best but at times it is too hard for her. Dex might look the part, but he is really a coward at heart and dominated in his career, his impending marriage and his choice of home by his father who knows only how to control.

In the background is Rachel's genial friend, Ethan, an aspiring novelist (John Kraziniski), played with some charm and fine one-liners ('The Hamptons are a zombie movie designed by Ralph Lauren'). He is also being pursued relentlessly by Darcy's friend, Claire.

Needless to say, Rachel can't tell Darcy the truth. Dex can't get out from under his father's thumb to do anything to resolve the issues. Ethan goes to England for the editing of his book. Rachel visits him to make a decision.

Taking a cue from French farces, the ending has people hiding in other rooms and overhearing things and leaving their coats in the open so that truth discovery is inevitable.

Kate Hudson is perfect in her over-lively role (and can be rather wearying). Ginnifer Goodwin has to do the acting – but, if only Ethan could get her to make a decision before all the anguish. And, Dex, well good looks are certainly not everything.

The film does show the ups and downs of friendship between the two women quite effectively.

SNOWTOWN

(Australia, 2011, d. Justin Kurzel)

Snowtown is based on actual events that took place in the northern area of Adelaide, Snowtown, during the 1990s, arrests made in May 1999 and later convictions. The central character, John Bunting, is considered Australia's worst serial killer.

This reviewer was not in the country at the time of the arrests and trials and so the story was completely unknown – and all the more shocking for that. Audiences who know the story may find it repellent (and it is) and may not want to see the film (which is well made and serious with its repellent characters and crimes) or may take the opportunity to go behind the headlines and attempt to understand what went on and why. But, it is fair to say, John Bunting is a complex and puzzling character as is the hold he had over a number of associates as well as the young Jamie Vlassakis who was also arrested and is now in prison.

There have been a number of fine and intriguing films on serial killers, Spike Lee's *Summer of Sam* and Richard Fleischer's *The Boston Strangler* and *10 Rillington Place* (about the guilt of John Reginald Christie and Timothy John Evans who was wrongly hanged). Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (and the film and the TV version as well as the treatment in both biographies of the author, Capote and *Infamous*) come to mind, indicating that what one person could not do by themselves, if linked psychologically and emotionally with another, then all things, all horrendous crimes, were possible. This is certainly the case with those who followed John Bunting.

Snowtown is often 'art-house' in narrative (not always linear), in screenplay and dialogue (often elliptical and symbolic rather than realistic) and in the use of camera and editing. One might say that it is sometimes the equivalent of a free verse poem rather than the visual equivalent of a novel or a true crime story.

Snowtown in the 1990s is brought vividly to life, often by suggestions and allusions as well as the previously mentioned 'poetic glimpses' of places, people, poses, minute detail – even when the surroundings are rough, poor and squalid. Many of the characters in Snowtown would be referred to in some quarters with derogatory superiority as 'trailer trash'.

We are introduced to the family of Elizabeth who has three sons, Jamie Vlassakis, and two younger boys. A neighbour has become friendly with the family, minding them at times while their mother works. It soon emerges that he is a sexual predator. It is this that seems to bring John Bunting to the house – the film is not strong on giving clear information or helping the audience to work out who the characters are who come in and out of the house and does not supply much by way of background story. We just have to take what is offered us by the film-makers, limited as it often is, and work on it ourselves.

John Bunting is genial and is welcomed into the family. He becomes a father-figure to the boys and takes over the household. At various times, a strange collection of friends turns up, at times people in the town gather to talk about the crimes they have experienced and their hardships. John's leadership is accepted by all. The boys are devoted to him and Jamie comes under his sway.

One of John's oddest friends is Barry, clearly gay and camp but who is also homophobic and has tracked down names and addresses of paedophiles in the area. John is clearly anti-gay – with a vengeance that becomes literal.

People begin to disappear. Jamie's step-brother who has raped him is tortured and killed. Various people are recorded as leaving town saying they don't want to be contacted. John has a system, which Jamie participates in, of benefits' fraud by assuming the names of victims and cashing in.

Watching Daniel Henshall as John is both mesmerising and horrific. He is an evil man with a smile, a lingo in command, especially towards Jamie who is in thrall to him, unable to make his own decisions, taking refuge in his dependence which is an excuse for his own violence, especially in the killing which ends the film. Lucas Pittaway's passivity is the perfect dramatic complement to Daniel Henshall's control. Snowtown takes us into a world of underprivilege where financial and emotional poverty can be exploited by a cruel but persuasive bully. It takes us into the world of sexual depravity. It takes us into a world of self-appointed vigilanteism where the perpetrators live with double standards about their own behaviour. And, dismayingly, it happened here.

THOR

(US, 2011, d. Kenneth Branagh)

Thor? Marvel Comics? Kenneth Branagh? Shakespeare it ain't. But, it's a reasonably enjoyable, quite expensive, matinee show in 3D.

A bit puzzling at the beginning if we are not familiar with the comic. We find ourselves both in the Viking times and in the modern era – we are told later, and shown, that there is a rainbow bridge between the two worlds (and many references to Einstein).

In the present world, we meet Jane (Natalie Portman), her co-scientist, Erik (Stellan Skarsgaard who, fortunately, comes from Scandinavia and is able to quickly fill in some Norse mythology background) and assistant, (Kat Dennings). They are investigating strange phenomena in the heavens in New Mexico (and speaking of alien visits, where else!).

Back in the mythological days, we see a huge battle and lots of close-up hand-to-hand combat as King Odin (Anthony Hopkins in full rhetorical style) is battling the evil frost-giants. He has two sons, Thor and Loki. They grow up as peace is restored and Thor (Melbourne's Chris Hemsworth) is to become king. Loki (Tom Hiddleston) assures all that he is loyal (of course not). When Thor presumptuously leads an expedition against the frost-giants against his father's wishes, he is banished – and, like Crocodile Dundee in New York – he turns up, puzzled by modern life, in New Mexico in the middle of a huge storm.

So, we have two plots for the price of one.

In the present, Thor, with some Viking gravitas and a fine, articulate baritone voice, is a mixture of courtesy, puzzlement, and enterprise, who can adapt to 21st century American idiom pretty quickly but who wants his emblem of strength, his hammer, back. A bit difficult because, the men in black (not so agreeable as Smith and Jones in this version) have confiscated all Jane's equipment and papers and have sealed off Thor's landing site. And Loki turns up in suit and tie to mock Thor and lie about their father's illness.

Then we are informed, which is quite an interesting explanation, that Odin, Thor and Loki were real characters (from distant and cultivated planets) whom the Vikings took to be gods.

In the galaxies, Loki is up to mischief with the frost-giants. Odin is in coma. Thor's warrior friends are finding loyalty to Loki impossible as he is now a despotic king, offending his mother (Rene Russo). So, the warriors cross the bridge and take on the Men in Black.

Don't forget the romance as Jane falls for Thor.

The film may not have the oomph of some of the other Marvel Comics films, but it is exotic enough to be rather fascinating in a mythical kind of way, and amusing to watch as Thor becomes an earthling. There is a lot of action as Thor defies the American authorities.

It looks as though Kenneth Branagh was taking a sabbatical from Shakespeare and more serious ventures and enjoying the opportunity to direct a mega-budget American enterprise. He has a very accomplished cast. And Chris Hemsworth (take a bit of Brad Pitt, a little Heath Ledger and some Russell Crowe and stir) is a strong screen presence with a bigger career ahead of him. In fact, if you wait after the end credits there is a minute or so more with Samuel L. Jackson and Stellan Skarsgaard indicating that there is more Thor and more Marvel Comics in The Avengers, already filming.

YOUR HIGHNESS

(US, 2011, d. David Gordon Green)

You have to be in the right frame of mind to enjoy Your Highness. If it is pointed out that the screenplay is about half Princess Bride and half Pineapple Express, sprinkled with some Monty Python Jabberwocky medievalry, the mood thing becomes a bit clearer. Those who would like the Princess Bride spoofery may balk at the stoner Pineapple Express language, bodily function humour and sexual innuendo and a lot that is not so innuendo. That is probably a useful bit of consumer advice.

David Gordon Green used to make rather serious minded films like George Washington and Undertow. Then he surprised his serious fan base by the mad hijinks of Pineapple Express. Now he joins with comedian Danny McBride, who is credited with co-writing the script, though the director says a lot of the dialogue was improvised (and it shows both for better and for worse). McBride sees himself and his character, Prince Theodorous, as a Middle Ages slacker who has ambitions but no drive, overshadowed by his text-book knight brother, Prince Fabious (James Franco enjoying himself), wanting to be kind without any effort. He is accompanied by a squire who is a mixture of misery and devotion.

The story is one of those courtly love epics. A demonic magician (Justin Theroux) has imprisoned a princess (Zoey Deschanel) and kept her under a spell. Rescued by Fabious, and acclaimed by the king (Charles Dance), she is about to become queen when she is re-captured. Fabious goes off to rescue her again and Theodorous is forced to go as well.

Because McBride is the writer and the star, he gets to show cowardice and then to be transformed into a chivalrous hero (but setting the bar rather low).

Into the quest comes a warrior vowing vengeance on the wizard who has killed her parents. While Franco plays the prince as all earnestness and smiling goodness, the warrior is played by Natalie Portman as a well-educated and spoken amazon. Which means that the performances are a conglomeration which work on the whole but there is a lot of unpredictability. Toby Jones and Damian Lewis are also in the mix for unworthy motives.

Which means then that the humour moves from daffy to raucous, to entertaining parody to a great deal of ambiguous (and unambiguous) and ambivalent sexual jokes. Old style fairy tale it isn't.

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ANGELE ET TONY

(France, 2010, d. Alix Delaporte)

What's in a name? Immediately, as the film opens, we see in a casual sex encounter that Angele is no angel. Within minutes we see her as bluntly aggressive and botching chances for some kind of self-betterment.

Of course, that is not the sum total of Angele's character. There is a lot more as we get to know her, not necessarily like her, as the film creates a portrait of this 27 year old mother of a nine year old boy, out of prison and reporting to her parole officer, making some attempts at settling, but wary of people.

The characters in the film are ordinary people, people like those we might know or have met. And that is a great strength of the film. We are dealing with real people, real situations, messy and confusing as they can be. The way that the film has been written and filmed – and the director, Alix Delaporte had a previous career as a journalist, so she brings an eye for character and situations to her screenplay – is in a very naturalistic style. As we are shown a village street corner, as we travel on a Normandy fishing boat, as we notice the buildings where the characters interact, the film has a 'documentary' realism and an eye for detail. This is very impressive.

And Tony? He is a fisherman (where threats to the industry mean protests, strikes and arrests instead of the traditional fishing festivals, decorating of the boats and putting on of plays) who works with his brother, whose father has drowned but his body has not been found and recovered, who in middle age is living with his mother to support her. His mother works in the fish market.

Will Angele click with Tony? Is she the kind of woman he could love and marry? Will his mother accept her after learning about Angele's past? Will her little boy accept her? Will he choose to live with his grandparents? Plenty of dramatic questions for the film's brief running time. And all made interesting.

Clotilde Hesme has to carry most of the film. She is a tall and striking-looking woman and is able to communicate both aggression and vulnerability. When she is finally able to smile, her face (and our response to her) is transformed. Gregory Gadebois is a theatre actor but makes Tony a very ordinary, unremarkable when seen in the street, middle-aged fisherman. Evelyne Didi seems every bit the old-style fishwife but also mellows and shows her vulnerability. Antoine Couteau is effective as the young son and Patick Descamps a sympathetic grandfather.

By the end of the film, which has a nice surrealistic touch, as Angele, Tony and the boy clamber over the rocks and pools on the shore, we feel we have been there and got to know these people.

BABIES

(France, 2010, d. Thomas Balmes)

What the title says is what we get. And, even the most curmudgeonly codger who finds children, let alone, babies, one of the banes of life, would probably be charmed.

This is a brief documentary, strong on images, with no voiceover commentary and, indeed, very few words heard except bits in passing from some of the parents. We are invited to look, to respond emotionally, to think, and to appreciate the

wonder of life that is conception, pregnancy, giving birth and loving and rearing children.

There are four families we are invited to join: in Namibia, a tribal way of life in a desert village; in Tokyo, a quite affluent, technological way of life; in Mongolia, a family community out in the countryside (with large home tents like those movie buffs will remember from *The Story of the Weeping Camel* and *The Cave of the Yellow Dog*); in San Francisco, a home with the comforts that the average middle class can take for granted.

After we are introduced, especially to the four mothers and their giving birth, sequences are intercut throughout the film, following the timeline from the birth of the children to the period after their first birthday – and a nice postscript during the final credits of how they look after the film has been edited and ready for release.

Of course, it is fascinating to watch the newly born children immediately after their birth and how they gradually come to life in the succeeding weeks; then the beginnings of movement from crawl to standing to walking; then the gurgles and sounds and words. Children are basically the same in their development the world over.

However, we are shown more than sufficient footage to appreciate the mothers and their care, again according to local customs and ways and in the context of other children. Interestingly, we see no father in Namibia but rather the mother and her bonds with the other mothers, sitting in the dust, talking and sharing, and the children playing and learning to relate. We don't see a father to all intents and purposes in Mongolia. It is the mother and the other children who are the key personal presence for the baby. After a while, the father is seen in San Francisco, especially his playing with his daughter and the outings, but the key presence is the mother and, again, with other mothers. From the outset in Tokyo, we see both mother and father, very young, with their daughter (whom we notice at ease on chairs near computers and other machines).

Everybody will bring their own agenda to *Babies* and that will determine the kind of response we make, how much interest, how much empathy, how much curiosity – and how much satisfaction that this is how the human race propagates itself and continues.

BLAME

(Australia, 2010, d. Michael Henry)

The action of this film takes place over a couple of hours. A music teacher finishes a class and drives home to his country house. He is attacked in his home by a masked group who attempt to kill him. As they speak and act, we hear some indications of who they are and why they are trying to kill the teacher. When one of them leaves his mobile phone behind, they decide to return to retrieve it, only to find that their victim is not dead. The process of killing him starts again but this time there is a lot more explanation, changes of attitudes in some of the characters, some revelations of secrets and lies, some truth and some final deceptions.

Audiences have a sympathy for the teacher who seems a decent type. We soon learn that his attackers are blaming him for the suicide of a student and of a sexual liaison with her. Our sympathies are challenged as we hear another side of the story. But, with a group of five in on the plan, it is much more complicated than that. In fact, our point of view is challenged several times as we learn more about all the characters.

The leader of the group is the sister of the dead girl who, deep down, is feeling guilty for not doing more to listen to her sister and her problems. She then feels guilty about not knowing the truth when she realises what has happened. The other girl in the attack is the dead girl's best friend. We learn more about their relationship, though many in the audience might be suspicious about her involvement without quite knowing why. There are three young men involved. One is the dead girl's boyfriend, a loud-mouth, a prone to violence type, who presumes guilt more on impulse than thought. Another is the dead girl's brother who at first waits outside but then becomes more edgy and involved. The third man seems more secure but we find that he is rather easily led and manipulated and becomes more responsible for the complications which develop.

And, so the title? Who is to blame? And for what? The dead girl's killing herself? Or for manipulations and deceptions?

The film was shot outside Perth and takes advantage of the bush settings and the isolated house, except for some tension as a postal delivery man turns up unexpectedly and the group have to evade detection – he leaves a note that he will come back later, and he does, which leads to more evasion and suspense for the characters and the audience. This is not just a suspense device because the contents of the package will reveal the truth.

A small Australian production, a bit repetitious and frantic at times. But, it does achieve what it set out to do, raises issues of revenge and violence, not thinking things through – and the dire consequences.

BURKE AND HARE

(UK, 2010, d. John Landis)

For two such disreputable characters, grave robbers, Burke and Hare, they have appeared in quite a number of films. Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi were their equivalents in the 1945, *The Body Snatcher*, based on a Robert Louis Stevenson story. Donald Pleasence and George Rose were in the *Flesh and the Fiends* (1960). Their real names were used in 1972, *Burke and Hare* with Derren Nesbitt and Glynn Edwards. They were fictionalised again in 1985 in *The Doctor and the Devils* (with Jonathan Pryce and Stephen Rea). Back they are to their real names in 2010. And they have popped up in supporting roles in other films.

The 1972 version created the background of Edinburgh society in 1827 when Burke and Hare sold cadavers (some of whom they helped on their way) to Dr Knox for his anatomy lectures. This film does the same and is quite lavish in its recreation of the period and its look. We feel transported back into the times, the dinginess as well as the respectability. But the film and seriousness?

In the 1960s there were a number of period films set in England in the 18th and 19th centuries, following the success of *Tom Jones*. But, they took the humorous and satiric line in their storytelling, films like *Where's Jack* (a highwayman story) and *Lock Up Your Daughters* (memories of Hogarth). This *Burke and Hare* goes for the comedy and the satire.

In many ways it is often silly. However, the blend of the serious with the silly makes for a sense of realism as well as for some laughs and a lot of smiles – though its macabre sense of humour may not appeal to those who like their comedies to be straightforward.

Not only are the production values quite high, the director is John Landis, out of films for some years, but evoking memories of *An American Werewolf in London*, let alone *The Blues Brothers*. He has always enjoyed putting hijinks on screen.

And the cast. Gollum himself, Andy Serkis is Hare, while Simon Pegg plays more of the ingenuous straight man as Burke. The two rival Edinburgh doctors are played by Tom Wilkinson (Dr Knox who took delivery of the corpses) and Tim Curry. And who should be the captain of the militia but Ronny Corbett (who turned 80 just after the film's UK release)? All kinds of British character actors turn up to make a kind of medley of British comedy, including Christopher Lee, Bill Bailey, Hugh Bonneville and Jenny Agutter.

There is a feminist addition to the plot. Burke becomes infatuated with a lady of the night with theatrical ambitions (Isla Fisher) whose aim is to put on an all women's version of *Macbeth*. She is looking for a sponsor with money.

In doing a quick Wikipedia check after getting home from the screening, I see that the film gives a fairly true picture of the episode in Scottish criminal history after all – but, as the film notes at the beginning, 'This is based on a true story – except the parts that are not'. If you are in the mood for a touch of 21st century carry on, *Burke and Hare* should keep you smiling.

CARLOS

(France, 2011, d. Olivier Assayas)

Some older audiences will remember forty years ago Frederick Forsyth's novel, *The Day of the Jackal*, and Fred Zinneman's exciting film of a fictitious attempt on the life of General de Gaulle. The Jackal became a nickname for mysterious assassins.

Illich Ramirez Sanchez, a Venezuelan revolutionary cum hitman, who linked with Palestinian rebel groups in the 1970s was referred to as the Jackal, but gave himself the public name of Carlos.

This film is an abbreviated version, half the length of the original mini-series for television. It runs for two and three quarter hours. It plays quite well in terms of photography and style on the big screen.

Director Olivier Assayas, who has directed all kinds of French films from personal dramas to period pieces, from thrillers to science fiction, employs a much more realistic approach to his subject. It is not a documentary, but it resembles some documentary styles at times, especially with names and dates, as it covers the period from the mid-1970s to the mid 1990s, when Carlos was taken by French authorities from the Sudan and imprisoned, where he still remains.

The film has the advantage of having Edgar Ramirez, himself from Venezuela, play Carlos.

At first, he is eager to be employed by the Palestinians, travels between Lebanon and France, as well as a job in London, aiming to become an important person in the network. He does, though the Palestinians are wary of his ambitions and his propensity for self-promotion and not taking orders well. He himself mouthes revolutionary language but, as time goes on, his associates and the audience realise that he is more pragmatic than idealistic, likes the good life and ease rather than self-sacrifice. The film also emphasises his narcissistic linking of his sexuality with his love of weapons. At times he indulges himself and puts on weight only to lose it in terrorist training camps and regimes. Later his vanity will lead him to liposuction. He is fickle in relationships, his wife eventually leaving him and his having little trouble in acquiring another.

The key section of the film and the most interesting is the attack on the OPEC meeting in Vienna in 1975 where he leads a group into the building, holds the delegates to ransom and divides them into friends, neutral or enemies (with the backing of Saddam Hussein's Iraq against Iran still under the Shah). Some of his associates are eagerly trigger-happy. With the granting of a plane by the Austrian government and a flight to Algeria, the plan goes askew, with Tunisia and Libya refusing to let the plane refuel and a compromise found with Saudi money. (To this extent, the film is interesting in 2011 with the uprisings in north Africa and Colonel Gaddafi playing a role in this drama in the 70s.)

Carlos was responsible for the deaths of police in an attempt to arrest him in Paris (which was the ground for his ultimate trial and sentence). Let go by the Palestinians, he is taken up by Syria, with its links to Russia, the KGB, East Germany and the Stasi, and involved in arms smuggling during the 1980s.

The last part of the film shows Carlos abandoned by Syria after the collapse of the Soviet Union and his finding refuge in Sudan.

Rather than presenting Carlos as a lone Jackall, mysterious assassin of popular imagination, the film shows him and his friends as another equivalent of the protest movements of the 1970s and the armed terrorist activities of organisations like the Red Brigade and the Baader-Meinhof group.

How much more the full mini-series would show of Carlos' activities and motivations, we don't know. But, this is a portrait rather than a biography. There is a caution at the opening of the film that, while it is based on a true story, much of it (especially the writing of dialogue between official characters that was not the subject of record) is also a fiction.

Originally filmed as a television mini-series, the film version runs for half that length at 165 minutes.

DIARY OF A WIMPY KID: RODRICK RULES
(US, 2011, d. David Bowers)

For a favourable review of the two Wimpy Kid movies, you would need something written by a very tolerant and understanding parent or else a definitely-not-wimpy kid who identifies with the two brothers, especially older brother, Rodrick.

There is a tradition in American movies and television series that kids have to be outspoken (outspeaking their parents often enough), argumentative even bickering, and not afraid to tell their parents off (or else hide the truth from them or just plain lie). These films are strongly in that tradition.

Maybe Greg, the title's wimpy kid, is a bit wimpish but, if he has anything to do with it, that won't last long. His brother, Rodrick, must never have been wimpy. He dominates, does what he likes, manipulates his parents, picks on Greg and ridicules him. He is obnoxious personified. Greg often seems to be on the way to this life path and pattern. It is hard to find any redeeming features in them, even though Greg, rather begrudgingly does a good turn at the end but is really happy only when people respond favourably to him and his friend, Rowley, and their magic performance.

Actually, Rowley is much more of a wimpy kid, pudgy but friendly, earnest and extremely tolerant of how Greg treats him. We could have done with more of Rowley in each of the films.

Perhaps, you are drawing a conclusion that I am not fond of these films. You're right.

FAST FIVE/ THE FAST AND THE FURIOUS FIVE
(US, 2011, d. Justin Lin)

Another sequel and the series is certainly vrooming. (And, if you wait during the final credits you will find a short trailer/teaser for Fast Six.)

There are speeding cars doing manoeuvres round a bus on a desert highway with the bus overturning and rolling and rolling. There is a robbery of flash cars from a moving train, a carrier vehicle crashing into the train, Paul Walker hanging on to the edge of the carrier as a narrow bridge is approaching, then he and Vin Diesel and a car do a Butch and Sundance very long leap into a river only to be surrounded by thugs. And that's only the first twenty minutes!

Fans of the series will know the characters, Vin Diesel's occasionally smiling taciturn Dom, Paul Walker's smiling Brian O'Connor, Jordana Brewster's romantic side as Dom's sister and Brian's wife. In the past, they were in Tokyo and this time they are in Rio. Plenty (plenty) of moving postcards shots of the city and its beauty – and plenty of warning not to go into the barrios unless you are Vin and Paul. Even the crack US agent, Dwayne Johnson doing a

tough impersonation of his professional wrestling name, The Rock, and his team find that they have to backtrack in the face of the gangs and their guns.

Joaquin de Almeida is Reyes, the Rio kingpin of drugs and deals who has, it seems, most of the police in his pocket. (I wonder what Brazilian director, Jose Padilo, maker of the two Elite Squad films thinks, about it with his very dim view of the Brazilian law enforcement agents.) Dwayne is after Vin and Paul. Vin and Paul are out to get Reyes. We don't waste much time in watching the planning. We generally go straight into action. And, there are some twists – nice one at the end.

If Al Jolson had been writing this review, he would at this stage say, 'You ain't seen nuthin' yet'. The last twenty minutes are much more oomphy than the first twenty. How they filmed it, I don't know, but it looks like a real chase with umpteen cars or more smashing their way through the streets of Rio.

The fans, despite the fact that there have been four fast and furious films already, will certainly not be disappointed. Nor will the producers because it seems there are more than enough fans out there to pay up – and ensure Fast Six.

FROM TIME TO TIME

(UK, 2009, d. Julian Fellowes)

1944 seems to have been an unusual year for some British children if films are to be believed. Some of them went into cupboards and entered Narnia. At the pictures, they might have gone to see Margaret O'Brien and Charles Laughton in *The Canterville Ghost*, where a little girl meets a ghost in a stately English home. In *From Time to Time*, we are back in a stately home, back in 1944, and a young boy finds that he can move from 1944 back to 1809, see what was happening in the house back then – and he could be seen by some of the characters (good) but not by others (several of them bad).

Filmgoers may associate writer Julian Fellowes with his Oscar-winning script for *Gosford Park* (another stately home) and know that he has written *Young Victoria* and the stage version for *Mary Poppins*. With Maggie Smith as the star of the film, this one might be thought of as a film for adults. But, it is much more a film for younger audiences which their parents might enjoy.

Though, having said that, it might be noted that the film is very British, particularly British in look and sound, and may seem quite remote to younger audiences from other countries. (But, if they think Narnia, they may readily accept it.)

Just before Christmas 1944, 14 year old Tolly goes to stay with his grandmother. Tolly is played by Alex Etal (who was the little boy who saw the saints in Danny Boyle's *Millions*.) While there are rations and coupons, life is not altogether unpleasant, though Tolly is resisting the idea that his soldier father might have been killed in action. Gran can be rather starchy, even condescending (in the Maggie Smith vein). Tolly listens to stories about the history of the house from the very genial groundskeeper (Timothy Spall) and the kindly housekeeper (Pauline Collins). Then, suddenly, he is in the stories of the past, opening a door from the muted drab colour of the war period into the bright colour and vitality of the Regency era. He can move instantly from one period to the other – with a little time travel mystery involving a torch that Tolly leaves in the past to help an ancestor of the groundskeeper – and then finds it in a cupboard of old relics.

So, *From Time to Time* is to be understood literally. Tolly befriends a blind girl and her African former slave boy, Jacob, and learns of his arrogant ancestor, Sefton, and his extravagant Dutch mother and the stern majordomo. There is a crisis when the mother's jewels are stolen and then the house is engulfed in fire.

Without wanting to spoil the ending, it is probably best to say that it is sad but upbeat – an affirmation of stiff upper lip Britishness.

The film is based on the second of a series of novels from the 1950s, *The Green Knowe* novels by Lucy M. Boston which Fellowes loved when he was young. He has created the stern atmosphere of the war and obviously relished the colour, decor and costumes of the 19th century.

The film entertains but it may be too reserved in its style for many of today's audiences.

THE HANGOVER PART 2

(US, 2011, d. Todd Phillips)

Not a sequel, the title declares, it is just part 2 where, as the characters keep reminding us, it is happening all over again. But, this time in Bangkok.

We know what to expect and, according to the huge box office returns during the first week of release, millions were keyed up expecting it.

One of the main features of the original Hangover was that, despite its raucous humour, language and episodes, it was able to be funny about it all and draw in its viewers, maybe despite themselves (which was certainly the case with this reviewer). So, that something to draw us in and share the humour was what I was expecting. But, I didn't find it. Yes, a couple of laughs, but this time the central characters seemed more crass than before. Admittedly, they were given some lines to make them sound a bit better at the end, but not enough, and they didn't really ring true. The trouble with the missing humour and human touch is that the characters and situations seem more tiresome and, often, irritating.

Bradley Cooper can do charm in other films but here he is basically a self-centred lout at heart who is responsible for starting the mayhem – and when he gets shot in the arm, I was all for the gangsters who were firing and, when he was being beaten by the Buddhist monk with a large bamboo rod for breaking the silence in the monastery, there was a temptation to draw on the immortal words of the Bloke in C.J.Dennis' classic poem-yarn, *The Sentimental Bloke*, 'Put in the boot...!'.

Zach Galifianakis can do dim-witted funny, which is what he is required to do here. There is some suspense and humour in wondering what terrible gaffe he is going to do next. But, without the more subtle underlying humour, he comes off as an annoying dolt (which he is to the characters in the film most of the time).

I had a few hopes for dentist Stu (Ed Helms) the bridegroom last time. It seems that a quickie marriage in Las Vegas was a big mistake (and it was) so now, for travelogue and location purposes (and Thailand does come off touristically well during most of the film – forget the dingy clubs), he is engaged to a Thai girl. Hence the trip. Hence the night out. Hence the hangover – and re-meeting Ken Jeong's Mr Chow who for some of the film was, relievedly, dead. But, no such luck... There is also the brother of the bride, Teddy (Mason Lee, the son of Ang Lee for the record) a sixteen year old medical and musical genius studying at Stanford who, for no apparent reason except for a plot device to find him, loses a finger. Which seemed more than unnecessary and drastic. He is also hung over. He seems a nice chap and deserves a better fate.

The Paul Giamatti turns up as an international gangster – and most will enjoy the plot twist that he unexpectedly provides.

The scenery is wonderful but, as mentioned, there is a lot of time in some of the less salubrious parts of Bangkok. Speaking of salubrious, who should turn up to sing the final song! Mike Tyson.

Obviously, a lot of people will enjoy this hangover episode, but it relies too much on its original appeal and not enough on doing something better with it. Perhaps one reviewer was right: if you would like a laugh like this, watch the original again.

HERE I AM

(Australia, 2011, d. Beck Cole)

The I of the title is Karen Burden. She is a young aboriginal woman from Adelaide, has a history of drug dependence, has been in prison and has a daughter that she has not seen for three years. The film opens with her leaving prison and traces what she does and what happens to her in the month of her parole supervision.

With the release of *Mad Bastards*, Australian audiences have had the opportunity to respond to a story about an aboriginal man who has deserted his wife and son, spent time in prison, who decides to travel north from Perth and find his son. The boy is being cared for by his wife's father, the local policeman. We are invited to share the life of a man who has experienced hard times, much of it his own fault. We are asked to share his re-awakening concern for his son and his being a father.

Here I Am has many parallels with *Mad Bastards*: parent, separation, fault and responsibility, the grandparent brining up the child, the desire for a new start and to see the child again. But, this film offers a woman's point of view.

In fact, most of the principal film-makers are woman. The writer-director, making her first feature, is Beck Cole. Karen is played by Shai Pittman. Much of the success of the film is due to Pittman's strong screen presence, a woman who has the potential to be liked despite her flaws. She is in every scene. We are apprehensive that she is going to fail again. We watch her make more mistakes. But we cannot doubt her great desire to see her little daughter. The scene where they do meet under kind supervision but with the hostility of the grandmother and an accident requiring time in hospital has its moving moments.

Another strength of the film is the presence of well-known and admired activist Marcia Langton as Karen's mother. She is a reformed alcoholic who has become the sternest of women, seemingly unforgiving and rearing the little girl.

Karen has a room in a women's shelter in Port Adelaide. The characters who live there are well drawn, move beyond the stereotypes of women in trouble, even though they share many characteristics of the stereotype. We come to know their stories better.

Men seem to be mostly absent from the film. There is a white man who picks up Karen at a pub. There are two sympathetic aboriginal men, one of whom befriends Karen, speaks honestly to her and could be around when she finds her feet.

There is depth of feeling underlying this film. The naturalistic photography becomes poetic at times with the Port Adelaide skylines, with Warwick Thornton (Beck Cole's husband and director of *Samson and Delilah*) as director of photography. We feel we have walked the streets with Karen at the opening of the film. We have lived at the shelter. We get to know the neighbourhood, the cemetery, and feel that we begin to understand these characters well – although some of the performances are awkward and some delivery sounds amateurish but most of us would be prepared to make allowances and respond to the meaning and challenges of the film.

HOODWINKED TOO! THE BATTLE BETWEEN HOOD AND EVIL (US, 2011, d. Mike Disa)

Like the original, this is a hit and miss affair – and many will not be sorry if they miss it.

The idea in the original was to update some fairy tale characters and involve them in a puzzle which they had to solve by brains (well, not all of the characters are blessed in this particular area) or by brawn, with some magic thrown in.

Working on the Red Riding Hood Story in *Hoodwinked*, Red became a heroine with some mean martial arts moves.

Granny was a wise old woman who, in the parlance, was not averse to kicking ass.

The setting is a strange mixture of the past and the present, much of the latter part of this sequel taking place downtown in a modern city, streets and skyscrapers.

The screenplay is not particularly witty. The play on words in the sub-title is probably the best joke. The plot is basic, though there is a twist when (spoiler!), the twee little Hansel and Gretel, imprisoned in the gingerbread house by the wicked witch, Verushka, are the target for rescue by Red, Granny and the dumb Big Bad Wolf, under the guidance of Nicky Flippers, a frog in command of a special fairyland rescue squad. Then Hansel and Gretel turn into a neo-Nazi twosome bent on fascist rule and demolition with heavy Cherman accents and all.

The voice cast has many stars who give it their best, especially Glenn Close (as before) as the feisty Granny. Joan Cusack is effective as Verushka. Patrick Warburton is again the Wolf and David Ogden Stiers is Nicky Flippers. There is some amusement from Martin Short's flamboyant, yodelling Kirk. Hayden Panettiere is functional as Red. Maybe the kids will respond to some of the action, parents probably not.

JULIA'S EYES

(Spain, 2010, d. Guillem Morales)

For those who enjoy atmospheric thrillers, suspense, plot twists and some shocks (and are not necessarily too worried about characters' behaviour that puts them in peril when they should have used more common sense), then this should be quite a satisfying entertainment.

With the title focusing on Julia's eyes, audiences can expect a film about blindness and terror. And this is precisely what we get. We go right into it with Julia's twin sister, Sara, blind from an eye degenerative disease, being terrorised and killing herself. Julia's eyes are also deteriorating and she collapses at the very time of her sister's death. She hurries to help but finds Sara dead – and becomes determined, no, obsessed, in trying to find out what happened to her sister. And this, despite the hesitations of her loving husband who is particularly concerned that stress could bring about a hastening of her sight loss.

The audience knows that there was someone present when Sara killed herself but we have no idea who. Julia's search leads her only part of the way. She is helped by some of Sara's friendly, but mysterious neighbours (an elderly man and his reclusive daughter and an elderly blind woman) add to her suspicions.

The suspense in the first part of the film is not knowing who the unknown stalker is and if and/or when he will strike at Julia.

Julia undergoes an operation which seems to be successful, a transplant (which also offers a twist on who is the donor and how), but has to keep her bandage on for two weeks to avoid any further damage to her eyes. She opts (bad move) to go to her sister's house, saying that she knows it well and can feel her way around instead of staying in the safety of the hospital. She is assigned a carer, Ivan, who is at her beck and call, considerate and kind and on whom she comes to depend.

The suspense in the latter part of the film is that Julia knows and now we know who the attacker is and whether she can cope or not. Resisting the temptation to mention some of the effectively surprising plot twists, suffice it to say that there are chases, menaces and knives – and in the dark.

One advertising blurb praises the film's originality. That is not quite right – and it would seem that the film is not claiming much originality. Rather, it draws on several well-known thrillers with blind characters like Mia Farrow in *Blind Terror* and, especially, Audrey Hepburn in *Wait Until Dark*. There are also some nods to *Rear Window*. Which means that the film places itself in a respectable (Hitchcockian some have said) tradition of intriguing audiences with familiar thriller conventions. It does its job well.

LITTLE WHITE LIES

(France, 2010, d. Guillaume Canet)

Very French.

French writers and directors seem to have an inbuilt talent for writing and directing films about families and tensions in relationships. They dramatise these not so much in melodramatic encounters and crises (though they can do that too) but in the ordinary things of life. The premiss of this quite long drama (almost two and a half hours) about families and friends is that in the ordinariness of life, we are not always truthful to ourselves or to others. We avoid responsibilities or hurt others with little white lies. We also tell more than little white lies to ourselves which evolve into considerable self-deception, sometimes with dire consequences. Hence the title of the film.

During the opening credits we see a young man on a motor bike riding through Paris streets and suddenly hit by a lorry. He is hospitalised with severe injuries. A group of close friends come to visit him. But, it is summer and northern hemisphere vacation time. Should they go on their planned holiday or stay in Paris to be with their friend?

We know that they will go on holidays but the scene in which they debate whether they should go or not, that their friend will be unconscious because of surgery and recuperation, and rationalising their going means the beginning of a new round of little white lies.

Much of the film shows the group on holidays by the sea out from Bordeaux. They know each other well and have been there before. For a while, we and they are happy in the sun and in the water.

But, we know it can't last. We begin to be very aware of the potential for clash. In fact, in one sequence before they go, we see the senior friend, Max, a restaurateur and owner of the holiday house (Francois Cluzet) being massaged by his physiotherapist, Vincent, and then dining with him while Vincent talks about his affection for Max, declaring he is not gay, is married and Max is his son's godfather. But, this encounter rankles with Max and the close proximity of Max and his wife with Vincent and his wife and son on the holiday leads to quite some outbursts, especially from a prickly Max prone to blurt out hurtful remarks who, whether he realises it or not, is an ambitious and controlling man. He has a very patient wife who is at pains to help him see what is happening despite her annoyance with him.

Others in the group have relationship problems which also come to the fore. Eric (Gilles Lellouche) is an actor who more than fancies himself as a ladies' man and is being ditched by his latest, an opera singer. Marie (Marion Cotillard) loves the injured man but has a dread of commitment and finds herself, most unwillingly, having to make a commitment choice to her latest boyfriend, a very sympathetic singer. Antoine (Laurent Lafitte) has the blues because his long-standing girlfriend has broken contact and is planning to get married, but not to Antoine.

Plenty of problems which audiences may or may not be able to identify with but will surely recognise. It is a pity but necessary, of course, for the drama, that so many of these characters are not particularly pleasant people in their own unpleasant ways.

Some locals become part of the group, especially the old oyster fisherman who has known Max since he was a boy and knows the group well – and is in a position at the end of the film to challenge them all, which he does.

The film was written and directed by actor Guillaume Canet who directed the French adaptation of Harlan Coben's *Tell No One*. He has taken on quite a large though intimate canvas here. He does it well but there is always that problem of how interested we really are in some, or all, of the characters and their sorting out their problems.

MRS CAREY'S CONCERT

(Australia, 2010, d. Bob Connolly and Sophie Raymond)

A film about music. But, importantly, a film about education.

Bob Connolly has directed only six documentaries over a period of almost thirty years. The two from the 1980s were filmed in Papua New Guinea. His last film, 2001, was also a music film, *Facing the Music* (Austalian Catholic Film Office winner for 2001). Connolly has photographed Mrs Carey's Concert and co-director, Sophie Raymond, was responsible for the sound.

The school at the centre of the film is now called MLC College. Formerly it was Methodist Ladies College, in the Sydney suburb of Burwood, but when the Methodist Church became part of the Uniting Church of Australia in 1977, the school's name retained the initials for its title. It is a Uniting Church school. There are 1200 students and the film takes us into the well-staffed Music School of the college.

Mrs Carey grew up in country New South Wales without any benefit of music education at school. It was at the Conservatorium that she heard Bach's St Matthew's Passion, a life-transforming experience leading to a realisation of what could be accomplished and communicated by team collaboration. In her work at MLC, she produces an annual concert at the Sydney Opera House that involves the whole school in one way or another (in this film everybody participating in playing and singing the march from *Aida*).

This means that there is plenty of music to delight music lovers, from Bach to Brahms to Ravel, with some music composed by the staff as well. The music is orchestral but with some soloists, especially violinists. One girl, Emily Sun, is chosen to perform a featured solo. We are taken into classes, rehearsals, the climax with the concert itself and Emily's star turn as well as the special pieces conducted by different members of the staff.

But, the film is more about Mrs Carey's education styles than her concert.

Mrs Carey is a strong woman who does not always suffer fools gladly. But, she is also sensitive and exercises tough love. We see it throughout the film in her insights into Emily, her coaxing some leadership qualities from her, her encouraging her to express her feelings, something difficult with Emily's background of Chinese emotional reticence, her attempts to help her become more responsible, her offering her a challenge 12 weeks before the concert with a new piece to learn.

The directors were given considerable access to staff and students over a period of more than a year, editing the film into stages of two month intervals before the concert. We are privy to Mrs Carey's reflections, staff discussions, interviews with students. We are privy to Emily's acknowledging that she could run the risk of ruining everything by poor behaviour but we sense also her dedication to her music, her memory of her musician father, killed in an accident when she was young – and at the end we meet her mother. We also note how many students of Asian origin are students at the school.

While Emily's struggles with her challenges might have offered sufficient opportunity for some drama, we are also introduced to problem student, Iris, who is disruptive, sometimes outspoken, sometimes passive aggressive, who is intelligent, (rightly) finds much of the rehearsal tedious for those who are not fully involved. She offers an interesting case study of someone who is bright, obnoxious and seemingly her own person and not open to teacherly persuasion.

We also get glimpses of several other students and their personalities or problems as well as getting to know, briefly, the music school staff.

Mrs Carey can get flustered, sometimes hesitating or doubting but still a determined woman who sees the potential for talent, achievement and self-esteem in the students to whom she undoubtedly dedicated.

OCEANS

(France, 2009, d. Jacques Perrin, Jacques Cluzaud)

This is a documentary where the audience is invited to sit back, gaze and contemplate. The cinematography is beautiful, finely lit even in the depths of the sea. The directors made the parallel documentary on birds, *Winged Migration*, and Jacques Perrin produced the fascinating contemplation of our world, *Microcosmos*.

That said, *Oceans* is something of a strange film. There is no narrative thread. There is no particular logic as to why one scene follows another. It is more like a moving picture jigsaw showing the life that dwells (generally) under water. There is a commentary (which on the whole does not need to be listened to) which identifies some of the extraordinary creatures we are looking at in close-up or names some of the places where filming is being done. It is interesting to hear some of the names but most of us would not pass a test remembering them as we left the theatre. A personal preference would have been not to listen to the commentary, though it is quietly and smoothly spoken by Pierce

Brosnan for the English version, but just look and go with the flow of the musical score – which, with its lulls and its poundings, provides some kind of indications for our responses.

There are certainly some exquisite and exotic creatures whom we never see except in films like this. Some look prehistoric (the dugong and some fish whose shapes, colours, extensions look straight out of computer generated fantasies). One can see why the sea lions survive - they are so lazy, placid and restful that nothing much disturbs them. While nature on earth is red in tooth and claw, under the water and over the water there is no blood but plenty of fish eat fish and swooping birds beaking fish (and baby turtles), the eternal food chain.

One wonders during the film how the photographers managed to be close to whales as they surfaced and rose so high, follow schools of leaping dolphins, be among the ravenous birds swooping below the surface, and not disturb the wonderful shoals of fish or the platoons of military crabs. While most patrons anticipating the appearance of a word which means credits are beginning and they can't get away from what they have been contemplating fast enough, for those who stay, there are more amazing shots: of the photographers and their range of cameras as they film close to the fish. So, that is how it was done.

As for any explanations of what oceans are, despite Mr Brosnan's asking us, there are no real answers, very little science for us to chew over and, what seems rather fatuous after the mysteries that we have been made privy to, he suggests that the real question is really, 'who are we'. I don't think so.

Magnificence for the eyes – bypass the commentary.

PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN: ON STRANGER TIDES

(US, 2011, d. Rob Marshall)

Who would have thought eight years ago that we would still be seeing Johnny Depp as Captain Jack Sparrow, the most oddball pirate in screen history? But, he entered into the cinema audience consciousness and, judging by the final scenes of this episode and a tantalising 20 seconds with Penelope Cruz after the final credits, he looks ready to set sail for a fifth Pirates movie.

This one is more straightforwardly piratical than the previous outings – and, perhaps the better for it. No monsters and Davy Jones Locker or ghosts returning from the dead. This is more in the Treasure Island vein, journeys to find a particular treasure lost at the Fountain of Life. In fact, there are three ships in pursuit: the Spanish, an English expedition captained by Barbossa who shows no signs or indications of having been dead before, and an ambitious galleon with Blackbeard.

At the press preview, there was a power surge and we had to wait fifteen minutes for the lamp to cool before setting sail again. A resident wit who fancies his humorous comments on movies did a run through of the predictability of all the plot elements. Actually, he turned out to be quite wrong. You may think some events will happen, and some of them do, but not in the way we might have expected.

The opening sets a rollicking tone, set in London where Jack Sparrow impersonates a judge to orchestrate a plan to free fellow pirate, Gibbs, from the gallows. All goes well – for a time. Jack is hauled before the king (a fey parody by Richard Griffiths) who wants to get his hands on the Fountain of Life – and who has a captain and a ship commissioned: Captain Barbossa himself trying to become respectable. Audiences should be alert to Judi Dench's amusing thirty second appearance as a society lady in a carriage.

Jack encounters his past love Angelica (a fiery Penelope Cruz) but is shanghaied and finds himself on Blackbeard's ship, inciting a mutiny claiming that Blackbeard is not on board. Actually, Blackbeard was having some introverted time and, refreshed, appears again as a cruelly greedy pirate king (and Ian McShane obviously relishes playing the role).

They do get to the island of the Fountain of Youth (with Hawaiian locations). There are all kinds of adventures and mix-ups with Jack, Barbossa, Angelica, Blackbeard and the Spanish, as well as some long sequences with mermaids who are a mixture of sirens and vampires.

We can't say all's well that ends well, because there are too many advance notices that the ending is temporary and there will be more to come. With Johnny Depp afire as Jack, both with throwaway lines and cowardly courage, with Barbossa re-invigorated and Angelica given plenty of motivation to make a comeback, audience enjoyment continues...

SLEEPING BEAUTY

(Australia, 2011, d. Julia Leigh)

This version of a sleeping beauty is no fairytale. In fact, though Lucy, the central character, is reassured that while she is asleep, she will not dream, her waking hours become something of a nightmare. She might have even more frightening nightmares if she could see what we see happening to her while she sleeps.

Sleeping Beauty was screened in competition in Cannes in 2011. Because of the sexual elements, nudity and some gross behaviour by some ageing clients, controversy was assured. Many praised the film. Others found it either boring or offensive or both. It has been described as an erotic film. One reviewer, with some perception, thought it an anti-erotic film.

This is one of those films which are not done justice by simply asking what it is about. A lot of questions about 'how' it is presented is more to the point. It is in the vein, though stories and emphases on exploiting of men and women are quite different, of *Eyes Wide Shut*, *In the Cut*, *The Book of Revelation*. Audiences uncomfortable with more open, franker and sometimes explicit explorations of sensuality and sexuality will not like the film.

However, as with many psychological film case studies, we are taken into the psyches of characters, becoming more aware of their problems even if we do not quite understand or sympathise. (Reviewers not sympathetic have found the psychological dimension here lacking or found it 'twaddle'.)

In the middle of the film, it seemed not so much interesting as intriguing. Then one of the elderly clients (played by veteran Peter Carroll) offers a short story in close-up, pausing the action, asking the audience to think about life, turning thirty and the enthusiasm of then contrasting with the impotence of age. It would be a pity to consider this as a distraction or as dull – it offers a basis for the culmination of the film.

The central character, Lucy, is something of an enigma and remains so, even though we are offered all kinds of tantalising clues to her attitudes and behaviour. She is played by Emily Browning who does create this enigma quite effectively even though she is usually not particularly likeable. Lucy studies, takes part in laboratory tests (deep swallowing), works in a cafe as well as an office and boards with her sister whose partner dislikes her and wants her out. She takes a phone call from her mother describing her as alcoholic.

Lucy is quite promiscuous, picking up men and leading them on in bars, more caring of a drug-addict friend whom she visits regularly, but not really exhibiting any sign of a moral compass. She is both passive and sometimes proactive in her choices. When she takes some cocaine, her reply is simply. 'Why not?'. It is the same with some of her sexual behaviour. While she shrugs with a 'Why not?', it seems never to have occurred to ask why she says yes.

When she is employed as a freelance sex-object wine waiter in a mansion that caters for rich, elderly customers, meals served by scantily clad young women, she is being auditioned by the elegant madam, Clara (Rachael Blake, a wicked witch with her potions) for a specialty of the establishment: sleeping beauty, where she sleeps and has no knowledge of what these ageing men do to her. (Emily Browning is particularly convincing in persuading us that she is asleep in these scenes.) While Lucy, professionally called Sara, is beautiful and seems to sail through this kind of life, it is the scenes of the old men and their sexual predation that offers the ethical if not moral compass. A scene with veteran Chris Haywood offers an epitome of the attitudes of men who are self-absorbed, abusive of women in speech and action and express themselves with a violent ruthlessness.

Sara/Lucy does wake up at the end with an experience of shock and dismay. But the film has one more short scene which does not draw explicit conclusions and leaves the audience to ponder what they have felt and thought.

SOURCE CODE

(Canda, 2011, d. Duncan Jones)

Fans of intelligent thrillers will like this one.

When Captain Colter Stevens wakes on a train to Chicago and finds that his travelling companion calls him Sean and says he is a teacher, he is more than bewildered because he knows he has been serving as a helicopter pilot in Afghanistan. After some attempts at grappling with what is happening to him until there is a mighty explosion, he wakes again, this time in a special pod, discovering he is the subject of an experiment in brain control. He has been made to identify with a teacher on the train and go back into the train to discover what caused the explosion, where the bomb was situated and who triggered the device.

So, back he goes, again and again and again. Movie buffs know what the groundhog day repetition is like, everyone else the same on the same day while the protagonist retains what he has learnt from each preceding visit to the past.

While the framework of the plot is science-fiction, science-fantasy, the captain's many attempts to find out what has gone on are like a detective story. He shows great ingenuity after a number of re-visits, especially since he has a window of eight minutes only each time. This time is based on how much the memory of a dying man retains (like an afterglow when a light has been turned off, so the inventor of this process claims). The procedure is called Source Code.

Jake Gyllenhaal does a good job of creating a puzzled man who rises to the occasion of the challenge (and experiencing the explosion a number of times). Michelle Monaghan is Christina who warms more and more each time she encounters Captain Stevens – especially as he uses his previous knowledge each time. Stevens' contact on each return is Goodwin (Vera Farmiga), a by the book officer who is also a compassionate listener and concerned about Stevens' mental and emotional health. The scientist behind the development of Source Code is played by Steven Wright.

Needless to say, the film builds up a serious amount of suspense, the audience wondering whether Stevens will find the bomb, identify the bomber and save the day. This involves encounters with a great number of passengers, many of them ordinary, if sometimes irritable, commuters. The action is tempered with some comic moments as well as some romantic moments.

The challenge of time travel films is the physics – and also the logic. Whatever happens at the end, there is a slight let down when you are wondering what really happened, whether it could have happened and how it could have happened. But, that's the nature of the genre. So, it's probably best to put relativity theory, other dimensions, parallel worlds to one side, and just get involved in the action and the psychological demands made on Stevens, his service in Afghanistan, his memories of what he did there. He also has a longing to be reconciled with his father.

The screenplay by Ben Ripley is quite ingenious. The film was directed by Duncan Jones whose first film ventured into something of the same themes though this time in a space travel situation, *Moon*. They say it is risky to go back to the same material for a second film, but Jones has been very successful with *Source Code*. (It is completely irrelevant, but many are pleased to know that Duncan Jones is the son of David Bowie.)

SOUL SURFER

(US, 2011, d. Sean McNamara)

Both words in the title need to be kept in mind as we watch this rather noble-minded film.

The surfing is obvious. Bethany Hamilton and her whole family live in Hawaii and surfing is second nature to them all. From a little girl (and there are quite a number of home movie clips during the final credits) Bethany has excelled in surfing skills.

The soul takes us into the religious beliefs and practices of the Hamilton's. They are quite explicit in their Gospel-church faith (and much less reticent in expressing it than many members of mainstream churches). They attend church, they sing with zest, they believe in a ministry of service to others. In fact, there is a final credit of thanks to Jesus Christ – and, right at the end, Jesus gets another thanks. (This type of religion and heart on the sleeve may not appeal to more heady, less emotional people, but it would be a pity if the Hamilton faith was not given respect by reviewers and audiences.)

Most people intending to see *Soul Surfer* probably know that one morning, enjoying the surf with friends, Bethany was suddenly attacked by a shark and lost one of her arms completely. This sequence is shown briefly and without much close-up but it is still a jolt and a shock. Fortunately, friends were able to contact the hospital and, though Bethany lost a lot of blood, doctors were able to help her and stitch the wound almost at shoulder level.

Though quite an exuberant young girl, Bethany was calm and stoic during her ordeal. Subsequently, her main concern was whether she could surf again or not. The second part of the film shows her determination, her continued attempts and failures, her ultimate success followed by a strict and gruelling exercise regime and going back into competition.

Bethany was aided immensely by her parents and the coaching of her father.

AnnaSophia Robb gives a vigorous performance as Bethany. Denis Quaid and Helen Hunt portray her parents.

There is plenty of surfing and giant waves for fans. But, given Bethany's experience and courage, the film is also highly inspirational and motivational, explicitly so. It might give a strong boost to young people who might have had similar accidents and difficulties to overcome.

THE TUNNEL

(Australia, 2011, d. Carlo Ledesma)

The tunnel (or tunnels) in question are those below the stations and tracks in Sydney's underground system, specifically St James station. These tunnels can be the opportunity for scary movies like *Death Train*, *Creep*, *The Escape* or even *The Taking of Pelham 123* films. And, so they are here.

This film was a collective enterprise of backers buying shares for a small budget production. It was also delivered to audiences on-line as well as screened on Foxtel. (For those watching it at home, a recommendation is to turn off the lights and watch it in the dark – you will really be sharing the experience of the characters underground, their sense of menace and of fear.)

It begins like a television documentary with a TV announcer introducing a current affairs item about the development of Sydney's water supply through a lake in the underground. We are then told that the project was mysteriously dropped and not talked about at all. A television crew is introduced via some home movies and banter and jokes which is a good way of establishing the central characters. They begin to interview a homeless man who has been in the tunnels but he weeps and rushes away. At this stage, the film becomes a reconstruction of events with two of the participants serving as talking head interviewees explaining what happened as their edited footage is shown.

Although we have been alerted by the opening with the recording of an emergency call from a station, it is now that the real purpose of the film becomes clear. With technology nods (and more) to the handheld cameras and style of *The Blair Witch Project*, the film is one of those fictions dressed up as fact, an account of some paranormal activity.

The real model for *The Tunnel* is *Rec*, its sequel *Rec 2* and the American adaptation, *Quarantine*. In these films, we have a television crew, journalist and camera man going into a building and recording the weird and brutal events they encounter. The TV crew offer a basic credibility that cameras would be in these situations and filming. (And the actual camera man for the film plays the fictional camera man.) *The Tunnel* also has a producer and a sound engineer in its crew. There is a combination of ordinary lighting, but much of the film is night camera work, green, blurry and eerie.

There is a fair amount of repetition in the early part of the film as the crew explore the underground. Then mysterious things happen and one member disappears. Should they search for him without extra help? Of course not. But they do – and, of course, things get worse. There is a certain plausibility, however, for the audiences as the journalist and the cameraman are continually intercut offering their narrative in close-up. We know they have survived. But, how? And what or who was down there?

So, not a bad Australian contribution to the horror pseudo-documentary genre. (And, we keep asking, uncomfortably curious, what are those tunnels like in reality!)

WATER FOR ELEPHANTS

(US, 2011, d. Francis Lawrence)

This morning a Melbourne reviewer, who obviously had forgotten to take his happy pill, gave *Water for Elephants* no stars out of five and vented a bit of spleen throughout his review, trying to prove it should not get any stars. This afternoon, the group behind me in the cinema shed some tears, compared it favourably to the book by Sara Gruen, one declaring the film was excellent.

So, somewhere in between.

While the film opens in the present with a very old man standing in the rain watching the circus gear being packed up, and then narrating his story to the manager of the circus, and hoping to get a job instead of going back to his nursing home, the main story is one from the Great Depression, 1931. Hal Holbrook brings quite some dignity to the old man.

As he tells his story (which leads us to expect a circus disaster), his voice changes into that of his younger self, Jacob, the son of Polish migrants who is studying at Cornell to be a vet. He is forced to cut short his studies when his parents die in an accident and he hops a train which belongs to the Benzini Brothers Circus.

This is a circus story (which certainly doesn't paint the circus fraternity as a nice and welcoming community) but it is quite interesting as it takes us into that community and the life and work demanded to keep the show going. And, in the Depression, times are tough, audiences can be scarce, and there is the pressure of selling tickets as well as finding new acts.

Jacob is almost thrown out but proves his worth with his veterinary knowledge. While he does the most menial jobs at first, when the circus acquires an elephant, he not only carries the water for Rosie the elephant but he is its keeper and trainer. The rider of the elephant is Marlana, the wife of the circus owner and manager, August. And, yes, you are not wrong. There will be emotional complications.

The film depends very much on the presence and performance by Robert Pattinson. His Twilight fans will have no difficulty in responding well to him. Those who find his undead Edward Cullen too passively pale and morose will cheer up to find that Water for Elephants can depend on him after all. It's a pleasantly standard performance but it is something of a relief to see that there is a life for Pattinson after Edward (despite his vampiric immortality) and this is a boost to Pattinson's career. Actually, he laughs a lot, perhaps grins too often, but, with a short back and sides, and getting stuck into his elephant care, he presents a strong enough character.

He has to because he is up against August, the circus owner, who is ambitious, desperate, cruel and prone to fly off the handle rather murderously even though he then can repent and present a surface of charm. He is played by Christoph Waltz who won the Oscar and a myriad other awards for his performance as Landa in Inglourious Basterds and then the villain in The Green Hornet. He is also due as Cardinal Richelieu in the 2011 version of The Three Musketeers. He does screen villains who can chill you despite the sometimes front of urbanity.

Marlena is Reese Witherspoon who has a story to explain why she is married to August and the hold he has over her.

The circus disaster does come at the end but is presented in a rather matter of fact way rather than as a big and sensational disaster.

Water for Elephants does deserve some stars – it is easy and popular entertainment,

X MEN: FIRST CLASS

(US, 2011, d. Matthew Vaughan)

At last what really happened during the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962 has been revealed, the mastermind behind the set-up, the action that stopped a nuclear war and the intervention of special agents.

Well, no, not exactly. This is the core plot for this prequel to the X Men series. It's intrigues and derring-do dreamed up by the screenwriters. But, it is not a bad conspiracy theory if you believe in mutants amongst us – and after four X Men films, don't we all!

Actually, this is quite an enjoyable action show – and, if I saw it first, then I would be tempted to watch the whole series.

Maybe not everyone was wondering what Professor Xavier was like when he was young or whether Erik Lensherr was a nice young lad or not, but for those who were (as well as for the rest of us), here are some interesting answers. Interesting is not exactly the right word because Charles Xavier was a pampered young man who studied at Oxford and received a Doctorate. Nothing particularly adventurous here. On the other hand, Erik's life takes us into a concentration camp, separation from his parents, an exhibition of his powers to move a metal gate and the sadistic behaviour of the camp doctor who is fascinated by gene power and superhuman mutants.

Erik as adult is on a mission to find out where the doctor is, only to discover he is a world domination criminal (in the Bond series' vein), not so easy to wreak revenge on. In the meantime, the CIA discover some mutants and special agent Moira MacTaggart enlists the aid of Charles Xavier. They recruit a number of other mutants and train them to bring their various talents to bear on Sebastian Shaw, the Nazi villain. This requires them to save the US in the aforesaid Missiles of October crisis.

There are plenty of complications along the way, especially the recruiting of Erik and ensuring his participation in the training. However, we do learn how he and the Professor were friends, parted ways and he became Magneto, luring away some of the Professor's disciples. We also learn how the Professor came to be in a wheelchair who offers a tribute to Patrick Stewart when he remarks that he would probably go bald soon.

As an entertainment, it all keeps moving fast – director Matthew Vaughan (of the questionable Kick Ass) knows how to make an enjoyable film, both serious (a film starting in a concentration camp is not entirely light-hearted) and comic (Hugh Jackman makes the most of his 30 second cameo refusing to be recruited).

The casting is interesting in view of the previous films and the later incarnations of the mutants. Scot James McAvoy

and Irish Michael Fassbender are sound serious actors and bring Charles and Erik to life. Amongst the others are American Jennifer Lawrence as Raven, English Nicholas Hoult as Hank/Beast and English Jason Flemyng as Azazel. Australian Rose Byrne is a sympathetic Moira. And, enjoying himself immensely as a snarling villain – unrecognizable at first as the German-speaking doctor – is Kevin Bacon.

Plenty of action, plenty of stunts, plenty of different locations – and more than plenty of plot. With the humans turning against the mutants, perhaps the writers could be encouraged to do one more X Men with this cast and find a world crisis that they could solve. The 70s and Vietnam suggest themselves. Or, with some make-up, they could assist in the Berlin Wall coming down or the collapse of the Soviet Union.

SIGNIS REVIEWS JULY 2011

ALL GOOD THINGS

BRIDESMAIDS

CRAZY ON THE OUTSIDE

FAITH, FRAUD + MINIMUM WAGE

HANNA

HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS, PART 2

LARRY CROWNE

LAST CIRCUS, The (LA BALADA TRISTE DE LA TROMPETA)

LOVE AND OTHER IMPOSSIBLE PURSUITS/ THE OTHER WOMAN

MR POPPER'S PENGUINS

MOZART'S SISTER

RED DOG

SPECIAL TREATMENT (SANS QUEUE NI TETE)

SUPER 8

TRANSFORMERS, DARK OF THE MOON

TREE OF LIFE

TRIP, The

ALL GOOD THINGS

(US, 2010, d. Andrew Jarecki)

A sadly ironic title. It refers to a shop that the central couple set up, a project dear to them but which was thwarted. It remained a dream for David Marks whose story this is.

All Good Things is one of those reconstructions of an American crime which remains a mystery. They are usually made for television. However, this film was for the big screen, especially with its strong cast, which makes the proceedings more interesting.

The film opens with an older David Marks being interrogated about a murder. We merely glimpse him, but the questioning goes on throughout the film, moving the narrative along. As the introduction indicates, the film is based on actual events from the 1970s to the 2000s.

For those of us (most of us) not familiar with the characters, we really don't know what the crime is until later in the film – and then it turns out that the interrogation is for a different crime.

David Marks is played by Ryan Gosling. He seems a pleasant if very weak-willed man who has witnessed the suicide of his mother when he was little and has never really come to terms with this experience. This is exacerbated by his dominating father, a successful businessman, very respectable until we discover his dealings and protection racket concerning the clean up of New York's Times Square. He has very little time for his son, continually disparaging him, and in public. Frank Langella gives a convincingly arrogant performance.

But David meets a bright young woman, Katie Mc Carthy (a vivacious Kirsten Dunst), falls in love and marries. They eventually open their shop, All Things Good. It doesn't last as David succumbs to his father's pressure and acts as a bagman for the protection collections. His behaviour becomes erratic, with disastrous effect for himself, for Katie and his unwillingness to have a child. The marriage cannot last. And that is where the mystery emerges.

The scene shifts to 2002. David is living incognito and in female disguise in Galveston to avoid the media as the DA re-opens his case. He becomes entangled with a tenant (Philip Baker Hall) who comes to depend on him and, to prove it, gets rid of someone who seems a threat to David, a past friend who has written a novel that is close to what happened and is now demanding money. Which leads to more violence and a strange verdict.

Because the case is still open, the film has an unsatisfactory ending for those wanting certainty. However, in its delineation of character and suggested motivations, audiences can make up their own mind.

BRIDESMAIDS

(US, 2011, d. Paul Feig)

There's a trend, very popular at the world box-office (Western countries only, I presume) to have movies from the US about weddings. Well, not exactly weddings (though we find ourselves attending one at the end), but what happens before the wedding. And this trend favours men behaving badly. There were *Wedding Crashers*, and now there are buddies of *The Hangover* and *The Hangover Part II*, selling tickets like mad. Women behaving badly? There was a British film earlier with Helena Bonham Carter called *Women Talking Dirty*. Which could be the title of *Bridesmaids* where there are American women talking dirty.

But, when it comes to women behaving badly on screen in movies like *Bridesmaids*, they are actually much better behaved than the men – and that's despite a bout of stomach poisoning at a Brazilian restaurant with dire consequences at a wedding gown boutique (much less crassly explicit than one would be led to believe) and the maid of honour getting everyone put off a Vegas-bound flight because of the whiskey she was given to calm her apprehensions only to let loose her hidden loutish side. Plus various conversations.

Bridesmaids is much more entertaining than *The Hangover 2*. There is actually far more humanity here.

Perhaps the reason is Jud Apatow (who directed *The Forty Year Old Virgin* and *Knocked Up*) who produces here. There is what can be called 'The Jud Apatow Syndrome'. The films start with some pretty crass behaviour and language but gradually they show more heart and, by the end, some happy, even moral, resolutions.

Kristin Wiig, who co-wrote the screenplay has the central role of Annie, whose life has taken a quickly downward spiral. We immediately see her in a casual relationship with a callow male, in an awkward situation with her flatmates wanting rent, having closed down her cake shop during the recession, and making more than a hash of advising customers in a jewellery shop (projecting her uncertainties on to them). Her mother (Jill Clayburgh in a final role) fusses – and, though not an alcoholic, sponsors people to AA. Her best friend, Lilian (Maya Rudolph) is proposed to – and wedding plans are on.

Annie is to be matron of honour but finds herself upstaged at every turn by the wealthy, vain (but ultimately lonely) Helen (Rose Byrne very effective in a non-sympathetic role). There are three other bridesmaids, including the solidly built sister of the bridegroom Megan, (Melissa McCarthy), who has a lot of the funny (and crass) situations but is one of the wisest of the bridesmaids.

In fact, a lot of the film is quite funny, some of it despite ourselves. It seems to reflect a lot of the 30 something angst about love and commitment, falling in and out of relationships that are shallow, finding the miseries in life. The males are in the background, though Chris O'Dowd as a New York cop who will be Annie's salvation after enduring her inconsistency and inconstancy makes a sympathetic male presence.

But, in Apatow-produced films, there is a do the right thing resolution of the problems.

CRAZY ON THE OUTSIDE

(US, 2010. D. Tim Allen)

Since television's *Home Improvement* and a series of movie comedies including the *Santa Clause* films, Tim Allen has appeared in many a comedy. As he does here, but he also directs. He also gathers a strong cast around him.

The pun of the title refers to his character, Tom Zelda, getting out of prison as the film opens. He is a little crazy but he finds life on the outside much crazier. This is the case with his sister, Viki (Sigourney Weaver enjoying herself) who has made up stories to explain Tom's time inside: that he has been in France and has a fiancée, Simone, who is an astronaut. These are not the only stories she invents throughout the film, much of it so that their Gran will not be shocked and have a heart turn. Viki has the final funny last line of the film in response to Gran's being told the truth at last.

Tom has been inside for DVD piracy (quite a topical theme for a film) and done time for his boss, Ray Liotta doing is usual. Should he go back or not?

Then there is his tough probation officer, Angela (Jeanne Tripplehorn) who has a matchmaking son, Ethan.

It's a bit a succession of sitcom episodes: work at the Pirate Burger franchise – along with two dopey ex cons with whom he sets up a house-painting partnership. There is also his ex-girlfriend whom Viki told him was dead, and her boyfriend (a cameo by Kelsey Grammar).

It's pleasantly amusing in an undemanding way.

FAITH, FRAUD + MINIMUM WAGE

(Canada, 2010, d. George Mihalka)

There seems to be a popular religious fascination with possible images of Jesus or Mary appearing in the least likely of places. This was the subject of *Henry Poole is Here* (2009) with Luke Wilson where the face of Jesus was discerned by many on a wall. Carl Hiassen's novel, *Lucky You*, treats the whole phenomenon, focussing on a weeping Madonna, with rather quizzical irony. There are frequent investigations by diocesan authorities but very few receive any authoritative backing.

In this variation on the theme, written by Josh MacDonald adapting his own play, the whole event is based on a prank. Casey (Martha Mac Isaacs) is a teenage Catholic who has lost her faith. She lives in a Nova Scotia town. Put upon by the owner of a donut fast-food outlet (Don Allison as the unctuous Uncle Bob; he is a pillar of the Church, bossing the young priest around – urging the organist to start playing when the priest flounders during his homily), she angrily throws her drink at the diner wall. She rubs it a bit – and sees that one could find Jesus' face there. She decides to alert people to it. Crowds begin to gather. People pray. Pilgrims arrive. Lots of devotion (while the Church is comparatively empty).

Casey has got in far deeper than she could have imagined. She is upset because her sister has been in coma for several years after a car accident. Her father (Callum Keith Rennie) is still distraught and his life has fallen apart. Casey has to work menially, sell Christmas trees to try to pay the bills.

The young priest is an interesting character, seemingly modern with joke attempts in his sermon and long hair which the diner manager tells him to cut. However, he is more anchored in reality than most and realises the hoax and tries to do something about it, especially helping Casey.

The film shows us a wide range of people in the town, lights on religious, faith and prayer issues – with Casey, still not a believer, reassuring shocked townspeople that God hears prayers whether the situation is revealed as a prank.

Not intended as a profound religious film, but it is a reminder that there is sometimes a fine line between faith and superstition.

HANNA

(US, 2011, d. Joe Wright)

A very strong cast brings this very grim drama to life. It is a story of espionage from Cold War times, a story of violence and deception, a story of scientific experiments for the good of society and its protection (a variation on the themes of *Never Let Me Go*), a story of revenge and desperation.

That might not sound a likely scenario for director, Joe Wright, although many of those themes underlay his fine version of Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. His first feature was *Pride and Prejudice*. His previous film was *The Soloist* with Jamie Foxx and Robert Downey Jr. The director obviously relishes the opportunity to make an action feature with thoughtful drama.

This is clear from the opening in Finland where the young Hanna is out hunting with her father. She is a deadly shot, is being taught survival techniques and complete self-reliance in a remote environment with few comforts (except some books and some fairy tales which she treasures, especially Grimm stories which will be taken up when she ends her quest in Berlin). The audience has little time to wonder who Hanna is and why she and her father are living as primitively as they do. The house is attacked by heavily armed troopers. Thus begins a cat and mouse chase as Hanna is captured, her father escapes and Hanna is submitted to tests in an underground bunker facility and laboratory.

Hanna is played with complete conviction by Saoirse Ronan who came to prominence in *Atonement* and featured in *Death Defying Acts*, *The Lovely Bones* and *The Way Back*. Only in her mid-teens, she is an actress of extraordinary

presence. She has to be because for most of the film she is on the run, putting her survival skills to extraordinary lengths, traversing Morocco, Spain and into Germany to meet her father again. She is pursued by a relentlessly ruthless American spy chief and her well-trained agents, including a seemingly effete but cruel Tom Hollander.

Interesting that the producers of Hanna have called on two Australian leads for their film. The father is played by Eric Bana who has to put his survival skills to the test as well, especially a violent confrontation in the Berlin Underground. And the heartless espionage chief is played by Cate Blanchett at her most menacing and cold.

There are some relaxing moments along the way, especially as Hanna makes friends with a Moroccan apartment block owner and with a travelling family, the parents (Olivia Williams and Jason Flemyng) amusing in their application of permissive parenting of their two children. In fact, the two children are crucial to the plot in bringing the pursuit to a head.

The film keeps up its rapid pace, is intriguing in its portrayal of its three central characters and the mystery of their relationship, and inserts many action sequences that match any espionage adventure.

In taking us into a murky world of agents, double agents, the complexity of truth and lies, as well as the impersonal schemes created, allegedly for national security but with sometimes devastating personal effects on the subjects, Hanna gives its audience a lot to reflect on as well,

HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS, PART 2

(UK/US, 2011, d. David Yates)

Well, that's that.

We can presume that there will be very few Harry Potter fans who will not enjoy this grand finale to a series that began on the screen in 2001. This is the eighth in a series that has followed Harry Potter and his friends, Hermione and Ron, going to Hogwarts as student magicians, a series of struggles with the powers of evil, embodied in Lord Voldemort, that has seen their growing up, a number of sad deaths, lots of magic and spells and a conclusion that takes on issues of the battle between good and evil, willingness to lay down life for others, and an ending that offers happiness and peace.

Not having succumbed to the temptation to read the novels, I rely on well-read experts to discover whether the films follow J.K. Rowling's novels closely or not. Current advice is that this final film is very close to the novel.

Part I began with drama and threats to Harry Potter and attempts by the Order of the Phoenix to protect him from Voldemort. Then it moved into a more quiet, slowly suspenseful mode as Harry and his friends sought the horcruxes which contained part of Voldemort himself. Then the film stopped. The second part is, one might say, both active and contemplative. The action and effects are impressive. One could single out the early visit and disguises for a visit to Bellatrix's secret vault (and a dragon flight). The battles are impressive, with the tending of the dead and wounded looking like a World War I hospital scene. Then there are the wand battles (Maggie Smith especially relishing Professor McGonagale's duel with Voldemort). And there are the villains' explosive deaths. It was also a pleasure to see flying brooms again.

As regards the contemplation, there was a lot to think about, especially for those who have not read the books, in the flashbacks, the explanations of Harry's origins, the role of Professor Snape, Harry's psychic connection with Voldemort and the strategy of Dumbledore (who turns up as a considerable presence in this film, along with his previously unknown brother) with Snape as regards Harry's ultimate fate.

Practically all the main cast are back, even if for only short scenes (Gary Oldman's Sirius Black). Ralph Fiennes has been an excellent Voldemort, Michael Gambon a persuasive Dumbledore and Alan Rickman, a mysterious Severus Snape. No need to despair, Robbie Coltrane's Hagrid eventually turns up. The only major new character is the Ghost of Helena Ravenclaw, played by Kelly Macdonald.

The other major thing about the series is that audiences over ten years have watched Daniel Radcliffe, Rupert Grint and Emma Watson grow up from age ten to twenty and have accepted them – and probably could not imagine their characters any other way.

A worthy end to the series and a special word of gratitude is needed for American writer, Steve Kloves, who has written all the screenplays except for The Order of the Phoenix, and for David Yates who directed the final four films which kept the audiences wanting more until the end.

LARRY CROWNE

(US, 2011, d. Tom Hanks)

Light and likeable.

For the first few minutes, there was Tom Hanks been Tom Hanksish in his old cheery, cheery way, being 'have a nice day' upbeat in a supermarket employee. He is Larry Crowne, 20 years navy experience straight after school, later working in supermarkets. Then, with some bad news for Larry, the film changes tone for the better and turns into a romantic comedy with stars in their more poised 40s and 50s rather than in the brash 20s and 30s. The film should appeal to older audiences wanting some relief from the younger shenanigans.

Not that there aren't shenanigans here, but they tend to be nice shenanigans. The screenplay was written by Tom Hanks and Nia Vardalos (who was responsible for *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*). Hanks also directs.

When Larry decides to go to college, he is advised to take Economics 1 – with George Takei doing an amusing turn as a self-important lecturer. He also takes up a course on Public Speaking. And who should be teaching that course but Julia Roberts! Julia Roberts reminds us of how telling a screen presence she can be. Here is a bit of a spoiler: by the end of the film she has laughed raucously as we usually expect her to laugh. However, for most of the film, she is grim-faced, frustrated by life, alienated from her husband, grimacing at the students and their attempts at impromptu and debates. She is entertainingly serious with the grim.

But Larry gets mixed up with a young student after he sells his possessions and buys a motor bike. She is a bikie with a Latino boyfriend who runs a gang. They cruise the streets but are more interested in antiques and garage sales, especially that of Larry's neighbour, played by Cedric the Entertainer. She arranges Larry's makeover, haircut, clothes, tidy house.

So, not the most profound of movies, but Tom Hanks can play an ordinary 'Everyman' convincingly and audiences may identify with his troubles and his way of overcoming them. And he and Julia Roberts (who appeared together in *Charlie Wilson's War*) work well together. And the end? Of course, you've guessed it, but you may enjoy the long way round to that final kiss.

LAST CIRCUS, The (LA BALADA TRISTE DELLA TROMPETE)

(Spain, 2010, d. Alex de la Iglesia)

The films of Alex de la Iglesia are an acquired taste. He had the graphic novel mentality before it became fashionable (*Day of the Beast* and the rather ugly *Perdita Durango*).

Ugly is one of the words that springs to mind while watching this film. De la Iglesia and many reviewers have opted for the word 'grotesque'. And, if you are not up to ugly and grotesque, it's best to give *The Last Circus* (or its more evocative Spanish title which translates, *The Sad Trumpet Ballad*), a miss.

The immediate grotesque images are those of the clowns in a circus, 1937. They cavort about and the children in the audience roar with laughter. The military suddenly interrupts the performance. Civil War has broken out and the clowns are commandeered. The principal clown has a son who is not so prone to laughing. The father makes a bequest of a career to his son before he goes into battle.

The time shifts to 1973. General Franco is still in control of Spain. De la Iglesia is offering some kind of fable or allegory about the Spain of the Franco era. And it is not a nice picture.

The son, Javier, is now grown up. He attempts to be the sad clown in the circus, is a threat to Sergio, the happy clown. Javier is also attracted to the tightrope artist, Natalia, who is with Sergio. It is the clash between the two men and the consequences which are the focus for the latter half of the film. There are brutal fights and disfigurements. Javier, grown fat, has a religious apparition, dons odd clothes, including a mitre and goes on a violent rampage, also pursuing Natalia. Sergio, despite his injuries, continues with the circus, though the managers and some of the entertainers, including a midjet who is fired from a canon, are continually worried.

The final confrontation takes place on a giant cross above the town, a fight to the death, or to the deaths.

The style of photography highlights the ugliness, the grotesque and the garish world of the circus and of Spain itself. De la Iglesia makes idiosyncratic films that can satisfyingly disturb or quickly alienate his audiences.

LOVE AND OTHER IMPOSSIBLE PURSUITS/ THE OTHER WOMAN

(US, 2010, d. Don Roos)

This is an American drama with some edge. Written and directed by Don Roos (who made smaller budget dramas like *The Opposite of Sex*), it is a film about parenting, step-parenting, divorce and re-marriage and difficulties in forgiving family members who have been the cause of hurt. At the core is the sadness of infant death. The 'other impossible pursuits' of the title is ambiguous and not what we might have let ourselves be led to expect.

The central character, Emilia, is played by Natalie Portman who has developed from a striking child debut in *Leon*, through adolescence, to prove that she is a respected actress (and director) winning the Oscar soon after this film as the doomed ballerina in *Black Swan*. Here, she is a bright young woman who has married Jack (Scott Cohen) after his divorce from an icily demanding surgeon, Carolyn, played by Lisa Kudrow who shows she can do far more than her ditzy comedy for so many years in *Friends*. The further complication is Jack and Carolyn's rather precocious young son, Will, who resembles his forthright mother.

After initial images of birth and the dawning realisation that the baby has died, we see a confrontation between Will and Emilia – he suggesting they sell the baby's unwanted pram and other goods on e-bay. He has no realisation of the effect on Emilia. Despite this, the two begin to become friends, Emilia showing him a quite different affection from that of his mother.

But, Emilia's blunt accosting of people (Jack points out she does this to those she loves most) puts a strain on the marriage, not helped by Carolyn's acerbic confrontations. After an emotional ceremony in remembrance of babies who have died, especially, from SIDS, Emilia attacks her father in public for his treatment of her mother. She then tells Jack more details of the baby's dying and her own feelings of responsibility and guilt.

While things can work out, especially with honesty and the difficulties of talking problems through, it is not easy – but is helped by Carolyn's actually doing something kind for Emilia.

A lot of parents may identify

MOZART'S SISTER

(France, 2010, d. Rene Feret)

In a fine Sherlock Holmes' film, *The Sign of Four*, Holmes did an analysis of Watson's alcoholic brother's scarred watch and when Watson protested that Holmes had cheated and knew the identity, Holmes replied with calm apology and regret, 'I'm sorry. I didn't know you had a brother'. Which came to memory while watching this film about the Mozart family and Wolfgang - 'I didn't even know you had a sister'. With this film, now we do.

Writer-director Rene Feret delved into the Mozart family archive and discovered letters written by the father, Leopold. The film opens with a voiceover of one of these as we watch the events he is recounting. Mozart is about ten and his father (surely one of the most avid showbiz parents of all time, though showbiz doesn't sound particularly 18th century) and mother are on a tour of Europe to display the child prodigy, his compositions, his harpsichord and violin playing. They even spend some time at the court of Louis XV in Versailles, where some of the film was actually shot. Oh, and there is also the older sister, Maria Anna, called Nannerl.

So, Wolfgang, precocious as he is, and whom we see playing, becomes a supporting character. This is a film not only about Nannerl, but a film of deep regret that she has been forgotten, and a lament at the restrictions placed on women in the 18th century, especially a player, singer and composer like Nannerl. Her father did not believe that the violin was an instrument for women, nor that women should compose – and expresses himself quite heartlessly to his daughter while he thinks he is caring for her.

Did all this happen this way? Maybe, maybe not. Feret has drawn on fact and embellished it with imagination.

Music lovers and devotees of classical costume drama will relish this film. 18th century France lends itself to decorous costumes, to abbeys and chateaux. There is a lot of 18th century detail, even to the discovery of a toilet! The lighting is particularly striking, much of it re-creating the light at night in the obscure interiors, candlelight and shadows rather than brilliant spectacle. The spectacle is left for daylight.

Nannerl is fourteen as the film opens. She is enjoying the tour and her brother's reputation and promotion. But, she is often frustrated in her attempts to be musically creative, except for the singing she is allowed to perform. When their carriage has a breakdown (perhaps too recent a word to describe what happens when the axle breaks), they stay in an abbey and discover several of Louis XV's daughters have been relegated there. One of them, Louise, becomes a firm friend of Nannerl's. Two of Feret's daughters perform the roles of Nannerl and Louise. The film skilfully shows us the loneliness of the girls, their loss of family, and how one of them would become a nun.

Then, at the court, while we see the prodigy amaze the music masters, Nannerl delivers a letter from Louise to a musician – though she has to disguise herself to enter the Dauphin's rooms to do it. She becomes friendly with the Dauphin who disapproves of his father's dissolute behaviour and forms a friendship with Nannerl.

But, according to the film, Nannerl is doomed to disappointment. The film ends and offers us more information, sad information, that she eventually did marry, looked after her father and collected the works of her brother, dying poor as an old woman.

Arthouse themes, an emphasis on visual and aural beauty, a trip to the 18th century – but, finally, a lament for ill-fated Nannerl, the ill-fate being that she was born female and not even considered capable and creative.

MR POPPER'S PENGUINS

(US, 2011, d. Mark Waters)

Those Ps in the title are important. Tom Popper's assistant, Pippi (played by British actress, Ophelia Lovibond which sounds like a fictional name but is real), has a profound predilection for positing, placing and pronouncing P words. You find yourself waiting for her to say her lines, wondering how she will bring so many Ps into them – she does. But, that is not where the main focus lies. That is with the Popper penguins.

Mr Popper is played by Jim Carrey in something of a return to the Carrey of the 1990s, shades of Ace Ventura, but a little mellowed by time and experience. We first see Tom Popper as a young boy, admiring his adventurer father who makes radio contact from (very) far-flung destinations and sends a souvenir from them all. Tom seems a very nice boy, sad at his father's absences. One didn't expect him to grow into the adult Tom Popper whose skill is in snake oil conning people into selling their building assets. We see him doing this to Jeffrey Tambor with the sound effects assistance of Pippi. He expects to become a partner in a big firm but they first want him to buy the famous Garden on the Green restaurant in Central Park. Where are the penguins!

They turn up soon. You might have guessed that Dad sent them as a final souvenir from Antarctica.

Penguins these days seem to be number one favourite at the box-office: March of the Penguins, Surf's Up, the cunning penguin pilots of the Madagascar comedies and Happy Feet, with Happy Feet 2 to come. Popper's are very likeable penguins. They even get names, Captain, Lovey, Bitey (he does), Stinke (causing childish merriment when he emits his stinkiness) and Nimrod who has seen too many Jim Carrey movies and is prone to excessive mugging as he bumps into things and overbalances. Some are real, others animatronic and it seems impossible to decide who is which.

Tom is separated from his wife of fifteen years, Carla Gugini. Of course, the penguins are going to be reconcilers, especially as Tom's son and daughter love them. But that comes after some mayhem in Tom's fashionable apartment, their intruding on a social event at the Guggenheim, their being abducted for exchange by a New York Zookeeper and an escape from the zoo.

Mr Popper's Penguins may work quite well as a film for the family, something for everyone. And the added presence of Angela Lansbury at 85 playing the owner of the Garden on the Green with touches of the crochety and the fairy godmother is a pleasure.

RED DOG

(Australia, 2011, d. Kriv Stenders)

There are two trailers for Red Dog, one a conventional trailer that indicates plot and characters and action, the other purports to be an audition of the dog by the director, with the dog being asked to do all kinds of faces and expressions for the film. The latter is definitely the one to watch before seeing Red Dog. You could feel the atmosphere all around the cinema as the audience warmed to seeing the dog (and their dog) on screen acting so cutely!

Actually, in the film, Red Dog is pretty endearing as well, even to non dog lovers.

This story has its origins in episodes in Western Australia in the 1970s. It was taken up by British novelist, Louis de Bernieres (Captain Corelli's Mandolin) and became a best-seller.

A young truckie in the West comes upon an old dog on the highway. He brings it to the next pub where a vet tries to help it. The locals all turn up and what happens is they all reminisce, something like a wake for Red Dog, and the story is told in flashbacks as each of the characters puts in their two bob's worth. This means that we build up the picture of

the stray dog that was collected by the pub-owner and his wife, was taken up by the workers in the mines and on the waterfront and who settled down with an itinerant American with whom Red Dog bonded.

Red Dog was not a shaggy dog, but many of the reminiscences are certainly shaggy dog stories, no less entertaining for that. It also fulfils the adage that a dog is our best friend, man and woman.

The stories are funny but they are also sad, and the latter part of the film shows Red Dog and his fidelity to his master no matter what the cost.

Some young Australian actors as well as some veterans make up the cast from Rachael Taylor and Luke Ford to Bill Hunter, Noah Taylor and Loene Carmen. Keisha Castle Hughes is in it. And Josh Lucas is genial as the travelling American.

The photography brings the region to life (though much of it was filmed in South Australia) as well as the period. It is a folklore story – with the statue of the dog (1971-1979) at Dampier to enhance it.

SPECIAL TREATMENT (SANS QUEUE NI TÊTE)

(France/Belgium, 2010, d. Jeanne Labrune)

The idea is probably more successful than the execution in *Special Treatment* (with its original title indicating, cock and bull). Not that it is not an interesting film with some fine performances, but it is more than bit schematic in its structure and the characters are often more enigmatic than real.

That said, the film's main thesis (and it is a thesis) is that there may not be much difference between the prostitute and the psychotherapist in their dealings with their clients, working with their minds, the subconscious and conscious, taking money for services which allegedly are improving the client. We see something of both, though the film is suggestive of eroticism rather than erotic and suggestive of therapy rather than offering psychological insights.

We are introduced to Alice, making salacious puns in an antiques shop and taunting the owner. We discover that she is a prostitute with her own apartments and discreet contact with clients, some of whom she likes, others not, and adapts her interactions with them to their own fantasies. The poster has her dressed like a schoolgirl, which she does for one of the men.

We are introduced to Xavier, a rather pompous psychiatrist, who bores peoples at parties, talks shop, to the aggravation of his wife who is falling out of love with him. We see him at work, sitting behind his patient (clients of both professions lie down in their sessions), communicating boredom to the audience, with not even an 'mmm' to the patient's stream of consciousness. He is probably thinking of some artwork he can now afford – as does Alice who likes beautiful objects in her flat.

There are several other characters, prostitute friend, clients, other psychiatrists. Since Alice is beginning to self-question, she approaches a mutual friend of herself and Xavier and seeks out the possibility for some therapy. Not everyone wants to take her on. Particularly interesting (and the film comes more alive) is an encounter with a doctor who works at a hospital for the mentally disabled, a good man with his patients. She has an outburst against him, alleging that he is refusing her because of her profession. However, he and some of his patients, serve as a catalyst for calming her down. In the meantime, Xavier has calmed down and reunion with his wife seems more than a possibility.

Bouli Lanners is convincing as the therapist in need of therapy. But, any film with Isabelle Huppert is dominated by her. The same here. She has made many, many films since the mid-1970s but is still one of the world's most telling actresses. She must be as the film ends with a long close-up of her face – enigmatic and challenging.

SUPER 8

(US, 2011, d. J.J. Abrams)

Super 8?

Those who were taking home movies before 1980 will recognise the cameras, with film stock, of those days. Probably, the intended audience of this film will not realise at first what the reference is. With video cameras coming in soon after, with young people filming now with I Phones and instant communication through social networks, they might also wonder about the walkie-talkies the youngsters communicated with then. They look like far more fun. The

walkman might be more familiar.

This film is set in 1979 – and all the more entertaining for it, a touch of nostalgia for those not as young as they used to be – the Star Wars generation, although there is one lack of credibility in the film – the kids give no indication that they have ever heard of let alone seen Spielberg's Close Encounters, even though have to live through a variation on this theme. Speaking of Spielberg, he is an executive producer and it is his kind of film. Had the screenplay been around in 1979, he would surely have made it instead of the rather unfunny 1941 – but he caught up in 1982 with ET. There are plenty of nods to ET in Super 8, even in the Amblin Films logo with the boy on his bike. Plenty of bike riding in this one.

J.J. Abrams was 13 when this film is set, so a nostalgia trip for him even though he one of the present whiz kids (comparatively speaking) with Lost, Mission Impossible 3 and Star Trek. The era obviously meant a lot to him.

We are in an Ohio industrial town near air force bases. There has been an accident at the factory and Joe (Joel Courtney in his first screen role proving a likeable hero) is mourning his mother. His best friend, Charles (Riley Griffiths) has Spielbergian ambitions and a super 8 camera and is making a zombie movie with his friends and with Alice (Elle Fanning getting better as she grows up). As they film at midnight at a station, a truck drives on to the rails and crashes into a train. Abrams' instructions to the special effects crew must have been 'give me the most spectacular wreck you can manage – and more'. And they did. It's quite a crash.

Then things get more mysterious. The army intervenes. Things begin to go wrong in the town with power outages, dogs disappearing... But, the zombie film must go on. What complicates matters is that the kids found the driver of the truck on the rails, one of their teachers, who warns them to keep quiet or else danger for them and their parents. Joe's father is the deputy for the town and discovers some clues about what the army is up to. Alice's father has a bad reputation and was the occasion (not the cause) of the death of Joe's mother. Fathers clash, forbid their children to see each other – but, ultimately, have to join forces to find their children.

Gradually, they and we learn more about the alien creature and what has happened. (Those who saw the comedy Paul will find this plot a bit familiar; those who saw District 9 will know that humans do not always warm to aliens.)

J.J. Abrams also knows his genres and their conventions and is able to combine a kids' peer film (Stand By Me and The Goonies were still to come in the 1980s) with touches of horror (and a couple of jump out of your chair shocks) and with family values – but in an alien on earth setting.

Super 8 could well be round for a long time entertaining both young and old.

TRANSFORMERS: DARK OF THE MOON

(US, 2011, d. Michael Bay)

Almost universally panned by reviewers. Almost universally liked by its audiences. This third in the series made over \$200,000, 000 in the US in about ten days and twice that in box office takings around the world in the same time. As they say, a popular cultural phenomenon. And, as the reviewers say, there's no accounting for tastes.

My previous experiences of Transformer movies was thunderously loud sound. For this third one, the projectionist kept it at tolerable. A great advantage.

Another advantage by this time, with a little help from a voiceover at the beginning, is that one has learned who the Autobots are and who are the Deceptikons and what they are doing on earth and how they relate to humans. You don't have to be a genius, only a fan of The Transformer movies (that sounds a bit mean as I look at it!), to know that the Deceptikons are up to no good. This time they don't want merely to take over the earth and make us humans their slaves, they want to bring their planet Cybertron down here. And, after decimating Chicago, they almost succeed. (After so many destructions of New York and, especially LA, even recently in 2012 and Battle for LA, there is a certain satisfaction in seeing Chicago the victim of spectacular special devastation effects.)

But, of course, the Deceptikons, especially Megatron (voiced by Hugo Weaving) have underestimated Sam Witwicky (Shia La Boeuf) who outwitted him before. Sam is out of a job, out of a girlfriend (since Megan Fox did not have her contract renewed), pestered by his parents, and jealous of his new girlfriend's boss. She is played by British model Rosie Huntington-Whitely who is certainly going to win on the catwalk but is in real danger of a Razzie nomination for her lack of performance. But, she gets plenty of close-ups and is in on all the final action.

The mechanically-oriented are going to be satisfied with the transformations. The action-oriented have nothing to worry about. Plenty there. The special-effects-oriented are going to be satisfied. The screenplay-as-something-one-

puts-one's-mind-to-oriented will simply give up.

Michael Bay, prone to the very big, the very loud and the very smashing in his films, and whose scrapbook of favourable reviews is still very tiny, ensures that the legion of Transformer fans will not be disappointed.

One of the interesting things at the beginning of the film is the build up during the Kennedy era of the race to the moon and then the actual Apollo 11 flight. But, even more interesting for conspiracy theory addicts, is that the flight was not simply to get there and be there but that Buzz Aldrin (who appears as himself seeming to verify what 'really' happened, a nice coup) and Neil Armstrong, after the famous, 'One small step...' actually had to spend twenty minutes examining the giant Autobot spacecraft that had landed on the moon some time earlier and which NASA wanted to investigate. Capricorn One, years ago, posited the conspiracy that the moon landing was fabricated in a studio. The forthcoming Apollo 18 is going to posit some paranormal activity. The moon landing is a ripe field for conspiracy.

The cast goes a bit more up-market this time. John Turturro is back as is Josh Duhamel. But, here we have John Malkovich and Frances McDormand with substantial roles, Leonard Nimoy as the voice of the treacherous Seintinel Prime and Patrick Dempsey as a smooth villain.

It has already made millions, so who needs a review!

THE TREE OF LIFE

(US, 2011, d. Terrence Malick)

Whether one likes The Tree of Life or not – and right from Cannes 2011 where critics split into both camps but the International Jury awarded it the Palme D'Or – one has to admit that the film is ambitious in content and scope.

Those in favour see it as creative in ideas and cinema storytelling. Those not in favour prefer to see it as pretentious. But, one person's pretensions are another's earnestness.

With Kubrick's 1968 2001: a Space Odyssey, which many quote in comparison with The Tree of Life, I found it immediately overwhelming. I didn't find The Tree of Life overwhelming, but there was a great deal to respond to and to reflect on.

Terence Malick has not made many feature films. In the twenty years between Days of Heaven and The Thin Red Line, 1978-1998, he made no films. Since then he has made The New World and The Tree of Life. Malick values the visual and is at pains to make every sequence perfect. He does not hurry over his films. This time has both poetic realism in his narrative about an average American family and special effects in his cosmological and biological portrait of the evolving world as well as a visit to a surprising land of life after death.

The film opens with a quotation from the Book of Job, chapter 38. The Job allusions would repay study. They are a challenge to humans in the face of the reality of God, creation and the sustaining of the universe. Who are we really? How do we compare with God? I wonder did Malick go to Job: 42 1-5. It contains the answer to Malick's initial quotation. It is a profoundly humble acknowledgement of human empty-headed words in the face of the mystery of God. Job must be silent in the face of God's grandeur and majesty.

Malick then follows this with comments on nature and grace. He states that nature can be competitive and destructive whereas grace offers a spirituality of humility, honesty and integrity and respect and regard for others. This is important for his portrait of the family.

As regards the universe, there is much to admire in his visualising of what looks like an interpretation of the Big Bang or a creative Theophany. The dinosaurs make an impression. The changing earth looks cosmically arresting.

Malick does not quite begin with the cosmology. It comes after our introduction to a family, the O'Briens in the 1950s and so there is a jolt as we are taken back into prehistory. Once Malick establishes that our world has evolved and here we are.

The first episode in the life of the family is the news of the death of a son in war, the delivery of the sad telegram to the mother and the grief of the father. In a way, or in many ways, the story of the family is particularly ordinary. There is a value in our seeing the average family. There is a disadvantage insofar as this is not so engagingly dramatic.

The mother (Jessica Chastain) is a fine and beautiful woman, devoted to her husband until she has to face the challenge of his changing and his frustrations and the sometimes erratic treatment of his three sons. She seems the personification of Malick's grace. The father is basically a good man who can face the reality of his failings and can apologise. He

also lives through life's ups and downs, his family growing up, his work achievements, humiliation in unemployment. This is an interesting role for Brad Pitt as he nears fifty, not a glamorous or celebrity role but rather an embodiment of the American male who is a personification of nature with moments of grace.

Actually, the real focus of the film is the oldest son. He is played with quite some intense hostility by first-timer, Hunter McCracken.

Whatever it is in McCracken's face and eyes, I became mesmerised by him and his struggles with his love for and dislike of his father. Brad Pitt is very good in portraying the father who is torn by his strong-willed discipline which cowers his son and his deep-seated but too often unexpressed love. We see a lot of Jack and even viscerally share his tormented transition from young boy to teenager. Many of these scenes are with his brothers, the younger the one who is to die, the littlest just hanging in there.

As has been noted, this is not a particularly interesting family in itself or in what it does, but it can be seen as a typical, even archetypal average American family.

Since Malick does not seem to need narrative order, accuracy or coherence, we move in and out of flashforwards, to Jack as a middle-aged adult, working in skyscraper offices, puzzled by life and in a context which seems looming apocalyptic. So, this is how Jack turned out. And he is portrayed by a time-ravaged Sean Penn.

Since Malick has shown us his interpretation of the past, the recent past and the present, he then ventures into the future.

His afterlife is symbolic (we hope), people wandering an empty landscape, bypassing each other, but many connecting. It is hard to portray an afterlife on screen. Film-makers often opt for what seems a purgatorial state or experience, a prelude to what we might hope is heaven. The afterlife here is akin to 'The In-Between' of Peter Jackson's *The Lovely Bones*. But, father and mother and the children arrive, wander, but are reunited with the adult Jack. It would seem that our lives and our after-lives are times of grace.

The Tree of Life (and there is a symbolic tree at the family home) is a religious film in the broadest sense. It would be interesting to hear an atheist's interpretation, probably dismissal of these spiritual dimensions except in so far as they are the aspirations of most humans whether they are fulfilled or not. For the believer in the broadest sense (which includes the agnostic who does not disbelieve but claims that we cannot know God), there are many of what Peter Berger called 'signals of transcendence'. Malick avoids much explicit connection to religion, but he is showing us a basically Christian culture, with reference to Job and the language of grace.

Christians can well appreciate his attempt to portray this religious perspective. After all St Thomas Aquinas, following the arguments of Aristotle, for a basic mover, cause and imaginer of the universe, acknowledges that people express this belief in their own ways. But he adds, for the Christian, this source of all being, we call 'God'.

THE TRIP

(UK, 2011, d. Michael Winterbottom)

A friend, given to rhetorical declamation, used to say, instead of simply, 'Why?', 'To what purpose?'. This came to mind during the screening of *The Trip*. The impression the film gave was that, above and beyond the newspaper, *The Observer*, asking Steve Coogan to travel for a week around northern England and sample some B and Bs and the cooking, there was some deeper purpose. Was it any more than Coogan and actor, Rob Bryden (who had worked together in Michael Winterbottom's clever film about the possibility of making a movie of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* – it had the title *A Cock and Bull Story*) improvising repartee that gave rise to some audience reflection, of providing some edgy as well as friendly interaction between two characters with some reference to their life, relationships and success in their careers? Or was that enough?

It will depend on how interesting you find the Coogan and the Bryden characters (while wondering how much is real and how much 'fictitious'). It is easy to like Bryden. It is not so easy to like Coogan. Bryden is married with a young child and they miss him while he is away, very happy to have him back. Coogan's current girlfriend is having a hiatus from the relationship and is in the US, though he does some improvising as well with two young women he encounters on the trip. While he visits his sympathetic parents, he goes back, alone, to his London flat. Which means there are some moral speculations and judgments made during the six days away.

This shouldn't be a problem but they travel during winter and, I presume, others as well as myself were relieved when the sun finally came out and shone for a while on Friday – their first day away was Monday.

Both actors are skilled at improvising conversations, and *The Trip* was originally a six part series of 30 minutes each for British television. This compilation is skilfully edited, though this always raises curiosity about what was omitted. The

two go through a range of moods, especially Coogan who seems to want some touches of the celebrity in accommodation and meals. Just a thought, but maybe some audiences will simply enjoy all the meals and their preparation.

There is a funny repartee about the phrase in war and historical films, 'we rise at dawn'. The pair offer a range of variations that could be used, 'we leave at ten-thirtyish'... When Coogan talks too much about the geography of a landmark, he is confronted by a man with a never-ending geological spiel.

One of the more enjoyable features of their journey, which covers quite a lot of ground and different buildings, rooms and dining places, is their capacity for impressions. They both do very good Michael Caines. Bryden is good at Hugh Grant, less so with Dustin Hoffman. And there are plenty of James Bond and Blofelds from them both.

So, at the end of *The Trip*? Something of a visual and verbal soufflé with hints of something more substantial.

A number of holiday films this month. The interesting dramas are the SIGNIS award-winner in Venice 2010, *Meek's Cutoff*, the documentary, *Precious Life*, and the psychodrama with Mel Gibson, *The Beaver*.

SIGNIS REVIEWS AUGUST 2011

BAD TEACHER
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FIVE DAYS OF AUGUST/FIVE DAYS OF WAR
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PRECIOUS LIFE
STAKE LAND

BAD TEACHER

(US, 2011, d. Jake Kasdan)

A bit of cinema froth. Black froth. Easily blown away, but may leave a bad taste in the mouth. But, it is still only froth and to be judged accordingly. Anyone who goes to see *Bad Teacher* thinking it is a film about education obviously hasn't done their homework.

The comedy is akin to *South Park* or those satires which take up a theme and imagine how it would play if you took and exaggerated the possible bad (which makes sense only if you appreciate what is good). So, *Bad Teacher* is something like a 90 minute unwashed shaggy dog story about a completely self-centred, go-getting, unscrupulous teacher, Elizabeth, played with full on energy by Cameron Diaz, manipulating people, ignoring students (until a bonus for getting best results comes into view), being rude to everyone. It's the kind of satiric joke we sometimes like to spin. It's also like a series of vignettes for a television series, rather hit and miss in its targets and its humour which, of necessity, has its many crass moments.

Farewelled from school after one year at work (how she got there in the first place is a mystery) but ditched by her fiancé's mother-in-law, she goes back to school, full of temporary surface charm but planning on getting another wealthy fiancé by undergoing breast enhancement. Some of the situations and jokes are obvious – her turning up for the grade 7 car wash day and making a mint because of the ogling men; her seduction of a city official to get an advance copy of tests. But, there are some funny black moments and wisecracks (and getting her class to watch teacher movies, *Stand and Deliver*, *Dangerous Minds*, *Lean on Me* – and the death of the principal, Henry Winkler, in *Scream!*).

Justin Timberlake gives a nice performance as the completely gullible nice and naive (wealthy) teacher. Lucy Punch has the unenviable role of being the rival for teacher accolades and for the nice teacher. Jason Segal is the gym teacher who takes a wry (but ogling) view of Elizabeth. John Michael Higgins is the harassed principal. Phyllis Smith is engaging as the large, simple and would-be friend.

Then it ends with Elizabeth back at school – but it is hard to tell whether the film makers are just being satirical or are trying to be romantic, or having it both ways.

BEAUTIFUL LIES (DE VRAIS MENSONGES)

(France, 2010, d. Pierre Salvadori)

Tres francais. This film is so French in its characters, behaviour and dialogue. Who else talks and behaves in this way? It would be very difficult to do a Hollywood remake. The French are so French. They have the phrase, amour fou, 'mad love' which does not capture the tone of the French words which are both fey and intense.

Audrey Tautou, almost a decade on after her *Amelie*, is sweet in her way but, as the film goes on, she is more shrewd, calculating (and fou) than sweet. She is Emilie. She co-owns a hairdressing business. Her mother won't accept that her husband has walked out on her. She meets her father who wants to marry his pregnant girlfriend. She is more than exasperated with her mother. When she receives an anonymous letter, a genteel but passionate love letter, she throws it in the bin. It has been written by Jean (Sami Bouajila), who does the maintenance work at the hairdresser's, but is too reticent to speak.

We expect that this will be the amour fou between Emilie and Jean. Not so. There is a further amour fou. Emilie retrieves the letter from the bin, copies it and sends it anonymously to her mother to get her out of her seclusion. It does. Maddy, the mother, (Nathalie Baye) hovers waiting for more letters in the post. Emilie has set in motion what becomes a series of deceptions. The English title opts for 'beautiful' to describe the lies. The original title opts for 'true'.

Elements of French farce (something else which is so French it does not easily translate to other cultures) now enter in as Emilie writes more letters. Jean becomes entangled with Maddy. He is fired, re-hired, fired. Jean unwittingly delivers one letter by hand and Maddy, no shoes and in her nightgown, follows him to the hairdresser's. Who finds out the truth and when? And how do they all handle it? A quick answer is 'badly'. Because this is l'amour, it gets more complicated but since when has 'amour fou' stood in the way of true love?

Pierre Salvadori also wrote and directed a film which was even more francais and starred Audrey Tautou, *Hors de Prix* (Priceless) which was an example of film idolatry of materialistic consumerism (as much as the *Sex and the City* films were)!

THE BEAVER

(US, 2010, d. Jodie Foster)

A serious film about Depression (with a credit note at the end that Depression is a family matter, that it is important for a family to be part of the treatment of this mental illness).

We are introduced to Walter Black, married with two children, who has sunk into depression and cannot find a way out. His family don't know how to respond. His wife loves him but finds it more difficult to cope with his erratic behaviour and mood swings. His teenage son resents his father, fearing that he could become like him and noting behaviours that he will try to avoid in his own life. His little boy is closing in on himself. Walter compares himself to his father with resentment and senses that he is a loser. Workers in his toy company are bewildered. He finally gets to his limit and contemplates suicide.

Audiences who may be wary of mental illness may find the rest of the film puzzling or may try to laugh it off. Some psychiatrists may be wary of the method shown for dealing with the depression. Most of us in between may be absorbed by the struggle of a man trying to deal with his inner conflicts and his alternate self by the use of a puppet on his left hand, a toy beaver, who takes on a life and voice and accent, not of its own, but of an outer Walter Black who can argue with the inner Walter and evoke responses from others via the beaver.

One method used in counselling in the past was that of the two chairs. The client speaks from one chair and moves to the other to answer and continue a dialogue that can reveal inner puzzles and struggles. The Beaver seems a variation on this method.

There is a parallel sub-plot (which gets more attention, perhaps, than it needs to when we want to focus on Walter). Porter, the teenage son, is also a troubled young man. One of his activities at school is to write assignments for fellow students (at a price). In that way, he becomes a beaver writer and voice for the students. This comes to a dramatic head when the valedictorian asks him to write her speech. She also has problems, especially with her brother having overdosed. She has expressed herself in vivid graffiti but has retreated into herself in ways similar to Walter's withdrawal.

There is a great deal of personal drama for the family and their inability to cope with depression and with the beaver, except for the little boy who is able to communicate better with his father.

There are no easy answers to these problems but there is hope (which, for many tastes may be too much of American feel-good in the final images). However, there is some irony as Walter Black and the beaver are shown as becoming momentary media celebrities with TV and radio interviews (with Matt Lauer and Jon Stewart as themselves on their talk shows). A recent film that would serve as a companion film is *Helen*, with Ashley Judd as an academic who struggles with depression.

Mel Gibson is very good as Walter Black, showing the ravages of depression, using a different voice for the beaver, dialoguing with himself. Jodie Foster, who also directed the film, plays Walter's wife. Anton Yelchin and Jennifer Lawrence portray the young man and young woman.

The performance stands on its own as a piece of acting, without reference to Mel Gibson's own life, his beaver-like rants and his desperate behaviour. They are not part of the film itself, although as many would note, *Walter Black*, in some ways, may not be all that far from the real Mel Gibson, which does make it interesting that he chose at this stage of his life to act in this particular film.

BEGINNERS

(US, 2011, d. Mike Mills)

Beginners seems an odd title for this film about personal relationships and characters finding themselves. Ewan McGregor plays Oliver, a 38 year old cartoonist who has four failed relationships, lives a rather lonely and morose life, and is grieving at the death of his 79 year old father. We see him, in silent stills, packing up his father's house. Then, he takes his father's dog home to his nondescript apartment. Beginning or end?

Oliver narrates his story, informing us of the death of his mother from cancer, and the fact that, at 75, Hal, his father (played with sensitive aplomb by Christopher Plummer) has not only come out but has taken up a gay lifestyle and has a younger partner, Andy (Goran Visnjic). That certainly heralded a new beginning.

Made up as Sigmund Freud (that has to be more than a clue), he attends a party and encounters an attractive young woman with laryngitis, Anna, a French actress (Melanie Laurent, so good in *Inglorious Basterds* and *The Round-Up*). They click or, rather, she clicks more than he, though he wants to click with her. Another beginning. (But, he laments that his life has been of separations and deaths, endings.)

The film moves fluidly in and out of the different time zones, the present, his childhood past, his father's last years. There are also various devices that alert audiences to reflect, like the collage of images of the sky, and of presidents, in 1955 when Oliver's parents married, in 2003 when his father died, in 1971 when Anna was born. The Jack Russell, Arthur, who communes with Oliver (as well as letting the audience know what he is thinking in subtitles) offers some humanity and humour.

The story is very important for writer-director, Mike Mills, because Hal does what Mills' own father did, coming out. Which means that the film is an opportunity for Mills to dramatise important events in his life as well as explore his middle aged self. While this is important for Mills, it is not always engaging for the audience as Oliver, despite a few valiant attempts at cheering himself up, for instance, by huge writing huge graffiti, is quite a sad sack of a human being and it is not so easy to identify with him or even empathise when he is obviously asking us to. This is much easier to do with Hal and with Anna. Which makes the film something of a take it or leave it experience.

CAPTAIN AMERICA, THE FIRST AVENGER

(US, 2011, d. Joe Johnston)

Steve Rogers, the puny little fellow who tries to enlist in World War II, in the steps of his mother and father who served their country, but who is constantly rejected because of a long list of ailments, is a much more human character than Tony Stark, Iron Man, Thor or Bruce Banner, The Hulk. They are Marvel Comics four Avengers (and the end of this film has quite an enticing trailer for the 2012 release of all four together in *The Avengers*). Even when Steve is transformed into a heroic-sized hulk, he is sympathetic. And then he becomes Captain America, also sympathetic.

The advantage of this film is that it is set in 1942 and turns into a war movie – or a war movie that draws on Marvel Comic heroics. This is a re-interpretation of the war and its battles – if Quentin Tarantino can rewrite war history according to his lights, then why not the exploits of Captain America?

Dr Erskine (an always good value Stanley Tucci) chooses Steve for a transforming experiment. He has already had some success in Germany before the war, changing Nazi Johann Schmidt into the superhuman Red Skull. Hugo Weaving glowers and snarls very effectively, even when he removes his mask and is seen, Red Skull and all.

But, what to do with the hulk-hunk Steve? A senator decides that he is valuable as a war bond sales promoter (a bit like the Iwo Jima heroes in *Flags of our Fathers*) and he is sent around the nation with a costume, a set of dancing girls, a theme song and some theatrical pyrotechnics. On a trip to the troops in Italy, however, he is booed. Which means he wants to do something for the country that involves his strength. He discovers that these troops are the squad in which his best friend, Jimmy Barnes (Sebastian Stan) enlisted, and they have been captured by Schmidt. Despite the scepticism of Colonel Phillips (Tommy Lee Jones being Tommy Lee Jones) and the concern of British agent, Peggy Carter (Hayley Atwell), he goes and conquers and frees them all.

The only thing left to do, of course, is to confront Red Skull. Which he does, though not quite with the ending we might have imagined.

This is good old escapist fare, a combination of action and patriotic gestures, a touch of romance, sinister uber-Nazi soldiery and Toby Jones as an evil scientist to match the good scientist. Captain America is the All-American hero – and, happily, he will be back.

CARS 2

(US, 2011, d. John Lasseter)

Cars has been the least interesting and appealing of the steady string of successes from Pixar animation. They have won most of the Oscars for Best Animation feature for the least eight years. Cars did not win. (Australia's *Happy Feet* won that year.) On the other hand, it had its entertaining moments, the personalising of the cars, their way of talking (and the actors, from Owen Wilson, Paul Newman and Larry, the Cable Guy, providing eccentric voices), the action in the races and the comic touches.

Expectations for a sequel? Not so high, despite the fact that Cars 2 has been directed by the head of Pixar itself, John Lasseter. I gradually warmed to it, despite the fact that at the session I attended there were a number of unengaged very little girls for whom the film was definitely not made. Cars and Cars 2 are a bit macho in their plots and characters, though this one has a British female secret agent car.

The secret agent story was a bit of a surprise. And with a very evident Michael Caine voicing the main agent, with Emily Mortimer as Holly, his young aide, the spy story is the main focus. Which puts Owen Wilson's Lightning McQueen, the champion racing car and his exploits and Italian rival, Francesco (John Turturro), somewhat into the background. But, into the foreground comes the comic character of the first film, Mater, the rusty old towtruck from Radiator Springs. If you want to know how Mater can become involved in espionage in Japan, Paris, the Italian Riviera and in London, collaborating with the British, you will have to see the film.

Larry the Cable Guy comes into his own as Mater and is the most prominent character in the film. He is the auto version of the Little Guy who is underestimated by everyone as more than a bit of a fool (the British think this is his genius as a cover for his work as an agent), is told off by McQueen, but who, of course, saves the day after a chase around London and is reconciled with everyone.

The basic message of the film is a green one, strongly critical of oil companies and manoeuvres to prevent the expansion of alternate sources of energy. The trouble is that the villain of the piece is obvious early on.

Not the greatest of Pixar's efforts (think of *Finding Nemo*, *The Incredibles*, *Ratatouille*, *Wall-E*, *Up* and the *Toy Story* films) but more entertaining than expected.

THE EAGLE

(UK, 2011, d. Kevin Macdonald)

In 2000, *Gladiator* and its win at the Oscars gave the Roman Empire films a push with audiences. The television series, *Rome*, was one of the major results. There have been several films about the Roman legions in action around the empire. *The Last Legion* and *Centurion* both took audiences to Britannia, the latter focusing on the disappearance of the Ninth Legion in Scotland and the building of Hadrian's world, beyond which was the world of the barbarians. *The Eagle* takes up this story again.

With the disappearance of the legion and its 5000 men, the family name of its leader fell into disrepute. Twenty years later, his son comes to Britain to bring back honour to the family name. He proves himself to be an alert commander and brave, saving his garrison from marauding Druids. However, he is injured, decorated by Rome but discharged. He takes the opportunity to go privately into the now Scottish highlands to find and bring back the eagle standard of the legion. He is accompanied by a slave whom he had persuaded a crowd at the gladiator fights to turn thumbs up for even though the slave offered no resistance to the fighter.

That is the first part of the film, a Roman legion story. The second part consists of the rugged journey and survival beyond Hadrian's wall. The third part is the meeting with the Seal People of the northern coasts where tables are turned and the Roman becomes the slave of the man he saved.

Will Marcus find the standard? Will he bring it back? Actually, will he survive, and what role does his slave play?

That is what you will find out if you enjoy Roman empire adventures like this one.

The film has been directed by documentary maker, Kevin Macdonald (and some have complained that his meticulous documentary techniques mean that the film is not always interesting or exciting). But, while there are battles, this is more a story of a quest beyond limits and a friendship between servant and master.

The film-makers have opted for the accent policy of such films as *The Last Temptation of Christ* where (for American audiences) the main characters speak with American accents and the outsiders speak with British accents (as did David Bowie's Pilate in *Last Temptation*). This is true even of British actors like Mark Strong who portray legionaries. The unlikely lead actor for Marcus is Channing Tatum, better known for hunk and heartthrob roles. His character is both honourable and sullen and he conveys this. Donald Sutherland appears as his uncle. The British accent is for Jamie Bell as the slave, Esca.

Based on a popular book by Rosemary Sutcliffe.

FIVE DAYS OF AUGUST/ FIVE DAYS OF WAR

(US/ Georgia/ 2011, d. Renny Harlin)

Which five days of war, in which August? The answer is early August, 2008, when Russia and Georgia were involved in a short war over the region of Southern Ossetia and whether it belonged to Russia or to Georgia. The Russians invaded – and are still in occupation.

The treatment of war is much the same as in many similar films. The interest is in being offered a glimpse of the war, the people, the suffering, the political issues, the response of the Russian leadership of Medvedev and Putin, the decisions of the Georgian leadership. While there are scenes of battle, the focus, in fact, is on foreign journalists and their role in bringing images of atrocities to the world's attention (even when the networks show no interest and are concentrating on the opening of the Beijing Olympics).

There is no doubt that the film is on the side of Georgia. The Russians are presented as barbaric invaders. Some commentators have felt that the film is propaganda. Others argue that it is not propaganda even though it firmly presents the views of Georgia. There is an underlying desire in the screenplay, despite the war and cruelty, for peace and freedom. And the film opens with the quotation about the first casualty of war being truth. There is also a statistic that in the past decade over 5000 journalists have been killed in war situations.

The film opens in Iraq 2007 where casual chat on the way to an interview is prelude to a deadly ambush. The central character, journalist Tom Anders (Rupert Friend) and his cameraman Sebastian Ganz (Richard Coyle) go to Georgia at the invitation of their journalist friend, Dutchman (Val Kilmer). As the war breaks out and there are uncertainties, they go up country and film a local wedding which, we know, is going to be bombed. What follows is a rescue of the bride, her sister who has been educated in the US, and their South Ossetian father. They are helped, and later rescued, by a Georgian fighter (Jonathan Schaech), but they also have to hide and witness atrocities carried out by a Cossack soldier. They are captured and interrogated to find the memory card with the incriminating footage, especially by a Russian commander (Rade Serbedzija) whose son was killed in Afghanistan and who has a world-weary view of war.

In the meantime, the president (Andy Garcia) and his cabinet are appealing for US help, not forthcoming, and for help from the European Union (eventually).

To a large extent, the material is familiar, characters and situations from other war films: the bawdy journalistic chat and drinking, the heroic rescues, the split second rescues, the rounding up of the innocent, the long marches of people

displaced.

Director, Renny Harlin, is better known as a director of action films like Cliffhanger and The Long Kiss Goodnight.

Despite these limitations and the fact that the hero is not particularly likeable, we become involved in the crises, perhaps remembering this war vaguely, how it impinged (or did not) on our consciousness, and being reminded of so many similar (and worse) wars in our time.

KUNG FU PANDA 2

(US, 2011, d. Jennifer Yuh)

Kung Fu Panda entertained millions of children and adults, a large panda, fond of eating and a touch lazy, was transformed into an action hero, despite himself. Voiced in his characteristic American voice, he made Po the panda, a comic creation, listening to his master (Dustin Hoffman) and surrounded by his fellow action characters (voiced by Angelina Jolie, Seth Rogen, Lucy Liu, David Cross and Jackie Chan).

Well, they are all back. Certainly, the novelty has gone but, despite the hustle and bustle, this sequel lacks the oomph of the original. No particular reason to see it, except to form a re-acquaintance with the familiar names and places.

The addition this time is a villainous peacock, Shen, who defies his parents, is exiled and makes plans to become the Emperor of China. He has a squad of goons and is involved in stealing metal to melt and mould into weapons.

For the most part, this is Po trying to find out about his parents after he realises that Mr Ping is not his real father and the battle between Po and Shen, lots of shenanigans, of course, entertaining but not so memorable.

Gary Oldman is the voice of Shen and there are cameo voices from Michelle Yeoh, Jean Claude Van Damme, Danny McBride, Dennis Haysbert, Victor Garber. My favourite is Po's father, the noodle-making Mr Ping, the goose who adopted Po, voiced by James Hong, who is worried about Po learning about his past and greatly relieved when Po returns home.

MARS NEEDS MOMS

(US, 2011, d. Simon Wells)

An expensive animation film which did not succeed at the box office. The title may be enticing, but it may also seem too absurd.

For those who thought the red planet could not support life, here is an alternative scenario. Under the surface is a huge world, rather mechanistic, where children are hatched and looked after by robot nannies and the men are just fools kept in custody. There is a witch of a supervisor of the women (Mindy Sterling, erstwhile Nazi-like harridan assistant of Dr Evil against Austin Powers). But, one of her helpers, Ki (Elisabeth Harnois) who picks out mothers on earth who teach their children obedience and who are then abducted to give their powers to the Martian nannies, has also been looking at some old earth TV from hippy days (and has absorbed their jargon). On Mars, there is also a human whose mother died there and he has grown up on the planet, Gribble (Dan Fogler).

Joan Cusack is the victim mom here and, speaking of Dr Evil, his son was played by Seth Green, who is Milo the boy who has spoken hurtfully to his mother, wants to say he is sorry and who finds himself leaping aboard the Martian spacecraft.

Which means that a lot of the film is about Milo on Mars, searching for his mother and being helped by Gribble. There is a time limit, a build-up to an emotional climax, the unmasking of the supervisor who has lied about Martians not being love-and-family-oriented.

By the end, this is a wholesome affirmation of parental love and the need for children to be loving to their parents.

Director, Simon Wells, has worked on a number of animation films including Fievel Goes West and Prince of Egypt as well as the live action version of his grandfather's novel, The Time Machine. The animation process used here is that of live action where actors perform and are linked up to camera and sound, the animation being drawn over them: Performance Capture, which was used for Polar Express, Beowulf and A Christmas Carol. That means that the adult Seth Green can be ten year old Milo with a younger voice dubbed. Part of the interest of the final credits is a fourfold divided screen presentation of many of the scenes being filmed and audiences seeing what the process is.

MEEK'S CUTOFF

(US, 2010, d. Kelly Reichardt)

There is no denying that Meek's Cutoff is a fine piece of film craft.

However, the director, Kelly Reichardt, belongs to the contemplation rather than action school of film-making, an approach that makes demands on the attention and patience of its audience so that they remain focused in their contemplation and reflection. Which means that her films (like the dog friendship story, Wendy and Lucy) are not for the easily bored and, especially, not for the quickly bored. 'No sense of adventure' was one complaint that missed the point of the film,

It is no real surprise at the end of the film to read that Kelly Reichardt also edits her films. Which means she is in complete control of how the film looks and how it is paced.

Almost any image taken from the film would make a beautiful contribution to a book of such stills. Each one is composed so a viewer could gaze on it for some time in some wonder and admiration. Her camera does not move a great deal. The movement is generally within the screen frame. And she holds the camera for much longer than the contemporary attention span usually manages. There is time for appreciation. There is time for reflection.

The story of Meek's Cutoff is that of a small pioneer group making their way west to Oregon in 1845, taking a shortcut on the advice of their guide. There are three couples, one of whom has a young son, and their guide, Meek (who is not meek at all). Along the way, they encounter an Indian and capture him. Meek is a grizzled veteran of the west with no tolerance of Indians, full of vicious stories about Indian vicious behaviour. The group hope that the Indian, to survive himself, will lead them to much needed water.

The film opens with the wagons and the women wading through refreshing water. Without words for some time, the film reveals to us the people, their situation and how they are dealing with it. We come to realise that these are very ordinary people, walking on (and they walk and walk behind the ox-pulled wagons), hoping for their future but still uncertain of their present, coping with the mundane detail of meals, rationing, broken axles and trusting in Meek. The journey takes its toll physically and mentally, especially when racist superiority, much of it unconscious, begins to emerge in their fear of the Indian.

This is the material of a short story rather than a novel-like narrative. It is a glimpse of the pioneer treks and hardships. Sterling performers like Michelle Williams, Bruce Greenwood, Will Patton, Paul Dano and Shirley Henderson create credible and vulnerable characters (even Meek). Ron Rondeaux is the Indian who speaks no English, whose attitudes and behaviour, including his prayer, baffle the pioneers. With the realism of the vast plains and hills of the American northwest and the meticulous composition for each frame, from close-ups to the wagon procession in the far distance, this is a film of great beauty as well as an exploration of human nature under stress.

Winner of the SIGNIS award at the Venice Film Festival, 2010.

PRECIOUS LIFE

(Israel, 2010, d. Shlomi Eldar)

In a rather intense conversation during this moving documentary, Raida, a Muslim mother from Gaza who is in an Israeli hospital with her baby son who was born with no immune system, declares that, for her, life is not precious. Rather, she says, it is 'normal'. So is death. She sees this as part of her Muslim faith. The director, Shlomi Eldar, offscreen, says that life is precious, from that of the little baby to all people. He has been a war correspondent for Israeli media in Gaza for many years and has witnessed death.

This conversation is at the core of Precious Life. It shows two vastly different points of view about life and the conclusions that can be drawn from those beliefs, especially in the context of the long conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis. The two go on to speak about Jerusalem, who owns the city (both lay claim) and whether it could be shared with the other side (Raida saying it could not). This makes Shlomi angry.

Yet, the film is about peace and life and being able to get to know the other side, helping and hoping that the next generation (or the one after) will have children who can play with one another.

The narrative of the film is not about peace and war as such although war is never far away and, in fact, erupts at the end of 2008, the film offering vivid footage of the bombardment of Palestinian villages and homes – and some Israelis asking whether such massive retaliation is in proportion to the attacks by Palestinian rockets.

The narrative of the film is about life. An Israeli doctor, concerned about the baby and the dangers to its life, offers the facilities of an Israeli hospital. The film director heads an appeal for donations for surgery and is quickly successful with money from an anonymous donor (whose son had been killed in fighting and who wanted to make his life one of helping people live). The doctor is admirable – and is called up to be a field doctor in the war which followed. The Palestinian couple are ordinary people. She has strong opinions (and can speak good English). He is more neutral, although, when his wife becomes pregnant again, we see he is of a patriarchal frame of mind. The divisions between Israel and Gaza are evident, not only in the war footage, but in the difficulties experienced by Palestinians at the checkpoints, at one stage, the baby allowed in but the mother kept at the border. The film ends with Raida's first visit to Jerusalem and her feeling she cannot enter the mosque because she has just given birth. The camera focuses on her face.

Precious Life lives up to its title – and its message emphasises the need for talk, mutual understanding and co-operation so that precious life is preserved not destroyed.

STAKE LAND

(US, 2010, d. Jim Michle)

What is the meaning of the seemingly inordinate amount of interest in vampires on the big screen and on the small screen in recent years? Is it simply an enjoyment of the horror genre and the fans' exhilaration at yet another variation on the themes? Is there more? It would seem that the Twilight series indicates that there could be more – and that the different films respond to different age groups.

Stake Land is a modest contribution to the vampire films. It is rather more like a zombie film rather than a vampire film that the dialogue indicates. But, it also joins a growing number of 'post-apocalyptic' stories where survivors roam a devastated and plague-ridden America, destroying the monstrous living dead and journeying in hope towards a promised land. Films as diverse in intention and tone as *The Road*, *The Book of Eli* and *Zombieland* come to mind. These films are wake-up calls to re-assess our attitudes towards the environment, the possibilities of cataclysms and the puzzle of the good and evil that is in all of us.

Not all has been lost in Stake Land. There are vamps and living dead but there are also isolated communities, healthy survivors, some of whom have travelled north to find 'New Eden'. Older Clint Eastwood westerns have suggested themselves to some reviewers, especially *The Outlaw Josey Wales*. This means that Stake Land is not just your average zombie and slasher thriller. There is more substance (along with some gory despatching of the vampires) in the story and screenplay, more worth thinking about. There is much greater sense of humanity in the characters and their plight as a small remnant, like that in *Josey Wales*, follow a leader who could save them from the enemy and lead them to a hopeful future.

The leader is Mister (played by the writer of the screenplay, Nick Damici). He saves a young lad, Martin (Connor Paolo) when his parents are killed. Along the way, where Mister is the slayer of the monsters, they encounter a pregnant young woman, a black man and a middle-aged nun (who seemed to resemble an older Kelly McGillis until the final credits tell us that it was Kelly McGillis) who is pursued by a madly zealot group, part fundamentalist Christian, part neo-Nazi. Her character, with habit initially, with crucifix and a small statue of Mary, gives the film an added level of interest, especially in the moral choices she has to make in situations of dire peril.

What adds to the quality of what is basically a genre piece is the fine photography of the American landscapes and their remote beauty, surviving the catastrophes, and the often quiet piano score which gives pause for reflection instead of out and out action.

A surprisingly better and more interesting take on survival in a post-apocalyptic world.

A range of interesting films this month. On the popular level, *The Rise of the Planet of the Apes* is a much better than average holiday fantasy. *The new Conan the Barbarian* is not.

On a serious level, worth recommending to any institution concerned about conflict resolution is *Face to Face* showing the facilitation of a community conference process.

For human interest, *The Help*, *Jane Eyre* and *Win Win*

BEASTLY
BIG MAMMA'S BOY
CHALET GIRL
CONAN THE BARBARIAN
CONSPIRATOR, The
COWBOYS AND ALIENS
DALE AND TUCKER VS EVIL
FACE TO FACE
FRIENDS WITH BENEFITS
GREEN LANTERN
HELP, The
HOBO WITH A GUN
HORRIBLE BOSSES
ILLUSIONIST, The
JANE EYRE
KIDNAPPED (SEQUESTERAS)
LOVE CRIME
POM WONDERFUL'S GREATEST STORY EVER SOLD
PRIEST
RISE OF THE PLANET OF THE APES, The
SECUESTRADOS (KIDNAPPED)
SENNA
WIN WIN
WOMAN, The

BEASTLY

(US, 2011, d. Daniel Barnz)

In theory, this should have been a surefire success for the popular market. It is a teenage interpretation of the age-old Beauty and the Beast fable. It stars Alex Pettyfer (I Am Number Four) as the beast, High School Musical's Vanessa Hudgens as the beauty and Mary-Kate Olsen as a kind of witch character out of Charmed.

But, it is not a success. Far from it. (This reviewer was prepared to give it full focus during a flight but could not give it the 100% attention it did not deserve.)

The running time is brief. Kyle (Pettyfer) quickly emerges as a smug, mean-minded and dominating presence at school, campaigning for the presidency of a group, tough on his friends, spiteful with his tongue and imagining that he is envied by all. He insults a rival, Kendra (Olsen), who puts a spell on him, transforming his inner ugliness to his outer appearance which means that he has to withdraw and live alone, being educated by a blind tutor (Neil Patrick Harris) and a housekeeper to whom he has been particularly nasty (Lisa Gay Hamilton). They both seem remarkably tolerant. His often-absent father supports him.

He rescues Linda (Hudgens) from thugs and takes her to his house for safe keeping. And so, Beauty and the Beast.

It is not all that interesting to watch since it is aimed directly at a teen audience (who like their entertainment in the Twilight zone) and even they have tended to give blogging thumbs down. Which means that there is space for doing a similar story, only better.

BIG MAMMA'S BOY

(Australia, 2011, d. Franco de Chiera)

Not to be confused with the Martin Lawrence comedies where he is a detective disguised as Big Momma for his investigations. This one has an Australian spelling for Mamma and is distinctly Australian – or, at least, Italian-Australian.

If you were to put your mind to writing an outline for a screenplay about a middle-aged man still living with his doting Italian mother, with a grandfather in the background, who works in real estate and seems to be good at it, who sings (well) at a club and who encounters a co-worker with whom he falls in love but Mamma cannot accept because she is not Italian and who engineers a girl to come out from the homeland..., then you would probably come up with most of what is in the film. You might be a bit more restrained on the sex angle and relationships though agreeing with the female characters who find the macho office types more than irksome. You would probably have all the food elements. You might not have thought to have some Greek characters as well, especially the boss of the agency. But, the writer and star of the film, Frank Lotito, has – and they are all here. Which puts this in the tradition of Wogboy, Take Away and the Kings of Mykonos, although they were a bit better.

This means that Big Mamma's Boy has its humorous moments, its stereotypical moments, its crass moments and, ultimately, its heart in the right place. It is not demanding in any way.

Frank Lotito does not create a consistent character, bashful one moment, brashful the next, under Mamma's thumb one moment, then defying her, in love with Katie one moment and ready to two-time her the next. Maybe, Lotito is actually saying Italian-Australian men are like this. Hard to know. Carmelina de Guglielmo fulfils all the expectations for Mamma. But, Holly Valance is attractive as Katie and, though she does her best, I was not persuaded that she really loved our hero and could spend the rest of her life with him after their move from Eaglemont to Ivanhoe – a Melbourne story.

CHALET GIRL

(UK, 2011, d. Phil Traill)

It was a bit of a shock to realise that this was a British film – having assumed it was American. It does sound like one of those American films about young people, a junior romantic comedy. In fact, it is very much like that in plot and types of characters. However, there is a bit more of British edge and some comic touches about it that puts it a notch or two above its US equivalents.

The film is also absolutely formulaic – or predictable (which sound a little less positive). But, the formula is tried and true: young girl from the wrong side of the tracks (actually, here from a working-class part of London) stuck in a dead-end, fast-food outlet job, but with a skill that is going to come in more than handy when a competition arises (skateboarding here which will translate into snowboarding), dead mother, old codger father (a sympathetic Bill Bailey), a chance for a job at a chalet in the Austrian Alps among the posh and snobbish, a romance with the son and heir, some deception, frustration, temptation to give up, a chance because of a generous gesture, victory, and having it all. Perhaps that spoils it by outlining the plot, but once it starts, that is what you would be expecting anyway.

Because Felicity Jones is a perky, common-sensed and interestingly attractive actress, we are on side right from the start. And, talk about product placement, not just the Tesco bags which do appear, but Austria itself. It looks beautiful, the mountains and snow glittering, the comfortable chalet, the chair lifts and the slopes – plenty of Austria and I wouldn't be surprised if many in the audience decided that there they must go there and that they should take up skiing or snowboarding.

The leading man is Ed Westwick, one of those heartthrobs in the Robert Pattinson vein. He could actually pass for Robert Pattinson's brother. His parents are played by Brooke Shields being haughty and mean and Bill Nighy being surprisingly ordinary and nice.

Our heroine makes some bad judgments despite her common sense, gets tangled in a relationship that she should have given far more thought to – but learning one's lessons and finding true love, which means commitment, is what most romantic comedies are about.

CONAN THE BARBARIAN

(US, 2011, d. Marcus Nispel)

Thirty years ago, there was a fad for swords and sorcery movies. The best-known of these was Conan the Barbarian, followed by Conan the Destroyer. And, of course, it starred in pre-Terminator days, the future governor of California. I don't think he has to worry about his Conan laurels. And, though not gifted with political prophecy, I don't think Jason Momoa will ever be governor of California (but the Reagan era put paid to such non-prophecies).

This version is quite ugly and brutal all the way through. (And the Foley talent works very hard and loud with bone-crunching effect.) Conan, in a rare moment of pause let alone reflection, says after Tamara, the heroine who looks demure but learns to despatch enemies with Conan-like gusto, asks Conan whether there is any meaning in existence or

whether it is all chaos rather than destiny, 'I live, I love, I slay, I am content'. Seems as though many audiences are less content than Conan. While the character from Robert Sherwood's comics is there, and this tends to be a prequel to the Schwarzenegger epics, it is all rather the same and the same and the same, confrontations, battles, slayings. And it is often literally dark (more so when you are wearing the dark 3D glasses).

One of the difficulties is that while Jason Momoa looks the part, he does not really stand out, does not have the charismatic presence of, say, Dwayne Johnson, who could have been a more vigorous and even a twinkle-in-the-eye Conan.

Stephen Lang does villains well and he is a loathsome character here, with Rose McGowan as his smouldering witch daughter. Ron Perlman appears early as Conan's father who is killed giving his son the motivation for revenge.

Not very well written. Not very well directed. Not very good at all.

THE CONSPIRATOR

(US, 2011, d. Robert Redford)

For those who enjoy a well-written and well-acted look back into history, especially if it involves a court case.

The conspirator in questions is Mary Surratt whose son, John, was one of the rebel group led by John Wilkes Booth, who had planned to kidnap the president and hold him to ransom in exchange for the freedom of Southern prisoners. John Wilkes Booth famously shot Abraham Lincoln during a performance at the Ford Theatre in Washington in April 1865. There were plans to attack the Vice President as well as the Secretary of State. The conspirators met at the boarding house run by Mary Surratt. She was arrested as being party to the plot and was tried in a military court.

The film is also a portrait of Frederick Aiken, the young lawyer who had severed in the Union Army, who was deputed to defend Mary Surratt, something he found abhorrent in the aftermath of what he experienced in fighting and in the hostile atmosphere in the North after the assassination. He assumed her guilty. He does his duty and discovers the case is not so open and shut, that the authorities, especially the Secretary for War, and the army chiefs, had really made up their minds that, allegedly, to satisfy public opinion against the conspirators, and to ensure that the South would not attack the North in any way, Mary Surratt had to be executed.

While the film follows the detail of the trial, it also shows the bigotry in national feeling after such a politically violent event as well as the repercussion on the young lawyer and his personal and professional integrity.

The film has been directed by Robert Redford who obviously has strong views on partisan stances in the name of patriotism. This was seen in his *Lions for Lambs* which did not succeed with critics or the public, looking as it did into American involvement in Afghanistan and the attitudes of authorities and the media. It is clear in *The Conspirator* that audiences should be remembering the feeling after the September 11th attacks in 2001 and the hostile attitudes to people from the Middle East and to Muslims. The trial sequences here should make audiences reflect on cases at Guantanamo Bay.

But, putting those considerations aside, we can enjoy *The Conspirator* as a drama that takes us back to the Civil War and its aftermath.

James Mc Evoy has emerged as a versatile actor in very different films, *Narnia*, *Wanted*, *The Last Station*. He is Frederick Aiken. Robin Wright gives a quietly intense and dignified performance as Mary Surratt. Danny Huston is the prosecutor and Colm Meaney, the overbearing and biased president of the court, over-ruling all Aiken's objections. There is also a strong performance from Kevin Kline as the implacable Secretary for War, from Evan Rachel Wood as Anna Surratt and Stephen Root as a turncoat witness.

Some critics have complained that *The Conspirator* is simply a filmed history lesson. It is – but it is much more.

COWBOYS AND ALIENS

(US, 2011, d. Jon Favreau)

Almost fifty years ago there was the absurdly specific title, *Santa Claus vs the Martians*. That was quite a juxtaposition. *Cowboys and Aliens* seems an absurd title, not so specific. In the past there were these small science-fiction-fantasy B-budget entertainments. Now we have the A-budget, A-cast entertainment that takes the old conventions of the western and the old convention s of those 1950s alien invasion melodramas, put them together and, presto, *Cowboys and Aliens*.

Not that it isn't a holiday entertainment, an upmarket throwback to the old serials and matinees days. And who to give it some respectability? The present grim-faced James Bond himself, Daniel Craig and Indiana Jones, now a grizzled, gruff and raspy Harrison Ford. Actor Jon Favreau directed the two Iron Man movies.

It all opens in the old West, but we have an immediate clue when we see the 21st century wristband that Jake Lonergan (Craig) is wearing. But, the screenplay wisely keeps tantalising us. We wonder about this man, at first with no name and no memory, whether he is the alien. We get hints as the film goes on. An explanation (perfectly logical in the circumstances) towards the end of the film.

Then there are plenty of cowboys, toughs and robbers, cattle hands and cattle barons (Ford is the patriarchal baron), the western town, the sheriff (Keith Carradine), the wastrel son of the baron (Paul Dano) who likes to throw his somewhat puny weight around, and his Indian minder (Adam Beach). There is a mysterious woman, Ella (Olivia Wilde) who is clearly something more than she seems. After some western standoffs and arrests, the aliens get going on the town, mystifying one and all. Suddenly, in this war of the worlds where revolvers don't stand a chance against space ships, individuals are being instantly swooped and swept into the air and into the spacecraft. And there are lots, LOTS, of explosions.

That obviously means a posse has to go in pursuit and the lone hero has to show his mettle. There are confrontations with the Indians, but this is a 21st century perception of the 19th, so the Indians combine forces with the cowboys (and the racist baron) to rescue the human hostages and destroy the aliens. The aliens themselves look like beings straight out of the old movies, no glamour, just monstrous (especially in size and in close-ups). We discover their dastardly plan and are ready to cheer on the goodies against these creatures (the word 'alien' not being available at that time to describe what is going on).

This is a close encounter of the reverse kind.

What we have is a bit popcorn holiday movie and it has its moments. The thought came while watching the familiar elements of both western and science fiction that it still had quite some originality – but a derivative originality. And, deciding on this phrase to end the review, I enjoyed it all the more.

FACE TO FACE

(Australia, 2011, d. Michael Rymer)

A film that should interest all who are involved in disputes and conflict resolution – which means all of us.

David Moore, an Australian workplace consultant, has worked in the area for some years. The process of Community Conferencing was used in cases of youth justice: an offender, the person attacked, friends, relatives, employers and others were invited, and consented, to be part of the meeting where a facilitated discussion took place whereby members felt free to express themselves and the facilitator enabled responses to be made with an end to finding some kind of resolution. These conferences are also called 'Restorative Justice Conferences'. Clearly this kind of mediation and communication can be more personally effective than courts and litigation. The potential is strong for workplace issues like harassment, for school bullying situations. It has potential for enabling restorative justice in organisations and in religious groups and churches.

Playwright David Williamson became interested in these processes and wrote three plays dramatising cases. David Moore interested director, Michael Rymer (Australian Film Institute winner for *Angel Baby* in 1995) in the plays and he adapted one of them for the screen and directed this film, *Face to Face*.

The screenplay takes advantage of the screen medium. While the main scenes of the film take place in the conference room (with plenty of possibilities for close-ups and for pacy cross-cut editing during interchanges), there are opportunities to go outside the room, for the audience to see episodes played out in fact (which gives the audience the advantage over the characters themselves, and the facilitator, because we see all episodes whereas the characters can only remember what they were involved in).

One of the main strengths of the film is David Williamson's dialogue, realistic, sometimes rough and ready in an Australian expletive way. His skill in arranging the interchanges and confrontations so that audience sympathy shifts as we understand the character better, find that we were judging on appearances and, as the characters begin to realise, there are many factors in a conflict so that it is not simply a matter of 'just clearing it up and getting an apology'.

In this case, drawn from actual notes, a young worker has crashed into the back of his employer's car because he was angry at being fired. He is not an intelligent young man but he was happy with his job. We see the crash and are

obviously sympathetic towards the company manager and his wife who sees the aftermath. (How would we feel if it happened to us?). However, as the mediation continues, all kinds of problems arise: the butt of jokes on a building site, racist slurs and the anger they incur, authorities knowing what was going on and not intervening; then there are the site problems, communications and issues of pay which sow discontent and give rise to anger and harassment; then there are the financial issues of people living beyond their means, envy; there are also relationship issues, within marriage and outside it. It is surprising how much material the film gets through in its not very long running time.

The acting is persuasive. We can believe that all the characters are real. They have enough solid Williamson dialogue to speak. They have blind spots and hostilities. But they are challenged to face them.

Of course, someone will say it is all very contrived. But, that is the point. It is a contrived process for justice. And it relies on the skill of the facilitator, both sympathetic and fair and firm. I think most audiences will be drawn into the dispute – not too far from some of our own experiences, and will be moved by the moments of resolution.

Matthew Newton is the facilitator and does a fine job of showing how it could be done. Luke Ford stands out as the young man with a short fuse, the target of workers' jokes that have dire consequences. Vince Colosimo is believable as the boss (who, as he realises, has very few redeeming qualities). Sigrid Thornton is his long-suffering wife. An excellent group of character actors bring the proceedings alive: the young man's mother, the foreman, the Arab worker (who came to the country aged eight but is still a target of jokes), the mousy accountant, the attractive PA, the young man's best friend.

Always an interesting film. But, it should also prove a useful film for studying and discussion.

FRIENDS WITH BENEFITS

(US, 2011, d. Will Gluck)

There is something distinctive about so many of the American romantic comedies in recent times. When we say 'romantic comedy', many of us think of the rather nice romances of the past, G or PG in their style and humour, or the 'screwball comedies' which were so popular in the 1930s and have become classics. Think *It Happened One Night* – which is now almost eighty years old. 21st romantic comedies tend not to be G or PG rated. *Friends with Benefits* is one of these.

The modern romantic comedy has a lot of screwball behaviour and jokes (I hadn't intended any innuendo when I just typed this but I realised immediately that it is there and is relevant). But, the language is often direct and frank. The situations are also often direct and frank and not neatly moral. Sex scenes are often not inhibited. But, with the most popular of them, especially those produced and/or directed by Jud Apatow, they start looking and sounding rather raucous and permissive. But, the characters go through some painful experiences. They gain some wisdom. They finish up with an emphasis on commitment that they did not anticipate at the beginning.

The best of these contemporary romantic comedies, which many older audiences are put off because of their directness and tend to think of as offensive, make some sense to the audience in their 20s and 30s and are alerts to this audience that relationships, friendships and love require something deeper than the original shenanigans.

Friends with Benefits starts with two couples breaking up. One, he, in Los Angeles, is an art designer for a website. One, she, in New York, is a headhunter of talent for companies. When they meet in New York where she wants to recruit him to work for the magazine, *GQ*, they click. Wanting to avoid the clichés of popular romantic comedy and movies (which they list and the movie sends up, often quite amusingly), they decide that sex is possible, not love, while they become best friends. Needless to say, ultimately they...

Justin Timberlake does very well as Dylan, the designer, who is reserved in emotions, protecting his deeper self. Mila Kunis is vivacity personified as Jamie, an intense theorist about friendship, cautious about love, but who falls in love despite herself. The characters are better written and performed than in many similar films.

Patricia Clarkson as Jamie's lighthearted wayward mother and Richard Jenkins' as Dylan's sympathetic father struggling with Alzheimers are able to offer advice and urge their children on to love.

There are some funny one-liners and incidental jokes, a send up of gooeey romance films and Woody Harrelson as the flamboyantly gay sports editor at *GQ*.

This is life as it is rather than as it should be – except that it acknowledges this and tries to do something about it.

THE GREATEST STORY EVER SOLD

(US, 2011, d. Morgan Spurlock)

Morgan Spurlock has proven himself as a documentarist but also as film-maker with a sly sense of humour and with his tongue in his cheek. This was true of his previous spoof on the search for the leader of Al Qaeda, 'Where in the Hell is Osama bin Laden?'. He had to take his tongue out of his cheek a bit for the film before that, 'Supersize Me', so that he could go on a month's opposite of a McDonalds' Ramadan, by eating only at the fast food outlets and indulging in Supersizing to discover what it would do to him. He had his satire while he ate it.

This time, a lesser effort than the previous two, he is able to have his cake and eat it too. That is, he spoofs a subject that he is dependent on for making his film.

Making a play on The Greatest Story Ever Told, he indulges it so that all advertising in the film is 'the greatest' of everything. And that is what the film is about, advertising, specifically, product placement in the movies.

The film is about the making of the film – but mainly before the film is made. Spurlock genially, sometimes self-deprecatingly, takes us through a process of making a pitch to companies to become sponsors for his film and contribute to the budget. He also approaches marketing experts, program analysis experts and legal advisers. We sit in on all these discussions. Lots of being turned down. Then with Pom Wonderful (a drinks – or, as they say in the US – a beverage company) coming on board, he is off and running fast.

This means that the bulk of the film is about the process and looking behind the scenes of the marketing world – with a number of references to movies. Finally, there are some commercials for the sponsors and a gig on late night television with Jimmy Fallon promoting the film (and we see the extent of all possible locations for promotion, literally everywhere) which becomes part of the film itself.

Spurlock also consults Noam Chomsky and interviews Ralph Nader – and there is an enjoyable gag at the end with Ralph Nader accepting a sponsor's gift.

We probably knew quite a bit of this already or, at least, suspected it. But, it is enjoyable to watch it in action, extraverted American style.

GREEN LANTERN

(US, 2011, d. Martin Campbell)

Yet another DC Comics superhero. Others include Batman and Superman. In fact, this presentation of Green Lantern more than resembles Superman. We open in space, on far distant planets where Guardians keep an eye on the universe (sitting aloft on tall pillars) and delegate the powers of Green Lantern, a community of protectors, to the thousands who keep vigil in the vastness of space. However, an imprisoned evil power, Parallax, has escaped internment and is on the galactic prowl, instilling fear which enables it to devour whole fearful planets and their populations. Obviously, not good.

Despite the spectacle and effects, this seemed more than a bit silly.

Meanwhile on earth, Hal Jordan is a test pilot for a huge corporation and, while transfixed by memories of his ace father who died in a fiery crash, ditches his plane to the dismay of his employers, a wheeler-dealing senator and the workers (who later bash him up). How could he be a superhero when he is a self-confessed 'screw-up'? Actually, the theme of 'I'm only human' is a plus for him so that he does not suffer from hubris when he finds he is the chosen one for earth (read US). Ryan Reynolds has been in lots of raucous comedies as well as romantic comedy and he is not necessarily a first choice for Green Lantern. Even he has to be reprimanded by a fish alien (with Geoffrey Rush's voice) because of his vanity in his lycra suit.

So we have intergalactic contact and a superhero costume and mask- disguised on earth (though it is a relief when his girl-friend, Carol (Blake Lively), recognises him and helps out). His close friend Tom (Takia Waititi, the NZ director of Eagle vs Shark and Boy) is also in on it. So eventually, is Hector, the unfortunate son of the senator (Tim Robbins) who has been jealous of Hal and Carol, who is brought in to examine the corpse of the hero who landed on earth to recruit Hal, but who is infected by Parallax evil and becomes disfigured in mind and body and becomes the evil human villain (Peter Sarsgaard).

Hal has to do the Superman thing a couple of times, but has to go to the Guardians to train (he is not into that) and to offer himself for the final superheroics against the swirling black cloud that is Parallax. And this after a pep talk from Carol who explains the difference between fearless and courageous.

Come to think of it, this plot and treatment still seems a little silly, so Green Lantern is not one of the best DC Comics superhero movies.

THE HELP

(US, 2011, d. Tate Taylor)

It's not quite accurate to say that one will enjoy *The Help*. Actually, one might be squirming in one's seat at times – for the right reasons. This is a film about American racism, as late as 1967. Some of the sequences are so effective in displaying how seemingly well brought up young woman can be so patronising, condescending and unjust to their maids, 'the help'.

Box-office has been high for *The Help*. It is one of those movies that you realise taps into the wide audience sensibility, that the characters are humane enough for audiences to identify with them, and that the issues are important enough to be concerned about. It's the type of film that turns up with Oscar nominations (a bit like the response to *The King's Speech*), that people vote for, able to overlook some of the stereotyping or other limitations that critics point out, because they liked the film so much and were moved.

The film is an adaptation of a popular novel by a white writer, Kathryn Stockett. The central character of *The Help* is a hopeful white writer, Eugenia 'Skeeter' Phelan, played with sunny confidence and concern by Emma Stone who has shown she is a talented performer in comedies and does very well here, especially in challenging presuppositions about race and the help. But, it is the black women who are at the core of the story, the maids whose ancestors were slaves, whose mothers and grandmothers were slaves in the southern states like Mississippi, which is the location for this story.

Viola Davis has shown great versatility in her roles (a police chief in *Law Abiding Citizen*, an upset mother in *Doubt*). She holds this film together with her rich interpretation of Aibileen, telling her story, patient with hardships, at home with poverty and a son who returned from Vietnam damaged, but spending her days in the homes of the rich, bringing affection to their often neglected children. Then there is Octavia Spencer as the large, amiable but more often irascible, Minny, who perpetrates a literally distasteful trick on the haughtiest of the young mothers in the town. They show different faces of human dignity while locked in a society that still deems them inferior – and thinks it is doing them a favour by building a separated toilet for their use at work (because they have stupid presuppositions about health, hygiene, in different races).

Skeeter persuades Aibileen to tell her story as well as Minny who is initially reluctant. Aibileen writes down her story and, eventually, the other maids tell theirs. Skeeter has a New York publisher connection (Mary Steenburgen) and the stories are published as *The Help*. There are many enjoyably prickly scenes as the locals read the book – and react.

Bryce Dallas Howard must be particularly good as the ringleader of the well-dressed and 'progressive' wives because we cannot help loathing her. By contrast, Jessica Chastain (*The Tree of Life*) is also effective as the 'trailer-trash' wife whom the others despise. For bonus, Allison Janney is Skeeter's mother who has a sad and bigoted story of her own which concerns her former maid, played by veteran Cicely Tyson. And Sissy Spacek is there too as Bryce Dallas Howard's mother who is losing it in the battle against dementia.

This is a film where men take a back seat, either pleasantly supportive husbands, or pleasant young men who suddenly show that they are tarred with the same bigoted brush as the young women.

Perhaps many of the characters are stereotypes of southerners of that era, even acting occasionally in caricature fashion. While that may be a limitation on *The Help* as a work of cinema art, the film works very well in dramatising issues from the past which need to be remembered and repented of, a warning that racism is often virulent just under the surface.

HOBOWITH A SHOTGUN

(Canada, 2010, Jason Eisener)

A very ugly film.

It started as a jokey interlude, some false trailers inserted into the intermission space in the Quentin Tarantino-Robert Rodriguez homage to 70s exploitation drive-in features, *Grindhouse*. Canadian Jason Eisener submitted one, *Hobo with a Shotgun*, which was used in the Canadian release of *Grindhouse*. These trailers were more entertaining than Tarantino's *Death Proof* or Rodriguez *Planet Terror* which comprised *Grindhouse*. But the jokes have gone beyond the joke with 2010's *Machete*, a slasher drama with Rodriguez himself turning a trailer into a feature film. Now, Eisener has 'developed' it into a full-length *Hobo with a Shotgun*.

He takes the title very literally. Rutger Hauer is a vagrant who rides the trains and arrives at a town, ironically called Hope City, which is a mixture of normalcy and anarchy (filmed in Nova Scotia!). Audiences of straight-to-DVD actioners will appreciate the presence of Hauer in so many films like this. The Hobo discovers the ugly side of town which is controlled by a gangster who owns a nightclub and his two absolutely disreputable sons. The many confrontations are staged with sneers, snarls, facial grimaces of disdain – which are so in your face that they seem either stupid or funny or both. The Hobo rarely smiles.

He encounters a young prostitute exploited by the gangsters who takes the Hobo in when he has been violently roughed up (which happens more than once). While local TV reports the chaos, while the locals just stand round intimidated or run away, the Hobo starts on a vigilante mission not of reform but of clearing and cleaning the town of human garbage (including the corrupt police in cahoots with the gangsters). Which is what he does with R 18 graphic violence in close-up – with so much brutality and so many weapons that it is disgustingly preposterous and perverse, which can raise glee for audiences who lap up this kind of thing.

The film is obviously in sympathy with the need for cleansing evils (a striking scene is of a pervert dressed as Santa Claus spying with binoculars at children in a playground – then a goodbye Santa blast, where Santa is an anagram of Satan). However, it follows the Grindhouse lead of slambang action and full-on violence – and torture – to make things right.

Eisener is a better editor (putting both the slam and the bang into his cross-cutting) than he is director. While he does capture the look of the old exploitation films, bright technicolour, the dingy interiors, the squalid exteriors, the seemingly ham performances of the cast in trash dialogue and action, it leaves the audience with the jokey exploitation, focusing on the film itself without much felt need to go beyond it.

HORRIBLE BOSSES

(US, 2011, d. Seth Gordon)

Hitchcock did it seriously. Strangers on a Train. Danny de Vito did it for laughs. Throw Momma from the Train. The three men with horrible bosses note this when they are advised by their ‘murder consultant’ that they should each get rid of another’s boss. Horrible Bosses does not take itself too seriously and plays the scenario for laughs. And, generally, gets them.

We are immediately introduced to Nick (Jason Bateman who does this engaging put upon victim often but well) who is two minutes late to work for his megalomaniac and paranoid boss, Kevin Spacey. Kurt (Jason Sudeikis) gets on well with his boss (Donald Sutherland) but not his cokehead, sex-addict son, a surprising Colin Farrell. Meanwhile, Dale (Charlie Day) is sexually harassed by his dentist (a surprisingly aggressive and lewd Jennifer Aniston). The murder consultant, who has a story of his own, is Jamie Foxx.

The guys get together each evening for a drink and get to talking about what life would be like without their bosses – which leads to a search for a hitman (with a funny offbeat toilet humour detour along the way with Ioann Gruffydd as a ‘wetman’ whom they mistake for a killer). Actually, the film could have been called Bumbling and Bungling Employees, as most of the film is taken up with their casing their targets, intruding into their houses and making a lot of false assumptions and mistakes.

While the mechanism which leads to the resolution of the case, which you might guess when you see what they lose in Kevin Spacey’s bedroom, is contrived, it is nonetheless an entertaining way of getting rid of the bosses.

While the bullying of Spacey and the grossly insensitive exploitation of Farrell are obvious (and irritating for employees and audience), it is the sexual harassment issue that demands a bit more attention. This is role reversal from the usual headline cases – and Kurt is such a womaniser that he can’t quite see Dale’s difficulties – that it highlights the male chauvinist attitudes that cannot recognise sexual harassment for the serious problem that it is. And Jennifer Aniston’s comeuppance is not as drastic as murder but pulls her up dead (so to speak).

Director Seth Gordon has been more of a documentary maker, so he obviously has enjoyed making a comedy. The writers of The Hangover are her again, obviously opting for the raucous and raunchy treatment rather than the refined. In the tradition of The Hangover and Bridesmaids, as they say.

THE ILLUSIONIST

(France, 2010, d. Sylvain Chomet)

Tatischeff is a magician/illusionist who, in the late 1950s, is becoming something of an anachronism in the theatres and

music halls where he performs. He also has a recalcitrant rabbit who won't stay in his hat. Out of work, he travels to London where he is upstaged by a 1960s rock and roll group (and the encores for their adoring female fans). What is he to do? He goes to Scotland, encounters a young woman who believes he is really a magician. Meanwhile, he works in a hotel and cares for the young woman, a father-figure.

Eventually, he goes away, leaving a note to say that he is not really a magician. Fortunately, there is an attentive young man who will love and care for the girl.

That's the plot outline for a screenplay written by Jacques Tati (full name Tatischeff) in the 1950s but never filmed. It has been taken up by director, Sylvain Chomet, who had made the intriguing animation, *Les Triplettes de Belleville* (like *The Illusionist*, Oscar-nominated for Best Animation Film).

For Tati fans (and those who will seek him out after seeing this film and discover his classics, *Jour de Fete*, *M. Hulot's Holiday*, *Mon Oncle* (a scene of which is playing at the local cinema for the magician to watch), *Playtime*), the film will be a delight as well as a wry reminder of Tati's own life and his abandoning one of his daughters. There are also playful, generally wordless, occasions like that of the puppet in the shop window whose price goes down each time we pass until it is still there, but 'Free'.

The animation is a blend of the realistic and the elongated, a bit like the tall, thin Jacques Tati himself and the magician Tatischeff whose walk, gestures and stances, especially hand at the back of the hip, observing, are just like M. Hulot. The backgrounds of Paris, London and Edinburgh have been given special realistic/impressionistic attention. The parody of the rock group and the lead singer is funnily effective.

Brief, slight, evocative.

JANE EYRE

(UK, 2011, d. Cary Fukunaga)

Jane Eyre and *Wuthering Heights*, both published in 1847, by Charlotte Bronte and Emily Bronte, with male noms-de-plume, have become English classics as well as the sources for many film versions. Here is a 21st century version. It is directed by an American, Cary Fukunaga whose other feature film was *Sin Nombre*, a look at migrants from Central America heading for the United States.

We are immersed in the world of Yorkshire, moors, crags, dales, the isolation, the seasons. The atmosphere is very realistic. However, this is a 19th century Gothic tale of a mansion, dark corridors, vast rooms and eerie sounds from a sealed part of the house. But it is also Dickensian in its picture of orphans treated badly by hostile relatives and, even worse, in an orphanage school with canings on the back and a headmaster with a hell and damnation approach to discipline. Jane suffers all this.

When she obtains a position as governess at Thornfield, the mansion of Edward Fairfax Rochester, she bonds with the housekeeper, Mrs Fairfax, and her French student, Adele, the past can be forgotten.

However, the film starts with Jane alone on the moors, running away from Thornfield, drenched on the carriage tracks and finally collapsing at a rectory where she is taken in and cared for by a minister and his sisters. It is from the rectory that the events of Jane's childhood and in the orphanage are seen as flashbacks. When she recovers, she remembers all that happened at Thornfield, of her encounter with the enigmatic and severe Rochester, watching his courtship of a neighbour, Blanche Ingram, then finding that he proposes to her and that she loves him. But, most audiences probably know already what Rochester's secret is and how it will ruin Jane's marriage.

Mia Wasikowska (who was Tim Burton's Alice in *Wonderland*) is a young, rather plain and reserved while assertive, Jane. Though she sometimes looks impassively stoic, she has invited us into her heart and mind so that we know what she is thinking and feeling. Michael Fassbender seems a younger Rochester (though he was five years older than Orson Welles was when he was Rochester in the 1943 version), dashing and, as Jane says, abrupt. Judi Dench plays the housekeeper with great warmth. Jamie Bell is the Reverend St John Rivers, a mature presence reminding us that his Billy Elliott and other juvenile roles are over. There are cameos from Sally Hawkins as Mrs Reid, Simon McBurney as the righteous Henry Brocklehurst and Valentina Cervi as Bertha Mason.

Most audiences will enjoy *Jane Eyre*, even if they have seen other versions (with Joan Fontaine, Susannah York and Charlotte Gainsbourg and Orson Welles, George C. Scott and William Hurt). It is both austere and emotional.

LOVE CRIME

(France, 2010, d. Alain Corneau)

A rather trite title for what is a much more complex murder drama. The main people that the central characters love is themselves.

This is the final film from distinguished French director, Alain Corneau (Choice of Arms and the drama about 17th century music, All the Mornings of the World/Tous les matins du monde). It is a character study as well as a drama for the committing of the perfect crime. I should have picked up the clue (well, I partly did) that had the power to unravel the perfect plan.

The film offers very meaty roles to Ludivine Sagnier and Kristin Scott Thomas (as a French character without some explanation, as in other French films she appears in, that she has a British background). We see the two together at the opening. Kristin Scott Thomas is the boss, supremely confident, and Ludivine Sagnier is the mousy, bespectacled assistant, who is hard-working and intelligent. They profess devotion to each other. The boss also encourages her protégé to seize the day – no matter what. And, of course, this is what happens. And it becomes a battle of wits and tactics, disloyalties and betrayals, some humiliations and, ultimately, vengeful violence.

There is also the boss's husband, debonair and handsome, but financially crooked and emotionally fickle.

The first part of the film sets up the characters and the conflicts in the context of international business deals as well as in more intimate interrelationships. Then the crime.

We see who did it, so it is not a murder mystery. The mystery is how the murderer can get away with it. And the method is not what we (or the police) would expect, fascinating to see how the murder, cold-blooded, was set up, and tracks covered (with some black and white flashbacks to fill out the detail) and a plot to incriminate a third party. Intrigue, on the part of the killer, and intriguing for the audience.

I have been careful not to give away who is murderer and victim – much better if you come to the love crime without knowing what is going to happen.

PRIEST

(US, 2011, d. Scott Stewart)

No, not another film exploring the Catholic priesthood and celibacy. Rather, this is another graphic novel (from a Korean author) showing the struggle between good and evil.

Actually, there is an amount of Catholic background and iconography in the film. However, it simply means that the makers have some familiarity with things Catholic but are offering them as images and plot devices rather than indicating any understanding of the Church. This is explained quite early in what is a short film (under 90 minutes). During the credits, the screen is filled with effective, narrative graphic novel panels which means that we are not to be taking anything literally. This is an alternate world, a world of fantasy.

But, what is this world like?

It is dark, frequently dark. Daylight scenes in the desert come as something of a surprise and a relief. Vampires (looking like mutant monsters rather than variations on a well-dressed Dracula) have conquered the world and forced humans into retreat. However, the Church has nominated priests who are warriors to destroy the vampires and intern them in settlements. These priests, having achieved their task, are now retired and forgotten (like veterans returning home after some wars). Paul Bettany plays the central Priest, a former champion, who keeps dreaming of a trap where his colleague (Karl Urban) fell to his death. He communicates this to the Monsignor in charge. He is played by Christopher Plummer with full authority and resonant voice. The whole thing (and the city visuals) seem like a post-Blade Runner civilisation.

Then, we are in the desert, just like a western, and what seems like a variation on the plot of The Searchers. A young girl is abducted by marauding vampires, her parents killed. Her fiancé, a local sheriff (Cam Gigandet), goes to the Priest to get his help in tracking down the abducted girl. The Monsignor refuses permission for this mission but the Priest goes anyway (you can quickly work out why). Enter the Priestess (Maggie Q), sent to control the Priest but who assists him (with moves and leaps like The Matrix choreography) and causes a great deal of damage including charging an oncoming train (filled with vampire pods) on a motorbike.

It seems that the Priest's partner did not die but has been vampirised – which, of course, leads to a spectacular confrontation, between the Priest and Black Hat, as his is now called.

Actually, Priest delivers exactly what it set out to do with an appeal only to its niche audience of graphic novel fans.

THE RISE OF THE PLANET OF THE APES

(US, 2011, d. Rupert Wyatt)

Many remember their shock at the end of Planet of the Apes (1968) when Charlton Heston rounds a cliff and discovers the prone head of the Statue of Liberty and realises that he is not on some foreign shore on another planet, but the planet of the apes is Earth itself. The film made such an impact that there were four sequels in the late 1960s and early 1970s as well as a television series. Then Tim Burton remade or, as was said at the time, 're-imagined' it in 2001, not one of his best efforts.

Which means that while audiences were interested in another Apes movie, the expectations were, to say the least, mixed. After seeing this film, I would not be against another sequel. The Rise of the Planet of the Apes is pretty good.

We are in the future (space exploration on Mars) though San Francisco looks the same as usual, always attractive and the film makes good use of the streets, the Bay, the Golden Gate Bridge (for a well thought out and executed climax) and the Muir Woods. James Franco is Will, spending years developing a drug to combat senility. His boss (British stage actor, David Oyelowo) is interested only in money-making with little concern about the apes that are used to test the drug. During a demonstration of the drug, one of the apes breaks out and mayhem ensues. Will leaves but takes the drug home to help his father (John Lithgow) who is suffering from dementia. He also takes home a baby ape, Caesar, who becomes part of the household, especially as Will's father recovers and improves.

All might have gone on undisturbed, until Caesar goes outside the house and disturbs a neighbour (who gets his comeuppance during the final credits). Injured, he is taken to a vet, who (as might be guessed, falls in love with Will). She is played by Freida Pinto from Slumdog Millionaire.

When Caesar is in trouble again with the neighbour (trying to drive), he is taken to a monkey pound where all is nice on the surface but it is an animal gaol presided over by Brian Cox and his sadistic son (Tom Felton more villainous than his Draco Malfoy). Of course, it is too much and Caesar (performance-captured by Andy Serkis as it was for Gollum and King Kong and the character then animated) whose intelligence has been developing means that it is time and we are ready for the rise and revolt of the Apes.

When they do escape, the effects and stunts for the chaos are excellent and exciting (except that the number of apes seems to increase and multiply without explanation), making expert use of the city, especially the Golden Gate Bridge climax.

Of course, it is all due to human exploitation and not the apes' fault. Caesar tries to control the situation, Because this story is a prequel to all the other apes films – and, because the screenplay leaves it open for more – there may well be a sequel since the film was both well reviewed and popular at the box-office.

SECUESTRADOS

(Spain, 2010, d. Miguel Vivas)

Best to say first that, though this is an expertly crafted film, its subject matter and treatment are not what most audiences would choose to see.

Not that its plot has not been seen on screen before. There were two versions of The Desperate Hours, in 1955 and in 1990, where a family was kept in their house by violent intruders. Austrian Michael Haneke made the alarming Funny Games in 1997, where two young men tormented a family in their home. He remade it in 2007, scene by scene in an American setting.

This time we are in Spain, a prosperous family who have just moved into a new and better house which, in mid-sentence about how they will celebrate, three masked burglars burst in through the window. Their treatment of the family is brutal, action offscreen at first, but more coming into focus as the film goes on. The director has used a hand-held camera to heighten the intensity and urgency and most of the takes are quite long, meaning that the audience follows the characters around the house, sharing their anxieties and their pain. At times, the device of a split screen is used so that we see two aspects of the story but can choose to look at one if we find the other too gruelling.

The action takes place during one night with the three members of the family, mother, father and 18 year old daughter, and the three burglars (who, as is the trend in many European films, are from Eastern Europe – which suggests that they are being made something of a scapegoat for social unrest and crime in Western Europe). Most of the action is within the house, though one criminal takes the father to ATMS to withdraw savings. A few others come into the picture, the girl's boyfriend, a security guard and a frightened woman at an ATM.

There is a mysterious opening, focusing on a bound man with a bag over his head who struggles to stop a motorist to warn his family. An alternative story? A dream? Just a tease?

Had there been some hope at the end rather than a nihilistic pessimism, the film might offer some catharsis to those identifying with the family and their plight. But, this is more like Jacobean drama with everyone dead on stage, a disaster story rather than a tragedy.

SENNA

(UK, 2010, d. Asif Kapadia)

This documentary has been acclaimed by critics (who welcomed its not having a talking head narrator as well as its editing of a vast amount of race footage and commentaries) and by fans of Formula 1. It is clearly a labour of love for British director, Asif Kapadia (*The Warrior*, *The Return*, *Far North*) who assembled thousands of feet of film and sifted through them to offer a documentary portrait of Brazilian three time world champion, Ayrton Senna.

Enthusiasts for the film have offered the disclaimer that Senna is not just for petrol heads or more respectable followers for Formula 1. That may be. But, many people also have an aversion to this sport, its noise, its big business and cigarette company sponsorship (much in evidence here), the contribution of national and local governments, its politics and rivalries and its dangers. All of these are very evident in Senna. They make it just that bit more difficult for some audiences to enjoy the film (as was the case with this reviewer). That reservation being offered for the wary, we can ask what the film does do.

First of all, it features a great deal of material with Senna himself. Born in 1960 in Sao Paolo to a comfortable family, a teenage competitor in Karting competition, and then introduced into Formula 1 in his early twenties, he was dead at the age of 34 in a racing crash that was seen the world over on television. He comes across as a genial personality but also a fairly driven (no pun intended) competitor. He had natural driving skills and concentration (and we are shown some footage from his on-car camera during races), and appreciated being a world champion. But he also comes across as sometimes self-deprecating, truly loyal to Brazil, and contributing to the well being of his compatriots in donations and a foundation. He also frequently uses God language in his explanations of what makes him tick. And his English, accent and vocabulary, is very impressive

If there is a villain in this drama to Senna's hero, it is his French partner and rival, Alain Prost, who is painted as an antagonistic grouch, but who still is a member of the Senna Trust Board. There are references to Nigel Mansell and Michael Schumacher and there are views of tragic accidents and some deaths. Senna is shown as being concerned about safety, arguing against the president of the sport's governing body for better conditions on the track. After his death, his doctor friend Sid Watkins was appointed to improve health and safety standards in the sport and there has not been a death since.

This means that audiences will take out of the film what interests them. Some will look at the racing footage. Others will be impressed with the portrait of Senna himself. Others will be intrigued by the competitiveness and the sport politics. Senna does provide enough material for all these interests.

TUCKER AND DALE VS EVIL

(US, 2011, d. Eli Craig)

A surprise.

If you look at the ads, this film looks like yet another of those 'Friday 13th young people being sliced and diced' movie or a variation on Texas Chain Saw Massacres. In fact, it is, but not in the way we might have been expecting. This is a parody and quite a funny one.

The usual group go out into the wilds for one of those spring break vacations. They are shown as pot smokers, drinkers and open about sex and relationships. At a gas station, they encounter Tucker and Dale who look like inbred hillbillies but who are actually two ordinary, friendly men going to repair a holiday house. The students have obviously seen too many horror movies and immediately misunderstand a shy approach by Dale, misinterpret everything that follows, and

determine that they have to defend themselves at all costs against these monsters.

We get to know Tucker and Dale and like them, especially poor old Dale (Tyler Labine who is the lab assistant in *The Rise of the Planet of the Apes*) who looks large and oafish but who is very kindly at heart.

Perhaps it is a one note joke, but it is played well with a nice attention to detail even for preposterous deaths. When Tucker and Dale save a sympathetic psychology student from a river, the rest think she has been abducted and fear the worst. This begins a number of attacks where the students die one after the other in their foolhardy attempts at rescue, jokingly bizarre. It all mounts up as one of the students has a past that motivates him to vengeance (but is shocked to learn what really is his deranged past). At one stage, he is persuaded by the psychology student that she can mediate between him and Dale and the film goes into a tongue-in-cheek counselling session.

Fans who take Friday 13th etc seriously might be shocked at the mockery of the conventions of the genre. Those who have avoided this kind of film may not see the jokes at all and find the deaths more than off-putting. But, those who have found the increasing number of slasher films becoming more pointless as well as gory will enjoy a film that is well-written and funny enough to remind us of how absurd so many of these movies are.

WIN WIN

(US, 2011, d. Thomas McCarthy)

You may have seen Thomas McCarthy's two previous films, *The Station Agent* and *The Visitor*, both well worth seeing for their drama and their sense of humanity. These qualities are present in *Win Win*, but there is also more humour.

Paul Giamatti is a versatile actor and has a potentially lugubrious face (used to great advantage in *Barney's Version* and *Sideways*). He gets plenty of opportunity to use it here. He is Mike, a family man with a sensible and loving wife (Amy Ryan), a lawyer with a partner (Jeffrey Tambor at his best), whose practice is in need of clients. Mike and his partner also coach junior wrestling in the town. His prospects and his debts don't look good. He also has a good friend (Bobby Cannavale) who loves wrestling but is no good at it and who is preoccupied with his wife's seeing another man.

Two complications arise. One of his clients, a wealthy man, Leo (Burt Young), is about to be declared incompetent to manage his affairs. Mike decides to take on the role of guardian and receive a large stipend but, after promising Leo that he does not have to be put in a home, Mike does place him into an institution. Then Leo's grandson turns up and Mike and his wife feel that it is the right thing to take the boy, Kyle, into their home. Mike enrolls him at school where Kyle makes friends and invites him to the wrestling club not realising that Kyle has been a junior champion. Things brighten up considerably until Kyle's mother (Melanie Lynskey), in drug recovery, alienated from her father for many years but sensing inheritance money in his will, comes to take Kyle home.

And then the truth about Leo and the institution come out. The latter part of the film involves us in the moral and legal tangles and Mike's trying to rehabilitate himself, with his wife's clear-sighted support.

The young man who portrays Kyle, Alex Sheffer, had never acted before but, aged 17, won the New Jersey State wrestling title in 2010. He really doesn't act. However, his straight, almost deadpan, delivery of his lines, actually creates his character very well. A straightforward young man, no pretensions, very direct in what he thinks and believes. His performance, balanced with that of Paul Giamatti, make for serious and humorous drama.

McCarthy's films explore aspects of human nature, the better sides of human nature (even when there is a need to be honest about shortcomings and failures and the need for some change of heart and recompense) and, really, what it is to be a decent human being.

THE WOMAN

(US, 2011, d. Lucky McKee)

This is a disturbing film, not for audiences who do not want to be disturbed. And, it is disturbing on several levels.

The film opens quite surreastically. A woman in the wild is glimpsed. A baby is glimpsed. There are sounds of barking and baying of animals. Images merge into one another for several minutes. When the title comes up, there is a rapid transition to a technicoloured middle American world around a swimming pool, where families are gathered and enjoying a meal and get-together. Chris, the father, seems very genial, though he tends to command everyone, especially his compliant wife, Belle, to obey his orders and whims. His teenage daughter looks depressed and solitary. His early adolescent son shoots basketballs. There is also a little daughter. Chris is a local lawyer who tries to help

people, especially an elderly lady who wants to sell the pool. The contrast between the family and the wild woman is immense.

Chris is also a hunter, sights the woman, goes home to alter the cellar for her and then goes to net her. He installs her, roped and bound, and invites the family to meet his trophy whom he intends to civilise.

The film is a critique of the patriarchal American family, nuclear, not in the family that stays together sense, but more in the potentially explosive sense.

Sequences veer between the 'normal' which get less normal as the film progresses showing the feeding, washing and abusing of the captured woman. She is both desperate and vengeful while being humiliated.

Gradually, in school scenes, playground scenes, meals at home and chores around the house, the unease becomes palpable, the tyranny of the father, his blandly charming exterior contrasting with his demands, the meekly submissive housewife, the situation of the daughter and the horrible spectacle of the boy, encouraged by his father, becoming more and more like him. Eventually, the explosion happens with the visit of a concerned teacher. At this stage, violence in a bloody and gory struggle may become too much for some audiences who have been following the drama with interest. But, that is what the film is trying to say, that the polite and even religious and civic veneer will crack, the centre cannot hold and more violence than anticipated will erupt.

By the end, the audience is well aware that this is a film targeting misogyny as the father's behaviour and attitude's become more extreme.

Small-budget, with a range of popular songs accompanying the action (the sound seems to clash with the action, the lyrics making comment on it), the film is based on a novel by the director and writer, Jack Ketchum. It is a stand-alone sequel to his film *Offspring*. He also wrote *Red*, which Lucky McKee directed, and the torture story, *The Girl Next Door*. Some commentators have dismissed *The Woman* as ugly trash. It is often ugly, but the makers and performers are trying to communicate something more serious than trash.

SIGNIS FILM REVIEWS: SEPTEMBER/2

13 ASSASSINS
ABDUCTION
CHANGE-UP, The
CLIENT 9: THE RISE AND FALL OF ELLIOT SPITZER
COLOMBIANA
FINAL DESTINATION 5
FIRE IN BABYLON
FRIGHT NIGHT
GUILTY PLEASURES
HUNTER, The
JOHNNY ENGLISH REBORN
ONE DAY
SUBMARINE
TABLOID
ZOOKEEPER

13 ASSASSINS

(Japan, 2010, d. Takei Miiche)

The title tells all in terms of plot and content. At the end of the Shogunate in mid-19th century Japan, the Shogun has promoted an upstart who is both shallow and callow, with little regard for people, who lives for excitement and power. Authorities dread his coming into power at the death of the Shogun and they call on a veteran Samurai to eliminate the despot.

After establishing the situation, the film focuses on Shinza, the Samurai leader, his negotiations with the followers of the upstart and their failure, then moves to his quest to find other Samurai who will train, perfect their martial skills and go on a quest which may well lead to their deaths as well. The film then moves on to the journey-quest, the hardships, especially in the mountains, and the bouts of opposition the warriors meet. They rescue a peasant hunter in the mountains. He joins them though he is offhandedly critical of their code.

The audience is in sympathy with the Samurai because several sequences of the upstart's callous behaviour, rape and murder without a second thought or a moment's compunction, have been seen.

However, the latter part of the film devotes over 30 minutes to the final confrontation. The Samurai ingeniously fortify an abandoned village, filling it with traps for the enemy and escape routes for themselves. The up close and personal detail of the fighting is effective except that it goes on for so long (and we really have not learned much about each of the assassins or identified all of them) that the attention begins to wander. Too much of a bloodthirsty thing.

The film is expertly made with great attention to period detail. What it lacks in character delineation, it makes up for in taking the audience back into this period of Japanese history and a different culture which brought about the end of the Shogunate and opened up Japan to its modern era.

ABDUCTION

(US, 2011, d. John Singleton)

How far is far-fetched? Pretty far in this case – and a little beyond. After all, two high schoolers taking on the CIA with its top surveillance techniques as well as a European assassin organisation (whose surveillance technology seems to rival that of the CIA – except when they are caught at the end and easily shot down) is not easily credible unless it is in an episode of *Spy Kids*.

After Taylor Lautner's success as the werewolf in the *Twilight* series, his fans obviously want to see him in other movies. So, this is a Taylor Lautner star vehicle, aimed directly at the teenage fans. Lily Collins is along for the chase and flight for the male fans. The trouble with the film (amongst many) is that the dialogue is aimed too squarely at the target audience and comes across as banal and sometimes corny with a lot of extra explanation for this who missed it the first time. It illustrates the need for a re-write or testing out the dialogue with an audience. The preview audience began to titter, then to laugh, then to guffaw, with an ironic applause at the end.

Had the film just stuck to the far-fetched plot and the chase with minimum dialogue, it would have been more effective. As it is, several top actors appear in supporting roles and some don't have such good dialogue either. The opening of the film is stronger, with Maria Bello and Jason Isaacs as Taylor's parents and Sigourney Weaver as his therapist. After Taylor starts a school project with Lily and they look at sites for missing children, mayhem soon overtakes him. Alfred Molina is the CIA investigator and Michael Nyqvist (the central character in Stig Larsson's *Milennium* films) turns up as the nasty killer from Serbia. This cast highlights the limitations of the performances of the young couple.

Come to think of it, the film is called *Abduction*, but it is not really about an abduction at all. Taylor's fate was no abduction.

The teenage audience might enjoy it. Adults will be more hesitant – or, perhaps, not. I fear the committee for the Razzie awards 2011 will be putting it on their shortlist.

THE CHANGE-UP

(US, 2011, d. David Dobkin)

With the advertising tagline, 'From the director of *The Wedding Crashers* and the writers of *The Hangover*', one would think that more than enough consumer information was offered for discerning filmgoers. The tagline is not false advertising.

For a while, over several decades, there was a series of comedies where two characters took each other's personality while still looking their original selves. These tended to be father-son changes (*Like Father, Like Son* or *Vice Versa*) or mother-daughter changes (*Freaky Friday*). This time it is two middle aged men. One is a very successful married lawyer with children (Jason Bateman doing his now familiar thing as the put-upon businessman) and the other is an irresponsible womanising loser (Ryan Reynolds doing what he used to do in crass comedies like *Waiting*, *Buying the Cow* or *Van Wilder*, *Party Liaison*).

We know where we stand (or where we sit). There are lots of situations which we might have thought up had we been asked to write a screenplay. The loser has to become responsible (not very good at it at all, goofing in the office and cavalier with feeding crying babies during the night...). Ryan Reynolds is a good enough actor to be able to do both incarnations of his character. Not so sure about Jason Bateman being let loose (and he is tempted to become quite loose at times). Even acting irresponsibly, he is not quite credible or persuasive.

There are some funny sequences as you might imagine (and Alan Arkin turns up as the loser's father). I am indebted to reviewer Tom Ryan of The Sunday Age for providing me with an adjective for this review and for future use. There certainly are some crass moments and jokes, but a lot of it is more basic, bodily functions and pooping babies etc. The word for this kind of humour and treatment is 'tacky'.

It's an American comedy of middle age and, as usual, with Judd Apatow comedies and the like, there is traditional moralising at the end. (And Jason Bateman's wife is actually played by Leslie Mann who is the real Mrs Apatow.)

CLIENT 9: THE RISE AND FALL OF ELIOT SPITZER

(US, 2011. d. Alex Gibney)

Elliot Spitzer may not be a name on most people's lips. But, there was a time, for a decade, 1999-2009, when it was on the lips of many Americans and, probably, most New Yorkers. He was the crusading Attorney General who took on Wall Street (the 'sheriff of Wall Street', the 'Crusader of Main Street'), the financial companies like Merrill Lynch and some high profile financial fraud managers. And, this was before the global financial meltdown.

Director, Alex Gibney, has a solid list of documentaries, including Enron: the Smartest Guys in the Room and the Oscar-winning Taxi to the Darkside, on US torture in Afghanistan and Iraq.

For audiences wanting to go back to the first decade of the 21st century and explore what happened in banking and finance and why the collapse would find this film and the 2010 Oscar-winning documentary, Charles Ferguson's Inside Job, absorbing companion pieces.

The crusading was the rise of Spitzer which culminated in his being elected governor of the state of New York with a huge majority. But, the glory did not last long. On the private level, this married man with children, began to meet with prostitutes, part of a large up-market and expensive ring of escorts and was exposed. He resigned, much to the glee of many of his targets.

The narrative traces the events chronologically, but the film has a continuous interview with Spitzer himself who can be disarmingly candid at times, who explains his legal campaigns against the fraudsters and the manipulators, who admits his private failures.

Other interviewees are financial commentators of the time as well as financiers themselves. Three of the main interviewees are two of his targets, Hank Greenberg and Kenneth Langone, whom Spitzer pursued relentlessly – and who appear on screen at the end, delighted at Spitzer's fall from grace (and power), and Republican State Senator, Joseph Bruno, who clashed with him when Spitzer was governor.

Two of the escorts 'appear' in the film. One, Ashley Dupre ('Kristin') became a media celebrity for a while. The other, 'Angelina', is not seen but her words are spoken by an actress.

Audiences who despise hypocritical behaviour in public figures will still despise Spitzer. Those who think that transgressing sexual morality does not deserve such a resignation (thinking Bill Clinton) and that the exploitation of government and financial management is more morally reprehensible will be confirmed in their crusading against such exploitation.

COLOMBIANA

(France, 2011, d. Olivier Megaton)

La femme Cataleya.

Director-writer, Luc Besson, made two films about assassins in the 1990s, La Femme Nikita (remade in the US as The Assassin) and Leon (sub-titled The Professional). These films were thrillers but had some strong characterisation even as they looked at the bleak and isolated world of the assassin. While Colombiana is in this vein, it is more of a surface thriller than exploring the deeper themes that it introduces.

Zoe Saldana, after her turn as the lead in Avatar, is a ruthless assassin who takes on contracts from her uncle (Cliff Curtis), more than twenty killings of high profile gangsters and criminals. She leaves a signature message, the Colombian orchid, the cataleya. But, the message is not for the authorities. It is for the drug lord who killed her mother and father. The audience has seen this at the opening of the film and have seen the effect on the seemingly impassive Cataleya who skilfully escapes her pursuers at the age of nine, going to the US embassy with information from her

father, but escaping on arrival in the US and hiding away with her uncle who trains her to kill.

The central part of the film is the visualising of two assassinations which she performs more than adeptly. Because the film relies on swift-paced action, we do not see any of her preparation for her work, just the expert fulfilling of her mission. In the meantime, an FBI officer has been pursuing the case, assuming that the assassin is male.

Eventually, Cataleya (with some deadly threats) discovers where the drug boss has been hiding and sets out to rid the world of him and his sinister assistant (Jordi Molla).

Careful to preserve her anonymity, she shuns all personal revealing of herself but does fall in love with an artist (Michael Vartan) who is the unwitting cause of her being tracked down.

You get exactly what you expected: a grim story of violence and revenge, filmed and edited with pace – and the possibility, if you are interested, to think more deeply about justice, revenge and passionate human nature.

THE EYE OF THE STORM

(Australia, 2011, d. Fred Schepisi)

Adapting a Patrick White novel for the screen. A tall order. Judy Morris has undertaken it and readers of White's novels will argue about its fidelity to the book (some forgetting that it is an adaptation by the screenwriter and an interpretation by the director, not the book itself) or whether it moves away from the book. Others of us will have to comment on the film itself.

It is fair to say, and Patrick White might be pleased to hear, that this is an 'art house cinema drama'. It does not make concessions to a multiplex audience who may find it sometimes precious and, perhaps, mostly tedious. But, it is a rewarding film with a complexity of plot and characterisation, expressed in White's literary as well as vernacular language. And, then, there are White's themes of what it is to be Australian, Australians in Europe, the cultural cringe to Europe, the not always admitted class distinctions in Australian society and White's seemingly inherent snobbery as well as his frequent anti-snobbery stances. Challenging food for thought for the local audience. A great number of questions about Australian society for overseas audiences.

This is a film about death.

The opening shot, overhead, of Charlotte Rampling luxuriating in the surf, gulls flying, sun shining, moments of peace after the gale winds and the rain, her happiness in the eye of the storm is suggested as a sublime moment for her by the voiceover from her actor son, Basil (Sir Basil Hunter, played by Geoffrey Rush). And the film returns to these moments at the end. In the meantime, the audience has come to know Elizabeth Hunter, the mother, quite well, seeing her through her own memory flashbacks, both earthy and ethereal, the (often jaundiced) perspective of her dilettante son and Dorothy, her surface-pretentious daughter, the Princess de Lascabenes (Judy Davis). Son and daughter have returned as their mother is ailing – they are always in need of money and their memories of their mother and her influence on them are a mixture of resentment and the need to escape.

Charlotte Rampling gives a performance that commands admiration, most of her scenes as the aged, sick woman (the make-up artist has done a convincing job), but some as her younger, glamorously wilful and assertive self. Geoffrey Rush has no trouble in presenting a West End 'lummy' theatre personality, partly slumming it in Sydney (and hoeing into food wherever he sees it and a presumptuously roving predator eye for women). Judy Davis has always been able to embody twitchy personalities and she does Dorothy and her twitches expertly.

And that is not all. The supporting cast has a number of veteran Australian actors of screen and stage who have made their mark in the past. Fine to see Helen Morse as the German cook who is able to sing and dance 1930s Berlin cabaret songs. Also to see Robyn Nevin as the wife of Elizabeth Hunter's devoted lawyer (played by John Gaden). Elizabeth Alexander plays the princess's ageing friend. Alexandra Schepisi is good as the devoted nurse who comes to expect a lot from Sir Basil but is doomed to disillusion. And Colin Friels is the labour leader who expects to become PM in 1972 (though he is more Bob Hawke than Gough Whitlam). (Judy Davis and Colin Friels, longtime husband and wife, have some wonderful, acerbic scenes together.)

While most of the action takes place in the Hunter mansion or at restaurants, hotels and social parties, there is the contrast with the ordinary Australians, nurses, workers, country house managers, who are presented as common-sensed, especially compared with the sometimes idiotic wealthy, and salt of the earth workers with decent families.

So, while the social themes are to the fore, so are themes of illness, increasing senility and dementia, the elderly coming to a more peaceful understanding of their lives. And this in the context of mother-children relationships. The children show some of their worst sides. But, it seems that they are actually learning something with their mother's illness and the prospects of her going into a home. It leads to a strange mutual dependence episode in the relationship between brother and sister. But, just in case we thought they had undergone a permanent change for the better, we realise that leopards and most humans do not change their spots.

Directed by Fred Schepisi with great attentiveness to White's waspish attitudes and dialogue, with sensitivity to human foibles and their consequences, the film has been photographed by Ian Baker who has worked with Schepisi since the 1970s. The score was composed by Paul Grabowsky.

For many readers, the novels of Patrick White were more admired than enjoyed. With *The Eye of the Storm* there is much to admire and, within its two hours, there is much to enjoy (though you might not really want to have met the Hunter family in real life).

FINAL DESTINATION 5

(US, 2011, d. Steven Quale)

Yes, the formula is the same: someone has a premonition/dream where disaster strikes and friends die one after the other; after he wakes up, the real disaster strikes and, though they all survive this one, they are later picked off one by one in the freakiest of accidents. And should one survive out of order, it really doesn't matter. Death has you on the list. A variant this time - if an expectant victim kills someone, they then get the time that their target would still have had they survived.

Preposterous? Of course, but with this kind of horror thriller, it doesn't really matter, does it?

The eight potential victims are ciphers rather than characters, though they are given some details of a back story. They are played reasonably enough, soap opera style. Nicholas D'Agosto is the sympathetic Sam who has the premonition.

It's the special effects that are the main attraction. It can be said that the bridge destruction which opens the film is quite spectacular, even more than spectacular. The makers must have decided that it was so effective that they repeat quite a lot of it for the real collapse after the premonition. In a ghoulishly fatalistic way, the other deaths have their special effects and shock moments: a gymnast steps on a tack with awful consequence; a sleazy type's massage goes awry as does a laser eye treatment.

There are a few dramatic variations with some murders, though the film ends with an ironic twist on gaining the extra time for life from a victim. As the film moves to its conclusion, we realise (if we are familiar with the series) that we are back in 2000 with the opening of the very first film.

A horror concoction, with macabre touches, in a series that has proved more durable than might have been thought a decade ago.

FIRE IN BABYLON

(UK, 2010, d. Stevan Riley)

Fire in Babylon? A historical documentary? War in Iran?

No. Cricket!

This is a very interesting as well as entertaining documentary about the dominance of the West Indies in world cricket for two decades from the 1970s to the 1990s. Even those who do not have the patience to watch a five day test match, let alone a one day match (or even a 20/20 match), will find much in the film to enjoy, and even be excited by. (Some British and Australian fans may also get excited in the glum sense as they see the West Indians returning the conquering compliment to Lillie and Thompson and the England bowlers.)

But, Stevan Riley's documentary focuses on the independence movements in the Caribbean in the 1960s, and the desire for freedom from European colonial power, the power of Britain. He uses news footage from the period. He also links the movements and the ascendancy in cricket to the music of the period, reggae music with Bob Marley, Jimmy Cliff and the Rastafarian background.

But, with so much cricket footage, rapidly paced and inserted, there is a growing sense of exhilaration as we see the defeated West Indian players decide to strike back against the fast pace bowling – and the many hits, bumps and bruises. And strike back the players did, scouting for and finding a new generation who developed bowling techniques that gave as good as it got. And the past dominating sides had to accept being beaten at their own game.

What enhances the film is the footage of talking heads, the cricketers from those times but also the strong contemporary interviews from Clive Lloyd, Viv Richards and many others who offer the benefit of their memories and their reflections after so many years. Colin Croft also appears, which raises the issues of rebel teams playing in South Africa in the 1980s and the consequences.

The running time is short, shorter than many an innings, but it is made by those who have an affinity with fast-paced bowling but don't mind some tricky spin now and again.

FRIGHT NIGHT

(US, 2011, d. Craig Gillespie)

Back in 1985, Tom Holland wrote and directed a vampire film (not so prolific then as they are these days on the big screen and on the television screen) which some consider a classic of sorts, Fright Night. William Ragsdale was the schoolboy who discovered his next door neighbour, Jerry (Chris Sarandon) was a vampire. He enlisted the aid of an eccentric showman, played with relish by Roddy McDowell. There was a sequel, less successful, a couple of years later.

Powers that be have decided that it is time for another version, and in 3D.

As vampires movies go, it is not bad (except for an excess of tiresome crass language which usually indicates quick and lazy writing). This time the setting is suburban Las Vegas, homes and schools, the desert roads, with a visit to a casino and one of those extravagant show theatres.

The question is: how seriously should it be taken? It is a B movie plot with an A cast.

This time Anton Yelchin is the boy. He is a good actor (Star Trek, The Beaver). His vampirised friend is played by Christopher Mintz-Plasse. Of all people, Jerry is played by Colin Farrell (who also tried his hand at black comedy as one of the Horrible Bosses). Toni Collette is the boy's mother and Imogen Poots his girlfriend, Amy.

The plot is much the same as before. Boy is alarmed at vampire next door, tries to protect his mother and Amy, sees what Jerry is up to and is hounded and pursued by Jerry. (And, stopped on the road, they are crashed into by Chris Sarandon with Colin Farrell doing to him what Sarandon did to others in the original: joke appreciated by horror buffs).

While Roddy McDowell tended to steal the show in the past, how will this one do it: as well or better? In fact, they have hired TV's recent Dr Who and the West End's Hamlet, David Tennant, to send up the wilful, spiteful, egotistical and alcoholic Las Vegas magician who is an expert on vampires. He is made up to look like a gaunt Russell Brand (perhaps Brand was going to do the part but could not) and proceeds to channel Brand's eccentric, in your face, style of comedy. He does it very well.

The plot is really a bit thin and familiar, so the interest and entertainment come from seeing this kind of cast, fangs and all.

GUILTY PLEASURES

(UK, 2010, d. Julie Moggan)

Guilty Pleasures. Sounds a bit prurient. And it is, but not in the sensual sense – at least not for the viewer. It's about readers of Mills and Boon novels, who are reading the books for some sensual sense.

Seeing is believing. Here are the stories of three women, one British, one Indian, one Japanese, who are devoted (and I mean DEVOTED) to their Mills and Boon stories. There are interviews with the unlikeliest of Mills and Boon authors, Englishman Roger, whose nom de plume is Gill Sanderson, and a model who has appeared on hundreds of covers and has aspirations for a film career, Stephen Muzzonigro.

What was not expected though, perhaps, it should have been, was being immersed in such a feeling and sense world. As Gill Sanderson notes – he is an older middle-aged man who looks and sounds nothing like Barbara Cartland (though some of the ladies who come to his writing seminars do) – the books present 'a nicer world than the real one'. He also refers to that 'magnificently trite' sentence: 'I love you'.

There are three case studies.

Shirley is from the north of England. We see her in bed curled up with Mills and Boon, next to her husband, Phil, who likes true crime stories. Shirley is a nice middle aged lady who looks after Phil's needs (we discover he suffers from depression). She seems a text book case with her loving attention to detail. Phil gets a lot of screen time and presents a striking contrast as an unrelenting macho type. He praises men's occupations, like mechanics and fixing things, and opines that this is really how men should be. You really don't want to know his opinion of his first wife and the demands he made on her – his young, presumptuous phase. But, Shirley has been good for him and we finally leave them buying each other Valentine's Day cards and having a nice meal together.

Phil is really redeemable. Not so, Shumita's husband in India, who walked out on her five years earlier and is shackled up with someone else. He is that kind of person, unpleasant and self-absorbed. He shouldn't have allowed himself to be interviewed because he elicits instant dislike (or worse) and does not seem to be aware of it. He is into mechanics as well as advising the director how to take photos. And, believe it or not, Shumita (heavier than she used to be) still wants him back and makes every effort, even buying large, primary coloured bras because... Well, you can guess. This is a hurt woman at her most devoted (and unwilling to do a bit of analysis on her ex-husband), stoked by her reliance on her Mills and Boon reading.

Hiroko from Japan loves the Mills and Boon dance stories and is a devotee of TV Dance shows. Her tolerant husband, who looks after the children, is happy that she spends most of her time at dance lessons and practice – and, with her instructor, she wins the inevitable competition. She is immersed in her SF fantasy – though, relievedly, she starts to come back to the real world after the victory.

If you want to hear the philosophy of the Mills and Boon machine, Roger has plenty to say as he meets readers, conducts his classes, sits in restaurants with his pen poised above his notebook to record stimulating conversational titbits that will become integral to his story.

And Stephen? As Emma Stone says to Ryan Gosling when he takes off his shirt in *Crazy, Stupid, Love*, 'You must be photo-shopped', so Stephen works out, poses on the beach, sails his boat, reflects on Yoga and Eastern hints for Eastern sexual prowess, and shows us several of his photo shoots for the book covers. While Roger prefers to live and be alone (perhaps compensating with his sometimes torrid romances), Stephen finds a partner who, for the moment, seems to be the real thing.

I have never read a Mills and Boon novel, but seen several movie versions. I was amused at the beginning of a Guardian review that I googled across: 'As I watched George Osborne's slow strangle of the welfare state on Wednesday, I wondered – how many Mills & Boon novels will have been sold by the time he finally winds up? The answer is 1,240, because they sell a copy every three seconds, plus no doubt a few more when the chancellor is speaking.'

Along with lipstick, Smarties and almost anything that fits in a handbag, romance fiction, the biggest sector in British paperback publishing, is depression proof. It is probably apocalypse proof too. And, to remind us why, *Guilty Pleasures*, a feature-length documentary about Mills & Boon, had its world premiere at the [London film festival](#) last night.' (Tanya Gold, October 23rd 2010)

Guilty Pleasures is, of course, a guilty pleasure of a documentary. It is a portrait of pop culture through some case studies. The guilty non-pleasure is trying to remind oneself not to indulge in a colonial kind of looking down on Mills and Boon and readers who enjoy their time immersed in this world.

THE HUNTER

(Australia, 2011, d. Daniel Nettheim)

Screen Tasmania is not a title we see all that often in a film's credits. But, here it is and Tasmania is definitely to the fore.

First of all, the scenery must be noted. The Tasmanian wilderness looks beautifully rugged and we are treated to a great deal of it. Secondly, the Tasmanian issue must be noted. The Tasmanian Tiger.

We have heard stories of the Tasmanian Tiger, the Tasmanian 'Devil', and its extinction. There have been rumours over the decades of sightings. The Hunter takes up the possibility of their not dying out. A multinational drug company is eager to find the animal to extract fluids which may have beneficial results for health but even more beneficial financial results. They hire hunters to go into the mountains to secretly track the animal. We learn that the company is quite ruthless in its ambitions.

Willem Dafoe is the hunter whose quest we share. Dafoe has been a strong screen presence for over a quarter of a century and communicates tough earnestness in this kind of role. His rugged face draws attention and his capacity for communicating an inner life are a great advantage since so much of the film concentrates on him and his roaming the mountains, searching lakes and caves, setting traps, confronting industrial spies and coming to terms with the moral issues which underlie his pursuing the tiger.

Frances O'Connor is the wife of an environmentalist who has disappeared in the mountains. She offers hospitality to the hunter who also gets on well with her two children. Morgana Davies, who was so strong a presence in *The Tree*, proves she can hold her own with adult actors here. Sam Neill is a local who is commissioned to help the hunter but who has a much more ambiguous role in the community where loggers are put off work and where environmentalists celebrate nature and irk the workers.

The plot is not always as predictable as might have been first thought. The screenplay is based on a story by Julia Leigh (*Sleeping Beauty*), using the basic plot but developing and adding many strands to make the drama stronger.

Often lower-key than might be expected, it is an effective small film with strong characters and significant issues. Is extinction preferable to exploitation?

JOHNNY ENGLISH REBORN

(UK, 2011, d. Oliver Parker)

If you are a Rowan Atkinson fan, you will, of course, want to see this sequel to his 2003 Bond spoof, *Johnny English*. It is not Atkinson at his ironic best as in his early sketches for *The Secret Policeman's Ball* or *Blackadder*. It is more a verbalised version of Mr Bean in an espionage context. While a lot of the verbal and visual jokes are the expected ones, Atkinson generally delivers them with his nonchalant panache.

The reborn in the title indicates that Johnny English is in espionage limbo – or, at least, doing training in martial arts and in mind control in Tibet. Some of the techniques he laboriously learns (amid many pratfalls) will come in handy at the climax with the foiling of an attempted assassination of the Chinese premier. The cause of Johnny's downfall was a similar assassination in Mozambique, which we see in continuous flashbacks.

The film is lavish in sets, with filming in Hong Kong, including quite a chase on the harbour, as well as familiar Bond locations in the Alps and a castle-fortress in Switzerland.

The plot is fairly straightforward as regards MI7 and spying and English failing and succeeding at the same time.

There is an interesting cast, although Gillian Anderson is somewhat colourless as Pegasus (the Judi Dench equivalent). Dominic West smiles and snarls as required. Rosamund Pike is sweetness and light as the house psychologist for MI7. Daniel Akuulya is the young assistant agent who has to correct and rescue Johnny English (with little thanks until the end). They are a bit like a latterday Don Quixote and Sancho Panza.

It is all quite undemanding Rowan Atkinson adventure comedy – but don't walk out during the final credits. Atkinson

does a wonderful meal preparation to Grieg's In the Hall of the Mountain King.

ONE DAY

(US/UK, 2011, d. Lone Scherfig)

I was very surprised to find myself quite tearful at the end of this film and wondered why.

First of all, I was predisposed to like One Day as I had enjoyed the director's films, Italian for Beginners and An Education. She seems to be able to combine serious themes with humour and emotion. Next, I admired the cast, the always attractive Anne Hathaway, Jim Sturgess who is showing greater versatility as the years pass. And the supporting cast was very good as well: Rafe Spall stood out as a would-be stand-up comic who has to come to terms with reality, Romola Garai as a humourless wife and mother, Patricia Clarkson as Sturgess' mother (with an English accent) and Ken Stott as his gruff father.

But, I suppose it was mainly the plot and the interactions of the characters over twenty years or so. David Nichols, who adapted his novel for the screen, had the idea of taking one day each year, July 15th in fact, St Swithin's Day, and tracing through glimpses, some very brief, some lengthier, how the two characters change.

The first day was in 1988 when Emma and Dexter graduated from university in Edinburgh. The encounter is brief and the two part (though there is a development of that day which becomes more explicit at the end of the film). Dexter goes to India for a year, later helps Emma move to London, re-visits her, has meals, goes with her to France for a holiday. He also becomes a TV personality on a late night variety and interview show which makes him more callow, relying on drink, drugs and women. Emma, in the meantime, has worked for some years in a Mexican restaurant but studies to be a teacher and proves good at this profession as well as writing a children's book.

The film shows us what strong friendship can be, in good times, as well as in down times. Emma is a good confidant but does not take Dexter's self-excusing lightly. Eventually, after Dexter marries and is divorced, he and Emma are able to come together more seriously than before.

The ending came as a great shock to me, quite upsetting. But, the film effectively takes us through the aftermath to a satisfying, even hopeful future.

REAL STEEL

(US, 2011, d. Shawn Levy)

Video games alive!

First of all, so many reviews are going to mention The Champ and Rocky, that I will mention them now as well. Plus Rollerball, Death Race and other futuristic sports films that emphasise smashing competitions and fanatical audiences.

But...

This is meant to be a family film and a film about family. There is plenty of noise, plenty of crashing of real steel against real steal, but it is geared to a PG rating.

Hugh Jackman (one of the best actors to convey both charm, geniality and toughness even when he plays an unsympathetic character) is Charley, a wanderer who is reckless and certainly no planner with his life and his work. He goes from carnival to carnival or rodeo or venue for robotic boxing (yes, that is the subject of the film), sometimes winning, often losing, always in debt. He is no good at relationships either, not having seen his wife or son for a decade or more, fickle even with the daughter of a gym owner (Evangeline Lilly) who had been a father-figure to him. This we see in the early scenes.

But, again...

With his wife's death, what is he to do with his 11 year old son? Get some cash so that he can be happily cared for by his wife's sister and her husband (Hope Davis and James Rebhorn). But, Max, the son, wants to go on the road with him, especially when he sees his dad's new robot fighter, the gigantic Noisy Boy.

For a while, it all goes badly, with Max being more intelligent and practically sensible than his father. Fate intervenes, and Max discovers an old robot which he cleans, fixes, trains and we are firmly in The Champ territory as father and son bond, and in Rocky territory with the build up to a huge fight in a fashionable New York arena, with fashionable

and wealthy crowds and media, where Atom takes on the champion, Zeus, and its arrogant inventor and owner. The screenplay mentions David and Goliath. The ending is only 90% predictable. But, it is smiles and tears galore.

Dakota Goya is the name of the young Canadian actor who plays Max. He has had a considerable career already (was the young Thor), but he stands out here, an extraordinarily confident and credible performance by an 11 year old.

Which seems to mean that, while boxing films are not a favourite and, on paper, I might not have liked Real Steel, I realised by the end that I had been caught up and did enjoy it, predictability, steel crunching and pounding and all.

RED STATE

(US, 2011, d. Kevin Smith)

Kevin Smith has proven to be something of a sign of contradiction, enthusing his fans and irritating his definitely-not-fans. I will opt for the fan side.

Smith used to portray himself in his films as a slacker, the famous Silent Bob. He has an offbeat sense of humour (uninhibited as well), belongs to the comics and graphic novels era (he turned 40 in 2010), is skilful in writing smart and sometimes tantalising dialogue, and doesn't mind being rough and ready in his film-making, favouring some improvising.

This is all evident in Red State which defies easy pigeon-holing as to what genre the film is. It shifts genre from time to time which may prove disconcerting to the unwary and the unwilling, but when it is all put together (only 88 minutes), it comes out as a smart movie whether we liked it or not.

There is plenty to put us on guard. It takes on current American bigotry, especially of the conservative religious variety. Smith was a producer on a 2007 documentary on the Westboro Baptist Church which is crusadingly against the alleged decline of American morals, homosexuality being a principal target. There is an explicit reference in Red State to Westboro, claiming that the group in the movie are even more extreme. And that is what we see.

Had we not had American incidents like Waco, or memories of Jonestown, as well as Oklahoma bombers and Unibombers, we might be tempted to say that Red State is far-fetched. But...

The film does indicate in its opening minutes that these themes will be pursued but it then focuses on three high-schoolers who are sex-obsessed and use their I-Phones to check out local prostitutes. Off they go and get more than they ever bargained for. You need to see it to appreciate what happens.

Red State then switches gear into a police investigation of a car crash the boys were involved in, as was the sheriff in behaviour that his wife would not approve of.

But, the film has also switched into a story about a religious church, a group of 25 members of a family and spouses, who put their religious convictions into deadly practice – literally. The result is a police siege – with ironic comment about the way American authorities have handled siege and terrorist situations: no witnesses.

The cast is strong and makes this watchable if not believable to non-Americans who have not experienced this kind of gun-toting religious certainty and intolerance. Michael Parks gives one of his best performances as the leader of the Church, seemingly sane, a smooth preacher (and he gets the chance for a long moralising sermon about the decline of the US) but absolutely convinced of his self-discovered messianic role. Melissa Leo is excellent, as always, as his fanatical daughter. John Goodman is the agent in charge of the siege.

Kevin Smith 'did' religion when he was in his twenties with Dogma, a provocative satire on the church, angels and images of God. This time, there is a social and political agenda behind his satire. Satirists are often perfectionists who are enraged by the failure of society that the only way they can make their point is by the combination of savagery and spoof. Kevin Smith has done this with Red State. (There is a lot of swearing in Smith's films, as here – however, he does use one of those four-letter sentences that are too often lazily used instead of better writing to end the film, and most audiences will find it apt, especially as it is Smith's only cameo in Red State.)

SNOW FLOWER AND THE SECRET FAN

(China, 2011, d. Wayne Wang)

A fascinating visit to China, present and past. Readers of the book by Lisa See have commented that the film focuses on the past and that the film has created the story set in the present. This makes it a different interpretation of the book

and highlights the comparisons between the 21st century and the early decades of the 19th century. This is particularly the case in the status and treatment of women. This is very much a woman's film in focus, themes and performance.

Hong Kong born Wayne Wang has had a very varied career for over twenty five years. Some of his earlier films from the 1980s had Chinese themes (Dim Sum, Eat a Bowl of Tea) some of them in an American setting. After that, he made many films in the US, with very American themes (Smoke, Maid in Manhattan). However, in recent years he has shown a greater interest in Chinese stories.

One of Wang's best-known film is The Joy Luck Club (1993), the story of four Chinese women, their past in China and their lives in America. Snow Flower can be seen as a companion piece. But, the story remains in China with only verbal references to the US and to Australia.

The film opens in the present in contemporary Shanghai. It should be said that the views of Shanghai throughout the film are very striking. We get a very good look, in close-up, of how Shanghai is a modern and developing city. We are introduced to Nina, a young woman about to open a New York office of her bank. But, she receives news that her close friend, Sophia, is in coma after a bicycle accident.

Flashbacks are introduced to show how the two girls met. Nina coaches the Korean born Sophia in Mandarin. So, we are offered two times as the film moves between the present and the past of the two women, especially the formalising of 'laotong', a lifelong contract of friendship between two women.

But, who is Snow Flower?

She is a young child in 1829 who suffers the cruel custom imposed on girl children, foot binding, so that they will have 'perfect' feet. She is from a poor background but her companion in the foot binding is a more wealthy girl, Lily. They bond as lifelong friends.

So, this introduces a third time for the narrative. Audiences may need to pay attention as the screenplay moves from period to period. Some may think it is confusing, but the film-makers want to dramatise the parallels between the lives of the women in a patriarchal past where their fate was to be wives and mothers (of boys), oppressed by their husbands, by the laws and customs of tradition, and a much freer life now for women and control of their destinies.

The parallels and contrasts are fascinating and a strong reminder that worlds change (and must). This is reinforced by two actresses playing the adult Snow Flower and Lily and also Nina and Sophia.

As the drama in each period unfolds, issues of love, self-sacrifice and discovery of the depths of affection, love and commitment are beautifully explored.

Bingbing Li is Nina/Lily who is single-minded for success but self-sacrificing (and controlling) for her friend. Gianna Jun is gentle and loving as Snow Flower and wilful as Sophia. Towards the end of the film, Hugh Jackman appears as Sophia's lover.

This is a film to surrender to rather than to sit in (impatient) judgment. It offers many challenges about history and the present and the rights of women and issues of equality.

SUBMARINE

(UK, 2011, D. Richard Ayoade)

What is it like to be an introspectively smart young adolescent who is gawky on the outside, prone to being mocked and bullied? Especially, if you have nice but eccentric parents – and there is an introverted hormonal crisis that wants to extravert itself?

You might not get so many answers while watching Submarine, but you will get to know a youngster who takes things seriously and who experiences the teenage confusions.

Craig Roberts is certainly a find in the role of 15 year old Oliver (though the Internet Movie Database indicates that he has been on the big and small screens for some time). He is on screen most of the film, confiding in the audience, inviting us to share his feelings and puzzles. What complicates matters is that he is attracted to a girl in his class, Jordana (Yasmin Paige, also very effective). He is a good companion to her, especially when her mother has terminal cancer – and then he blows it. It seems he has lost his chance and Jordana takes up with another boy in the class.

But, Oliver is also concerned about his parents. His father is a sea-life academic, rather withdrawn, but has lost his job

and works at home. Noah Taylor makes this seemingly unlikely character quite credible. Then there is Oliver's mother (a different kind of role for Sally Hawkins) who tends to be prim and organised but who is attracted to an old flame (Paddy Considine) who turns up and plays with her affections. Oliver is determined to break up any possible relationship.

So, there we are in a coastal town in Wales, keeping the company of an earnest, searching young lad, experiencing his feelings, his desires and his mistakes, hoping that he will grow into a sensible man and that he will bring his parents together again.

It's a small-budget film but very effective in its modest way.

TABLOID

(US, 2011, d. Errol Morris)

Another documentary from Errol Morris who explored police issues in *The Thin Blue Line*, Robert McNamara's political advice in *The Fog of War* and torture in Abu Greb in *S.O.P. (Standard Operating Procedure)*. This time his touch is light. He is exploring a tabloid story which reminds us that truth can be stranger than fiction. He has his tongue in his cheek with interviews and employs tabloid and pop TV visuals to illustrate his cheerfully preposterous story of former Miss Wyoming, Joyce McKinney.

In the 1970s, Joyce McKinney was obsessed with, says she was in love with, Mormon Kirk Anderson. He claimed he went to England to escape her. She rounded up a strong man, KJ, and hires a pilot, Jackson Shaw, to take her to London where she virtually abducts Kirk and is alleged to have used him as a sex slave. The London tabloids, principally the *Daily Express*, got hold of the story and had no qualms in exploiting it, with the *Daily Mirror* sending a photographer to the US to track down Joyce's friends and associates and discovering a cache of sex photos (which Joyce claimed were doctored). However, the evidence seems to show that she was available and advertised for sex. There is some footage from Joyce when young, telling a fairy story and hoping it has a happy ending.

But, what makes the film so engrossing (and funny) is that it is principally an interview with Joyce thirty years later, a buxom middle-aged woman, ebullient and not hesitating in being forthcoming about herself, explaining and justifying herself. But, can we believe her? She obviously believes herself but may have become so involved with the fictional side of what she did and what happened to her that much of her interview could be taken with a grain of salt.

Morris has some other interviews which contradict Joyce's story at times. KJ died in 2004, so is not in the film. Kirk Anderson (who is seen in home movies and photos) refused to participate in the film. But, the pilot is there. The *Daily Mirror* photographer is there – probably giving a lot of the truth but showing himself as a real tabloid personality. A Mormon DJ is also interviewed offering info about Mormon customs which may surprise some viewers (especially about the Mormon undergarments). Finally, a British *Daily Express* journalist is interviewed who brings some ironic objectivity to the whole story.

Since all these interviews are intercut throughout the whole film, it makes for continually interesting shifts of points of view.

In recent years, Joyce contacted a cloning scientist in Korea (he is interviewed too) about her dying dog – with the result that she now has five cloned puppies!

A tabloid life!

ZOOKEEPER

(US, 2011, d. Frank Coraci)

Older grandparents accompanying their grandchildren will remember the Francis the Talking Mule movies of the 1950s. Younger grandparents may remember Doctor Doolittle's song, 'Talk to the Animals'. Parents will remember all kinds of talking animals on the large and small screen. Here's another one.

The littlest children may find the animals funny but there is a lot of plot concerning the Zookeeper himself and his pining over his former girlfriend, Stephanie (Leslie Bibb) while he has to learn to be satisfied in being his real self which will seem to them to be just marking time until the next funny bit. It may appeal most to primary school goers. Parents could enjoy it, but it is fairly basic comedy.

Kevin James made his name with the TV series, *The King of Queens*, and then came to the screen in *Hitch*, Paul Blart

Mall Manager and Grown Ups. He is large, acknowledges this, and is not exactly your screen heartthrob. He plays to this image, plenty of pratfalls, plenty of accidents and a fair amount of mayhem.

The animals have obviously seen the Madagascar films and see Zookeeper as a great opportunity to become stars. They talk – although the code does not allow them to let humans know they can speak. But, they are grateful to Griffin the Zookeeper for helping them, especially against hard-hearted co-workers and obnoxious visitors to the zoo. When they reveal themselves to Griffin, they each try to help him to woo Stephanie again and make him look like a hero. The results are disastrous as each animal gets him to be like them: lions advising getting prey by themselves, the wolf advising his canine techniques for marking out territory (demonstrated and Griffin following suit), bears offering macho hints.

Griffin's main friend is the lonely gorilla, Bernie, and a highlight of their being buddies is Griffin taking Bernie to TGI Friday's and a boisterous night on the town. Bernie is also instrumental in helping Griffin propose to Kate (Rosario Dawson) his co-worker.

And, there are some amusing out-takes during the final credits.

The bonus in seeing the film, the voice talent: Nick Nolte is a doleful Bernie; Adam Sandler is the comic monkey (and his wife, Jackie, appears as the waitress in TGI Fridays); Sylvester Stallone is a rather cowardly lion with Cher as his wife; Jon Favreau and Faison Love are the bears and Maya Rudolph is Mollie the Giraffe while director Judd Appatow is Barry the elephant.

SIGNIS FILM REVIEWS, OCTOBER 2011

CRAZY, STUPID, LOVE
DRIVE
FOOTLOOSE
HIGHER GROUND
MIDNIGHT IN PARIS
MONTE CARLO
PROJECT NIM
SPY KIDS 4: ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD
SURVIVING GEORGIA
TAKE SHELTER
THING, The
WHISTLEBLOWER, The

CRAZY, STUPID, LOVE.

(US, 2011, d. Glenn Ficarra and John Requa)

It's unusual for a film title to have a full stop at the end of it. What does it mean for Crazy, Stupid, Love? That it is a statement? That, at the end of the film, all is resolved – which it is except for a crazy, alcoholic school teacher? (Or was it just a typo and we are reading too much into it?)

Some reviewers and publicists are referring to the film as another 'romcom'. Not exactly. Rather, this is a story of some crazy behaviour on the part of very young, young and middle aged people, quite a range of craziness and quite some stupidity.

At the centre is a middle-aged couple who married young, who have three children, who seem to be ideal –until the wife, Emily (Julianne Moore) blurts out to her husband, Cal (Steve Carrell) that she wants a divorce after having an affair with a fellow-worker (Kevin Bacon). The film is more about Cal's depression, his listening to a young man about town and womaniser, Jacob (Ryan Gosling) and letting him dictate his new fashions and look and advise him on picking up lonely women in bars. The one he does pick up, Kate, the teacher (Marisa Tomei) has more than enough problems of her own, eventually compounding his.

The sub-plot focuses on Jacob and his being thrown off guard by his attraction for a young lawyer, Hannah (Emma Stone) and her love which challenges all his presuppositions.

There is another sub-plot, quite bizarre, more crazy and stupid behaviour than with the adults. Cal's thirteen year old son is smitten with his 17 year old babysitter and becomes something of a stalker. She, meanwhile, has a crush on Cal which she act on.

It all comes to a head when the babysitter's parents find out, some of the participants literally fighting head on, as the son's behaviour comes to light and there is a plot twist which we didn't see coming. After the brawl at home comes the son's graduation from middle school where he is valedictorian and there is a scene which could take place only in a demonstrative, extravertedly crazy American setting.

In many ways, it is uncomfortable watching people behave like this, make mistakes, act cruelly and vindictively. But, to think that this does not reflect what many people go through would be avoiding the issues.

The cast is strong. There are some funny lines and moments even if it is a bit Americanly 'out there'.

DRIVE

(US, 2011, d. Nicholas Winding Refn)

This film won the Best Director award at the 2011 Cannes Film Festival. In terms of craft, it is very well done, bringing Los Angeles to life, plenty of action sequences excitingly filmed, long close-ups for allowing the audience to reflect on characters, an atmosphere of tenderness amid some moments of ugly violence.

The director is Danish Nicholas Winding Refn who spent some formative years in New York. He has built up a reputation for some tough drug thrillers, the Pusher series and Bleeder. He also directed the powerfully strange portrait of prison life, Bronson. This is his first film made in the US, bringing a European eye to the city of Los Angeles.

The film works on several levels.

It looks like an action and crime thriller. It opens with a well-timed and well-executed robbery and a night chase eluding police. Later, we are immersed in the world of ugly thugs in LA and another robbery that goes wrong.

It is also a love story of the quietly tender kind.

And, by the end, it has become a vengeance payback film with some very grim deaths.

The star is Ryan Gosling who has proven himself a versatile leading man in his 20s, with such films as The Believer, Half Nelson, Blue Valentine and such romances as The Notebook. Here he is The Driver, no further name given. He is about thirty. We know nothing of his background. He is a stunt driver for movies but also takes on jobs as a getaway driver. He loves driving and is energised as he exercises his skills. He is also an introspective, laconic man who just says enough to get by. His focus is on his driving. He is exact, precise and looks at life very objectively. He is prepared to drive an audition for his friend, mechanic Shannon (Bryan Cranston), to impress former film producer and shady entrepreneur (Albert Brooks leaving his sardonic comedies far behind).

What he has not expected in life is to become personally involved with anyone. He is attracted by his apartment neighbour and her little boy. Carey Mulligan is a star on the rise (An Education, Wall Street 2, Never Let Me Go) and she is charming as a waitress whose husband (Oscar Isaac who was St Joseph in The Nativity Story and Jose Ramos Horta in Balibo) is in prison. She has an engaging little son whom The Driver also befriends. These are the tender scenes, showing The Driver's potential for emotion and relationships.

Life is not all that easy and The Driver, out of kindness and concern, involves himself in another robbery. The consequences bring out The Driver's capacity for cold violence and vengeance.

Audiences will go through a range of emotions and responses as they watch Drive. The Driver is a flawed character whose life might have been different and more positive. He lives by a code rather than a morality and is faithful to that code. Which brings him into conflict with those who lack morality and code.

Nicholas Winding Refn has offered us a complex study of a fringe Everyman.

FOOTLOOSE

(US, 2011, d. Craig Brewer)

Yes, we have been there before. Back in 1984, with a popular movie, its music, its story of teenage rebels and of authoritarian parents. But, as the Paramount publicist reminded me, the main cast of this version were not even born when the original film was released!

While *Footloose* 1984 was entertaining, it wasn't the greatest. The usual reaction to remakes (and updates) is, first of all, why bother when you have an original and, second, 'it's not as good as the original'. This reviewer thought that this remake was better than the original (although not the greatest, either). The screenwriters have been able to look at the 1980s screenplay and provide some improvements and developments.

The opening crowd dance sequence gets us into the mood (raucous teenagers, dance, cars, drinking, sexual relationships) but with the sudden car accident, the mood instantly changes. It gives a more realistic context to the decision of the town council where the dead teenagers came from to impose curfews, forbid dancing and put a limit on loud music. In 1984, the main enforcer was the local minister, played with some fire and brimstone denunciations by John Lithgow. This time, Dennis Quaid, both a minister and a member of the council, is intense because of the death of his son and overprotective of his daughter who is certainly into rebellion. But Quaid plays much more quietly, using arguments and emotion rather than simple denunciation. Andie MacDowell plays his wife, very much in the background until she tells her husband that she has been a preacher's wife and silent for decades but it is time for her to speak out. And she does.

In place of Kevin Bacon, at the beginning of a long and successful career, we have Kenny Wormald, a dancer who looks like a cross between Zac Efron and Tim Roth. This gives him more of a cutting edge than dreamboat rebel. His background is filled in more credibly as well. Julianne Hough is Ariel, the daughter, who has to move from couldn't care less to being much more vulnerable.

One of the highlights of 1984 was Chris Penn as the awkward friend who has to learn how to dance. This time it is Miles Teller who tends to steal the scenes he is in. For fans, this version repeats the dance lessons and uses Let's hear it for the boy, the memorable song from the old days. Of course, *Footloose*, with its corny lyrics, is there at beginning and end.

The film is set in Georgia and is a reminder that the religious right is still a strong influence in contemporary American beliefs and politics. *Footloose* is an appeal for the older generation to trust the younger, even make mistakes – before they become adults, parents and act like their parents do with them!

HIGHER GROUND

(US, 2011, d. Vera Farmiga)

Vera Farmiga, a versatile actress in quite diverse roles in films like *The Departed*, *Breaking and Entering*, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* or *Up in the Air*, has taken on demanding tasks for her first film as director by playing the lead as well. For those who 'get' the film (and there will be many who don't because it deals with themes of religion and challenges to faith), she has done good work in both directing and acting.

The film is based on a memoir by Caroline S. Briggs, 'The Darkest Hour' and she has co-written the script with Timothy Metcalfe. Because it is a memoir rather than a biography, the film uses memoir structure: moments are glimpsed; motivations are implied sometimes rather than being spelt out; characters may also seem enigmatic or underdeveloped as the screenplay quickly moves from times and places in leaps rather than in ordered and explained progression.

That said, the film is fascinating for anyone who is concerned about religion, especially popular religion and what is often called 'simple faith'. While devout simple faith can be a great solace and sustenance, we realise that for many it is not enough. Important questions about life and its meaning are ignored at one's peril, an opting out that can lead to a blind and/or stubborn hanging on to the words of belief without reflection, or a shattering of the fragilities of faith leading to giving up on religious effort or despair.

Corinne, as a little girl, was stirred by an eager preacher and put her hand up to say that she had made a choice for Jesus. At home, things are not so easy: a drinking father, a carefree mother, the tragedy of a death at birth. As Corinne grows up (and Vera Farmiga takes on the role), she writes and thinks but becomes infatuated with a young band member, Ethan, who invites her to write a song with him. The older Ethan is played well by Joshua Leonard. Pregnancy and marriage follow in that order. When, some band members are fooling around in a bus and cause it to swerve into a river, Corinne's and Ethan's baby does not die as they had feared. From then on both become believers and members of a home church, led by an enthusiastic preacher (where men preach and women, dressed modestly, don't).

Years go by until one of Corinne's close friends, Annika (an engagingly exuberant performance by Dagmara Dominczyk) has a brain tumour and Corinne begins to give voice to her questions about suffering and God's presence and absence. The help she gets is not sufficient to help her resolve her issues and her husband's and children's continuing devout lives. Some have complained that the film leaves the audience up in the air concerning Corinne's decision, but there are several, non-verbal indications that tell their story satisfyingly.

The film presents evangelical Christians as they are, positive and negative and response will depend on presuppositions audiences bring to the film as to whether they approve/agree with these Christians, their faith, the Jesus-language, their charismatic approach to prayer and sharing, their moral codes (and patriarchal leadership). For mainstream church audiences, the film is a challenge to them as to how they believe, how they express that faith and speak of Jesus, how they respond to questions about God. It is a challenge to those in leadership and spiritual direction as to how they would listen to such a Christian, evaluate their prayer experiences and assist them in discerning God's place in their lives.

Vera Farmiga made some observations on her approach to the film. She herself comes from an American Ukrainian Catholic background:

'You've got fundamentalism, and you've got relativism. I wanted to push both ways and try to come at it from a middle ground.'

'My dad is someone who feels the breath of God on his face. He's tapping into something that I have yet to tap into - and yearn to.'

'Doubt is the middle position between knowledge and ignorance. It encompasses cynicism but also genuine questioning.'

[On any difficulties she encountered in casting 'Higher Ground'] It should have been a lot harder. I'd say, 'It's about a woman enmeshed in this very particular spiritual community who's trying to conceptualize and define God for herself. And you use the word 'God' and people quake with fear. That's when I started to realize what a touchy, bizarre, sensitive, combative subject matter it is.

MIDNIGHT IN PARIS

(US, 2011, d. Woody Allen)

A very pleasant surprise.

Woody Allen seems to have fallen on hard times in the last ten years or so. Some of his films have not been released in countries like the UK and Australia and have gone straight to DVD. Critical response has been mixed. Allen has also been making films in England, Spain and in France as well as New York. He did break out of his critical and commercial stalemate with Vicki Christina Barcelona in 2008. With Midnight in Paris, he is back again: some very good reviews and some substantial box-office.

When he made Midnight in Paris, Allen was 74, not bad for an older director with over forty years of directing, writing and acting.

The opening is quite entrancing. Lots of wonderful views of Paris, the familiar views, scenes with people in ordinary life. We know that it is eventually going to arrive at midnight. And it rains but, as it does throughout the film, rain doesn't take away anything from the distinctive beauty of the city. There is a jazz musical background.

Then we were in Allen territory, character-wise. This time his alter ego is Owen Wilson in one of his best performances. While Wilson has his familiar accent and modulation, he is able to communicate the Woody Allen modulation as well. He articulates Allen's funny lines and his reflective lines very credibly. Wilson is Gil, who has been writing screenplays for Hollywood, is now writing a novel in his favourite city, though his nostalgia is for the American expatriate life in Paris in the 1920s, the world of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Zelda, Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, Picasso, Luis Bunuel and Salvador Dali (at least).

This nostalgia is not at all shared by Gil's fiancée, Inez - Rachel McAdams in a most persuasive performance, she and her parents types who would walk out of this kind of film. Kurt Fuller and, especially his snobbish wife (Mimi Kennedy), 'Cheap is cheap, I always say', are particularly good, caricature, perhaps, with Allen taking shots at the Republican agenda and the Tea-Party.

Gil likes to get away from his prospective wife and in-laws and wander the night streets of the city. He gets into a taxi and off into the 1920s where the above list of celebrities actually materialise.

For those for whom these names are familiar, the film is a delight, indulging our pleasure in a 21st century man being welcomed into the past. And he meets Picasso's model, Adriana (a most charming Marion Cotillard) and falls in love with her. (Her nostalgia period is La Belle Epoque and, again delightfully, we are taken with Gil and Adriana to the 1980s and who should be there watching the Can Can at Maxims but Toulouse Lautrec, Gauguin and Degas).

The performances are wonderful. Kathy Bates is perfect as Gertrude Stein, helping Gil with his novel. Adrien Brody has only a few moments as Dali but is very effective and funny with his talk of a rhinoceros. There is a funny joke with Bunuel about the plot for *The Exterminating Angel*.

This means that the film might not strike all audiences in the same way. At one moment, there is a reference to a character from the past whom I did not recognise – making me realise that those who do not know Picasso, Hemingway and co would not enjoy much of the film.

The review cannot end without a word of praise of Michael Sheen (in the 21st century narrative) as an American academic who is not burdened by humility – at all. He is described to Gil as 'pedantic' (an understatement) by the tour guide, who is played by Carla Bruni.

All in all, *Midnight in Paris* will go into my list of my favourite Woody Allen films and I would be pleased to watch it again.

MONTE CARLO

(US, 2011, d. Thomas Bezucha)

Slipping into a holiday afternoon show at a multiplex, I found myself with the target audience (plus a few oldies and grandparents) and they all seemed to enjoy the shenanigans in Monte Carlo. The target audience is definitely teen girls (of all ages) with the characters being 18 and 21.

Apparently, this project started life as an adult romantic comedy for Nicole Kidman (whose name appears as one of the producers, as does Forest Whittaker) and Julia Roberts. It would have been the modern equivalent of those Golden Oldies like *Three Coins in the Fountain*, three women finding romance in a lovely European city, scenery and all. The powers that be reduced the ages of the three women and sent them to Paris. But, Paris was not enough and the plot soon takes them to Monte Carlo. There's romance (all very PG level) and there's beautiful scenery (and a clip from *To Catch a Thief* to honour Grace Kelly and all that romantic aura of Monaco half a century ago or more).

What gives the film more verve than might have been expected are the performances and the vivacity of the three actresses. Singer-actress Selena Gomez is Grace, an 18 year old from Texas who graduates and has been saving up for a trip to France (Andie MacDowell appears in a scene or two as her mother). There is her good friend, Emma, 21, a down-to-earth high school dropout who works at a diner (Katie Cassidy almost stealing the show with her bright screen presence) and Meg, 21, Grace's new half-sister (Leighton Meester who has change from snobby prim to letting her hair down).

After a nightmare rushed cheapo tour of Paris, Grace is mistaken for a British heiress, in France for a charity auction. She embodies all that film-makers caricature in creating an obnoxious (that's an understatement!), snobbily domineering, self-centred upper class horror. It is to Selena Gomez's credit that she makes Cordelia Winthrop Scott live up to this description.

Yes, the plot then becomes a modern version of *The Prince and the Pauper* as Grace is bundled by mistake off to Monte Carlo, and the girls decide to live it up for a few days. Grace encounters a charming young Frenchman. Meg has already met an Australian backpacker in Paris who turns up in Monte Carlo (Luke Bray from *Home and Away*, looking like a blend of Heath Ledger and Simon Baker). Emma encounters a prince and finds that he is also a snob, especially when, being ignored at dinner with his friends all speaking French, she decides to help the waitresses with their clearing the tables. But she has a Texan beau who comes to France to find her.

The final expose of the three is fairytale enjoyable, aided by British comedian, Catherine Tate, as Cordelia's aunt. The film's heart is in the right place: down with the wealthy snobs, up with charity and volunteering – and true love.

Fluff, of course, but sparkling fluff.

PROJECT NIM

(UK, 2011, d. James Marsh)

James Marsh made the fascinating and Oscar-winning documentary on tightrope walker, Phillippe Petit, *Man on Wire*. He has now made another fascinating documentary but not in the way we might have imagined. It is the story of chimpanzee, Nim Chimpsky, who was the subject of an experiment during the 1970s. Taken from an Oklahoma centre, Nim was fostered by a family, who were not expert on care of monkeys. He was then taken away to Texas by himself where he bonded with a worker. But, then he was taken to Lemsip, an institute for animal use in testing drugs.

While Nim seemed to respond to sign language and indicated some kind of communication, the initiator of the experiment, changed his mind about its success and terminated the program. But, instinctively, Nim does some violence and damage to carers.

But, what is of great interest along with the issue of cruelty to animals and experimentation with them, is how the humans behaved. While a couple of characters are presented by actors, most of the principals are seen in the movies made at the time and, seated individually, being interviewed in the present. There was a clash of personalities, some highhanded and authoritarian interventions, a lack of communication abilities and sensitivities, which means the film is also a study of human behaviour.

The present interviews juxtaposed with the past movie footage also remind us of how age and ageing is inevitable and irrevocable.

The story of Nim is presented chronologically and we can sympathise with the chimpanzee, first of all being treated like a spoiled child, as someone remarks. Then, without warning, sudden change, isolation like imprisonment. Then some care. Then experimentation. Then old age.

The human story goes back and forth giving some of them the opportunity to reassess their behaviour (especially the director of Lemsip), while others are tearful about the past, rueful, regretful – and sometimes condemnatory.

(A film for comparison is the French story of a gorilla in a zoo, *Nenette*, and care and zoo visitors.)

SPY KIDS 4: ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD

(US, 2011, d. Robert Rodriguez)

It is eight years since the last *Spy Kids* movie, the third in the series. The first two had been enjoyable for family audiences in their way, spoofs of the James Bond kind of thrillers but with enough jokes for kids to keep them interested and entertained. The third film was not so good (and Sylvester Stallone proving again that comedy was not his forte).

Robert Rodriguez has had a strange film career. He loves genre stuff and has a relish for the tough and the violent (think *From Dusk to Dawn*, *Planet Terror* and *Sin City*) and a love for the material of graphic novels. Yet, he has had a soft spot for children's films, *Shorts* as well as the *Spy Kids* series. And, as with most of his films, he writes, directs, photographs, edits and has a hand in the musical score.

It seems that this one has not gone down so well in America and has received bad word of mouth. I'm not sure why. I wouldn't think that it deserves it. It is as good as any of the others, better than *Spy Kids 3*. In fact, those original *spy kids*, Alexa Vega and Darryl Sabara, turn up again, quite grown up. But, the main *spy kids* are two littlies who are cantankerous at first, the sister resenting her new stepmother and playing nasty pranks, the brother more amenable. Then they have a new little sister. But, we know stepmother's secret. She is a spy. Meanwhile, her somewhat mealy-mouthed TV writer husband has been developing a new reality show, *Spy Hunter*. Little does he realise...

Mother (the feisty Jessica Alba) is called up for duty because an arch-villain, the Timekeeper, has a device that shortens time, and time is running out. While you can guess the rest, it is how it all works out, how the kids become involved, how mother's niece and nephew, the original *spy kids*, get into the action – and even Dad turns up – that makes for easy young children's entertainment. They will like the mechanical dog who is programmed to be guardian for the kids, and who talks – a deadpan recitation by Ricky Gervais.

(It is Ricky Gervais who introduces the film with its 4th dimension, a card with numbers which you scratch and sniff when the number comes up on the screen – mine didn't seem to work and had a general odour of stale air freshener instead of bacon or cheeses! A needless and ineffectual gimmick all round.)

Jeremy Piven has a good time in multiple roles, and there are some enjoyable special effects.

With its catering to boys and to girls, this is an undemanding and lightly entertaining holiday outing (or home DVD).

TAKE SHELTER

(US, 2011, d. Jeff Nichols)

This is a striking and thought-provoking film.

On the one hand, there is a 'realistic' story about a man and his family, their ordinary lives at home, the man and his work and his prospects. On the other hand, there is far more, as the film goes into the man's mind, his imagination, his dreams as he discovers mental torment and premonitions about an apocalyptic threat. The ending does not set everything out like the solution of a problem, but leaves the audience pondering what they have seen and what it might mean.

Michael Shannon has shown he can do torment, madness as well as malice in quite a number of films, frightening in such films as *Bug*, *World Trade Center*, puzzling and threatening in *My Son, My Son, What Have Ye Done* and *Revolutionary Road* (for which he received an Oscar nomination). His is ideal casting for this strange 'Everyman', Curtis, in today's or tomorrow's US mid-West.

Curtis is overwhelmed by his nightmares as well as his visions of swarming birds, spectacular lightning . looming tornado clouds. His mother was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia when she was in her mid-30s and Curtis is now afraid for himself and of himself. He does not hear voices. He sees visions. He behaves erratically, symbolised by his getting his workmate to help him excavate a giant hole for a shelter against the tornado he continually sees coming. This costs him his job, his reputation, his friends.

While it puzzles his wife and daughter, his wife is a strong woman, coping practically with the crises and showing that marriage can truly mean for better or worse. She is played by Jessica Chastain who is currently proving herself a substantial actress in varied roles (*The Help*, *Tree of Life*, *The Debt*). His young daughter is deaf, which leads to some powerful scenes with mother and father learning how to communicate with her as well as help her during the storm.

What is happening to this basically good man? He visits his mother in an institution. His brother comes, concerned about him. He seeks counselling and psychiatric help.

With the apocalyptic images and a powerfully ranting speech that Curtis makes to bewildered friends and colleagues at a company lunch, there is quite a deal to ponder about images of the end of the world and a coming catastrophe. This has already led some reviewers to think about the film as a symbolic story of America in the grip of global financial meltdown, of jobs and wages, of unemployment, of the fragile state of the American psyche. All are themes worth reflecting on – as well as the literal refuge in the shelter that Curtis builds and equips and the symbolic warning of impending disasters.

THE THING

(US, 2011, d. Matthijs van Heijningen)

In the early 1950s, *The Thing* (*The Thing from Another World*) was early science fiction, B-Budget and story, an introduction to the theme of hostile aliens invading Earth with no good intentions towards humans. It became something of a cult classic.

In the early 1980s, *The Thing* was remade by John Carpenter with a bigger cast, led by Kurt Russell, and a bigger budget, especially for the ugly and hostile aliens and their vicious attacks. Carpenter had a big reputation at the time and his version of *The Thing* is highly regarded.

In 2011 (is the spacing of thirty years for each version significant?), the new *The Thing* is not so much a remake but a prequel, set at the very time in 1982 that Carpenter's film was ready for release. While the cast is not quite the A list, the budget certainly is and there is no slouching with special effects for the horrors perpetrated by the thing as it takes over the humans and distorts their features as well as revealing its frighteningly ugly self. Joel Edgerton is a helicopter pilot. Ulrich Thomsen is a relentless scientist.

But, in the early 1980s, one of the most famous of the alien films, *Alien* itself, was popular as was Sigourney Weaver as the tough leader and survivor, Ripley. In this version, a similar heroine, Mary Elizabeth Winstead who is not quite a match for Sigourney Weaver, takes charge.

Actually, the plot is fairly straightforward. Scientists in Antarctica discover a space ship and its monstrous creature. Another group of scientists arrive to investigate. Gradually, the thing begins to take over and absorb the scientists and the ground crew. The rest struggle to defeat the thing and to survive (most of them unsuccessfully).

While the material is familiar, it is offered with some zest and panache and should satisfy fans without necessarily threatening the reputation of the previous versions of *The Thing*. Thirty more years for the next version!

THE WHISTLEBLOWER

(Canada, 2011, d. Larysa Kondracki)

Any whistleblower usually has a very difficult time personally. They have to weigh carefully whether they will communicate abuses to authorities, consider how the information will be received, what the reaction will be from fellow-workers, especially if they have been involved in the abuses.

Kathryn Bolkovac was a tough member of the Nebraska police force in the 1990s. After a divorce, she wanted to move closer to where her daughter would be living since the father had custody. He thought she was married to her job. In fact, she was. Then she was asked if she would be interested in six months work in the Balkans as part of a UN peace-keeping corps. She agreed and went.

The audience has been warned from the beginning of the film that *The Whistleblower* will not just be about Kathryn's peace-keeping work. We are immersed immediately in the world of human trafficking, specifically from Ukraine to the Balkans. When Kathryn becomes involved in defending a battered wife's rights, she is asked by the authorities if she will head a department for women. She soon discovers the extent of trafficking in women as well as the involvement of UN personnel, many of whom were employed by a private security company. As she learns more, she experiences hostility and blockage from authorities. There are harm and death threats. She becomes more emotionally concerned with a group of exploited young girls.

The actual Kathryn acted as technical adviser for the film which pulls very few punches. She is fortunate to have Rachel Weisz portraying her, one of Weisz's most powerful performances, tough yet tender, bold but apprehensive, principled and determined. The supporting cast includes Vanessa Redgrave (her kind of film and cause) as the sympathetic authority, Monica Bellucci in quite an unsympathetic role as a by-the-book bureaucrat (perhaps also a presence because of her belief in the cause). David Strathairn, always reliable, is another encouraging authority figure.

There have been a number of feature films as well as documentaries on the horrors of human trafficking and women being lost in a sexually and physically violent world. *Lilya 4 ever* was set in Russia and Sweden, *My Name is Justine* in Poland and Germany, *Trade* in Mexico and the US, *Amos Gittai's Promised Land* in the Balkans and Israel. For the multiplex audience there was the action thriller, *Taken*, set in Paris, focusing on Albanian and middle eastern traffickers. *The Jammed* had an Asian and Australian setting. This indicates how the issue has become more evident in the last decade.

There are some graphic sequences involving the young girls who fell for the promises of a good life and found themselves sex-slaves. The brutality of the men is appalling. The expose of the behaviour of peace-keepers and members of security forces as well as the indications of cover-ups probably mean that the audience is in a state of anger for much of the film. The UN traffickers might claim immunity but, as Vanessa Redgrave's character states, but they don't have impunity.

A grim movie experience but one that is important for alerting all to this gross abuse of women's rights and gross behaviour of the traffickers.

SIGNIS REVIEWS NOVEMBER 2011

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WHAT'S YOUR NUMBER

ANONYMOUS

(US/Germany, 2011, d. Roland Emmerich)

'Brush up your Shakespeare', Cole Porter wrote for Kiss Me Kate. 'Brush up your Earl of Oxford' doesn't go nearly as well (let alone 'brush up your bacon!').

What if...?

If you like that question, then try this interesting and often amusing speculation (yet again) about who wrote Shakespeare's plays. The candidate this time is Edward, Earl of Oxford. If you don't like the question, then check some of the bloggers on the Internet Movie Database who will prove to you, very seriously indeed, how impudent this question is. They probably didn't enjoy Shakespeare in Love.

This film owes more than a little to Shakespeare in Love but a great deal also to all those films about Elizabeth I of England with their differing focuses on the Dudleys, the Cecils and the Duke of Essex. Whom did she love – and was she in fact a virgin queen. (This speculation is definitely answering no, with some scandalous implications as well.) But, John Orloff's complex and often ingenious screenplay links the plays to the politics, especially the writing of Richard III and a performance at the Globe Theatre to rouse the groundlings against Robert Cecil (and his hunched back).

The film looks very good, re-creating London in the late Elizabethan era (plus some flashbacks to when Gloriana was younger). The dialogue is often witty, especially at poor William Shakespeare's expense, since he was an average actor who stepped up at the cry, 'author, author', to take the credit (and the money) from the anonymous Earl of Oxford (who had offered the job and salary of a 'front' to Ben Jonson who could not take the responsibility).

Rhys Ifans gives one of his best performances (very serious, so unlike his ruffian in Notting Hill) as the Earl who loved writing more than anything – the film has him writing and performing A Midsummer Night's Dream when he was about twelve. Some scenes are re-enacted from different plays with Mark Rylance (who has been until recently the artistic director of the restored Globe Theatre in London) showing us how well a lot of the verse and performance work so well if played to the audience (his prologue to Henry V is a case in point, and there is a rousing cheer at the end of the St Crispin's Day speech). To be or not to be also works well.

So, the mystery of the authorship is presented intriguingly (with Rafe Spall very good as the rather bumpkin Shakespeare). The building of the Globe, the murder of Christopher Marlowe (Shakespeare again!), Hounslow and Burbage and the others associated with the Globe as well as Jonson make for provocatively entertaining sequences – with Derek Jacobi in the present providing an on stage prologue and epilogue asking us to believe this tall story.

The politics is also interesting with the sinister roles of William and Robert Cecil (David Thewlis and Edward Hogg), the reasons given for the stand of the Earl of Essex in 1601, the place of the Earl of Southampton (and an intriguing reason for Shakespeare's very personal dedication to him). And Elizabeth. Vanessa Redgrave must be very satisfied in having the opportunity to do a portrait of Elizabeth in old age (bewigged and rather embalmed with make-up as was Bette Davis in her two films portraying the queen). She is, as might be expected, very good. Her daughter, Joely Richardson, is cast as the younger Elizabeth.

Dates are skewiff if you want to review the film as history rather than as intended, a pleasing cinema hoax. Which means that it is (mostly?) nonsense – so why not enjoy it all, tongue in cheek. It does help in brushing up our Shakespeare.

CEDAR RAPIDS

(US, 2011, d. Miguel Arteta)

A slight, comic and satirical look at Middle America.

Candide is a character who comes to mind as we watch the rather ingenuous and naive adventures of Tim Lippe, an insurance agent in a small town, who has never quite grown up even though we find him in a sexual relationship with his former teacher (Sigourney Weaver). When his boss asks him to go to Cedar Rapids after the former top agent of the firm dies, he not only has to represent the firm but is expected to bring back the top award made by the annual

conference. It would seem he doesn't have a chance.

Ed Helms (The Office, The Hangover films) as Tim is a rather gangly innocent who falls into the clutches of exploiters – who then turn out to be his friends when he discovers that his boss and the conference boss are dishonest. This means that he gets caught up in drinking, going to a club with a prostitute, having a relationship with a seductive colleague and pushed by the insurance agent that his boss had advised him against.

This might make the goings on seem worse than they are and how they are presented. Tim has to discover his naivety, the double-dealing of authorities and that his friends who lead him astray are good at heart.

There are some amusing episodes but it is the cast which move things along to a more sensible and happy ending. John C. Reilly is, as always, very good as the at-first-obnoxious agent. Anne Heche is the seductive colleague. Stephen Root is the fickle boss and Kurtwood Smith is the surface respectable president of the association. The baddies are unmasked and the goodies improve.

Not necessary, but it has its surprising moments.

CONTAGION

(US, 2011, d. Steven Soderbergh)

Catchy title? No, that's far too flippant a comment for this kind of very serious film. It is about contagion. It does show how a virus can spread. It is alarming how an epidemic can gather momentum. It is frightening in its visualising of the life and death consequences, in health, in the ensuing chaos in public order, in the time needed for antidotes to be developed, in the consequences in the disrupting of organised and routine lives.

One can sit through many a slasher film or monsters devouring humans (or nor) and know that it is only a fantasy. But, to watch the spread of a virus and realise that this kind of thing has happened and could happen, creates much more genuine alarm and fear in a cinema audience.

Steven Soderbergh has turned his director's hand to all kinds of film since he won the main awards at Cannes in 1989 for Sex, Lies and Videotape. He has made small and experimental films. He has made big-budget movies like the Oceans trilogy. He has made the two part portrait of Che Guevarra. And now he has made a disaster movie. Not unlike those of the 1970s with a big star cast. He has three Oscar-winning actresses in leading roles, Gwynneth Paltrow as a bearer of the virus who dies at the beginning of the film (but, spoiler, is seen in later flashbacks), Kate Winslet as an American expert who is sent by Laurence Fishburne to work on site in Minnesota where the outbreak has occurred, Marion Cotillard as a Swiss World Health Organisation expert who goes to investigate in Hong Kong where the virus may have originated.

Matt Damon is the human face of the consequences, playing Gwynneth Paltrow's husband. And Jennifer Ehle has an important role as a scientist who works for Elliot Gould who has been able to isolate the virus. Jude Law plays an obnoxious, interfering exploitative blogger.

So, plenty of good actors and plenty going on.

It is interesting to see the efforts of authorities to search for solutions, to handle the logistics of an epidemic in an American city, to control the media against alarmist reporting. The film shows scenes of rioting and looting but to make convincing impact with this theme, some more explanatory sequences are needed. The riots and looting happen quickly without sufficient explanation – though, of course, the audience does supply this.

The search for explanations of the origins of the virus lead to Hong Kong and some scenes in China.

Contagion is interesting in its rather realistic speculations of what might happen. It is also strongly cautionary in its promotion of hygiene and cleanliness. Without the big names, Contagion might have been too much of a downer for most audiences. But, the stars mean that more people will see the film – and perhaps be more thoughtful and cautious.

THE CUP

(Australia, 2011, d. Simon Wincer)

Plenty of cups around the world but, for Australians and for international racing, the cup is the Melbourne Cup when the nation allegedly stops to watch or listen to the race (as we see them do in the film).

Films about racehorses have always been popular. The first film shot in Australia was the Melbourne Cup in 1896. Australian film makers have made *Archer* and *Phar Lap*. In fact, director Simon Wincer made *Phar Lap* almost thirty years ago and returns with *The Cup*. He knows how to craft popular, even old-fashioned, films for the wider audience (which has occasioned some surprisingly negative reviews for *The Cup* from some critics).

If you want to sit back, look at the racing industry and some races, see the story of Australian champion jockey, Damian Oliver, the sadness in his family life as well as his triumphs, then enjoy *The Cup* even as you become more than a little tearful at the tragedy and then, with excitement and sympathy, at the running of the 2002 Melbourne Cup and the achievement of Damian Oliver and the Irish horse, *Media Puzzle*.

Stephen Curry looks and acts the part of Oliver and makes him a sympathetic ordinary bloke with a talent for riding racehorses. Damian MacPherson is his brother, Jason, also a rider. Their grandfather had been a jockey as had their father who died in a sad accident. Accidents dogged the sons as well. Singer Colleen Hewitt appears as their mother.

The Irish connection in the film is well served by having Brendan Gleeson as trainer, Dermot Weld, stropky, demanding, shrewd and, ultimately, sympathetic. It is interesting to see Tom Burlinson back on screen – he was the champion's trainer in *Phar Lap* – as the assistant trainer to Dermot Weld. A host of Australian character actors appear like Lewis FitzGerald, Martin Sacks, Shaun Micallef and Bill Hunter in his final role, playing Bart Cummings. Added to that are quite a number of cameos from commentators like Eddie McGuire, Denis Cometti as well as a studio session with the Coodabeen Champions. It definitely is a Melbourne film.

While the nationalism and the national spirit are strong, we are reminded that just before that Melbourne Cup in 2002 and the Oliver family tragedy, there was the Bali bombing and death toll, which gives quite some edge to the national spirit.

Those who know what happened in fact will enjoy seeing it played out. Those who do not know won't be surprised at the final outcome. But, the important focus of the film is on Damian Oliver's response to his brother's accident and the soul-searching as to whether he should ride *Media Puzzle*. *Media Puzzle* was a puzzling horse and quite unpredictable and not the favourite except in sentiment.

The kind of film that gives pleasure to a wide audience that enjoys a local story like this.

DON'T BE AFRAID OF THE DARK

(US, 2010, d. Troy Nixey)

There was once a little, scary telemovie, *Don't Be Afraid of the Dark*, 1973. A husband and wife go to redecorate an old house and the wife discovers little, lethal monsters in the basement. Now, almost forty years later, there is a more up-market re-make, co-written by Mexican director, Guillermo del Toro (*Pan's Labyrinth* and the *Hellboy* movies). It is no longer the wife who goes down to the basement and encounters the monsters, it is a little girl, which probably makes the film that much more scary.

The title is misleading insofar as the film-makers hope that you are scared of the dark but don't mind being scared, especially if the scares come from the screen.

There is a prologue in an old-English Gothic looking house, with a gory touch or two concerning teeth, that can set audiences on edge – and it is all explained rather clearly later. But, the perpetrator, an artist distraught at the death of his son, is played by Gary McDonald – and then Jack Thompson (with the eerie American accent he has done in so many films and which you never hear from anyone else, Julia Blake and Nicholas Bell turn up so we realise that it was probably filmed in Australia, standing in for the US).

The plot is fairly basic when you think of it. Divorced father has to look after his daughter as he renovates a mansion. His girlfriend is with him and the daughter does not like her. When the daughter encounters the monsters, no one believes her. Fortunately, the girl and her father's girlfriend bond and...

Katie Holmes is quite good as the girlfriend. Guy Pearce does a turn as the father. But, it is Bailee Madison who has to do all the dramatics in confronting the monsters. The latter are effective small, snarling, teeth-bearing creatures who look like relatives of the Gremlins.

It is all more or less predictable (except part of the ending which seems more than a little cruel so that you can't say it all ends happily ever after), but that is what this kind of blend of horror, thriller and monsters is all about.

THE FIRST GRADER

(UK/ Kenya, 2010, d. Justin Chadwick)

At first, we might think that this is a feelgood film. An old man hears that the Kenyan government states that all Kenyans have a right to free education. He applies but is rejected. He does not give up and a sympathetic teacher takes on his cause, battles for him. All that is in the film, but there is a lot more.

The First Grader states that it is based on a true story. It also gives information at the opening about the Mau Mau uprising of the 1950s. This means that different audiences, especially for those who have a lived experience and memories of this period, will have different stances.

The film is very critical of the British, their occupation, colonial presuppositions, their military tactics against the Mau Mau, interrogation and torture. Kenya eventually achieved independence in the 1960s.

British residents and landowners who not only experienced dispossession but were the targets of savage violence will not look so benignly on this story of a former Mau Mau who had made the oath of loyalty to the movement and would not renounce it.

Another difficulty in Kenya was the tribalism – and, in recent years, has been shown to be still a difficulty. The Kikuyu were the core of the Mau Mau and there are still conflicts between the Kikuyu and other tribes.

Outsiders who look back at the racial and colonial injustices in African countries (and Australia and Latin America) will see justice and injustice on both sides and will ask how to progress from this conflicted past.

Oliver Litondo plays the illiterate farmer, Maruge, portraying him in the vein of a rural Mandela. There are flashbacks to his torture and the death of his wife and children. He can also have his tough moments as the parents of children resent his taking up a scarce desk in overcrowded schools, the criticisms of the old idle men, the hostility of the adult men.

Naoemie Harris plays the sympathetic teacher, Teacher Jane, who takes Maruge in, coaches him, finds that he is a good influence on the children, encouraging them with their own language, with singing and dancing and the issues of freedom. Jane is married to a husband working in Nairobi in diplomacy. The Education Department is not helpful in Maruge's case and an inspector is actively opposed and intrusive. The character of Jane is the ideal educator with a concern for justice. The fight for Maruge takes its toll on her life, her marriage and her career.

Eventually, Maruge takes action himself, facing the Kenyan bureaucrats in their comfortable offices, with their suits and ties, reminiscent of their British predecessors.

The education situation reminds us of many other stories of teachers and classes but engagingly so. So are the bureaucratic struggles, but that means we are urged to feel the injustices. The characters may seem idealised or stereotyped, but the film is trying to make its point through these confrontations.

Since the Kenyan situation, past and present, may not be familiar to many audiences, The First Grader offers an opportunity to remember, to face regrets, and to ask what are the best directions for the future. Maruge, before he died in 2009, addressed the United Nations on issues of education in Africa.

IN TIME

(US, 2011, d. Andrew Niccol)

The concept for In Time is interesting, tantalising. It's a pity that the dialogue is sometimes a bit trite and a lot of the action is rather conventional – that does not do enough justice to the ideas.

Andrew Niccol was responsible for such interesting 'futuristic' films like The Truman Show, The Minority Report and Gattaca. He also did the tough expose of arms dealers, Lord of War.

In this future world, which looks exactly like Los Angeles of the present, but that doesn't matter, there is no more money. We might wonder how this could be. But, the premiss of the film is that time not only means money, it is the money equivalent. In this society, humans can live to age 25 without complication (shades of Logan's Run but less lethal). But, their metabolism is put on permanent hold and they look 25 for the rest of their lives. And, immortality is theoretically possible if you have the time. Everyone has a luminous code on their arm so that they know how long they have to live. They can donate. They can receive. And their code serves as a bar code for all expenses.

There is still a gap between time-rich and time-poor, with separate zones which cost a lot of months and years to pass through. The rich have vast stores of time (and in banks where small time registering machines are kept). The poor eke out time from day to day and live in a ghetto zone.

All very interesting. The plot is quite straightforward. The hero resents his mother's untimely death (you can make all these word plays with time as the dialogue does as well). While helping a time-rich young man who is set upon by a gang, he is given time and drives to New Greenwich, the wealthy enclave. Discovered, he abducts the corporation head's daughter and they become a new age Bonnie and Clyde, pursued by a Timekeeper (played chillingly like a futuristic gunslinger by Cillian Murphy). They rob banks. They are media notorious. There will be a confrontation and a shoot out.

Actually, with this subversive scenario, this could become a cult classic for demonstrators at G20 meetings or for Occupy Wall Street and similar movements.

Justin Timberlake and Amanda Seyfried are Will and Sylvia who spend a lot of time almost running out of time. Average film, above average ideas and themes.

JUCY

(Australia, 2011, d. Louise Alston)

A Brisbane comedy which will resonate there – and, hopefully, all round Australia.

The title? A combination of the names of the two leads, Jackie and Lucy. This film owes a great deal to the combination of talent seen with, say, Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders. Jackie (Cindy Nelson) is the larger than life comedian. Lucy (Francesca Gasteen) is the sligher but more sardonic comedian. They are both 20-somethings who have not entirely grown up.

They have done everything together for years – a kind of co-dependence and friends wonder about their 'womance', the female version of 'bromance'. They work in a video store for customers with 'alternative' interests and tastes and give their advice to the eccentrics who are looking for their favourite or new 'genre movies'. They socialise but turn events into messes for themselves and others. It is the same with relationships.

When they branch out, especially with a local production of Jane Eyre, where an oddball company have rehearsals (with Jackie and Lucy vying for parts and attention, especially for the role of Jane rather than the mad wife), where they tangle with the director and the leading man, where there are complications with the printing and distribution of the posters. Jealousy rears quite an ugly head.

So Jackie and Lucy have to experience alienation before they can accept themselves and each other – which, of course, they do.

The film was co-written and directed by Louise Alston who made another local comedy, All My Friends are Leaving Brisbane (2007).

Jucy's initial release outside Brisbane is in local country areas rather than in the capital cities. (Parochial distribution? Or apprehension about interstate rivalries and criticisms?)

OUR IDIOT BROTHER

(US, 2011, d. Jesse Peretz)

The Russians have Chekhov's Three Sisters and Dostoevski's The Idiot, classic characters who reveal self-centredness (the sisters) and ingenuous goodness that can be taken advantage of (the idiot). Of course, it is a bit of a stretch from Russian drama and literature to a 90 minute Hollywood movie for the multiplexes, but it does indicate what this film is trying to do at a very popular level.

Whether it succeeds or not depends on the performance of Paul Rudd as our idiot brother – the 'our' being the three sisters. Rudd can be an engaging screen personality even when he is in broad comedies and even crass comedies. He is very engaging here and makes Ned, a rather naive and agreeable middle-aged man, a man who can be generous to others, believes that other human beings (despite so much evidence to the contrary) are good and trustworthy, worth the

benefit of the doubt. Director, Jesse Peretz, has commented that Ned does not use irony as a weapon. At times, he is unwilling to believe in bad behaviour even if it is right in front of him. He is also a believer in the simple life – loves ordinary work, loves his dog (Willie Nelson, the dog, not the singer, though he appears on the soundtrack), is a great and playful uncle to his nephew. Actually, it's a wonder he has survived so far – and we see him right at the beginning selling marijuana to a cop in uniform who tells him a sob story about how he needs it and Ned is touched – and arrested, and jailed.

If you want to see human nature at its mundanely unpleasant, you have only to look at the three sisters and Ned's former girlfriend. They are selfish and self-absorbed. We remember poor old Lear and his selfish daughters, though here is no Cordelia here. Ned, out of prison, is shoved off by the girlfriend (Kathryn Hahn who doesn't like but keeps Willie Nelson), stays with his sympathetic mother (Shirley Knight) and then with each of the sisters. Miranda (Elizabeth Banks) is a go-getting journalist and a control freak with her boyfriend (Adam Scott). Natalie is a would-be stand up comic with a girlfriend and some complications with an artist (Hugh Dancy). Liz (Emily Mortimer) is the nicest. She is in a marriage where her fickle documentary maker husband (Steve Coogan showing again how effectively he can do hypocritically unpleasant characters) who have a politically correct agenda for bringing up their son.

Needless to say, Ned embarrasses them and they move him on. Where can he go? Is goodness catching? Has he a future? Can the sisters change and face themselves and look beyond themselves? Americans like happy endings – they offer some kind of hope, even if temporary.

PARANORMAL ACTIVITY 3

(US, 2011, d. Henry Joost, Ariel Schulman)

The previous Paranormal Activity movies have been strong box-office successes. So has this third episode.

The present reviewer was not taken (or taken in) by the first two films. While they were emulating The Blair Witch Project and the many other films that purport to be records of actual happenings (and the Paranormal Activity films even have the time code on the screen to prove what they are showing), they seemed too contrived, even taking their time to build up an atmosphere as if it were real. It would seem that you would have to be easily scared to be upset by the poltergeist kind of happenings that they were showing.

By the time of number 3, you would have to be easily and quickly unsettled rather than easily scared to be affected or frightened. There is a continuity with the other films (apart from a lot of resemblances with camera set ups in bedrooms and bumps and noises in the night) because Kate, from the other films, is reminiscing and showing footage of episodes from twenty years earlier and what happened to her and to her sister. A mysterious presence in the house has an effect on Kate's younger sister. No wonder Kate has led a life of paranormal activity.

This episode was directed by the makers of the pseudo-documentary Catfish and they have obviously enjoyed themselves (except when they make their characters swear a lot).

Probably a bit better than the second film because of the ghostly presence and the story of the girls, but the whole series seems rather underwhelming.

SANTA'S APPRENTICE

(Australia/France, 2010, d. Luc Vinciguerra)

A Christmas story for very young audiences (and not too long for parents and grandparents). Easy to look at animation. And Australian voices for the local version, French for the French.

It has good credentials. It won the special UNICEF award at the 2011 Annecy International Animation Festival in France. This prestigious award recognizes the best animation which highlights the goals of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

There have been so many Santa stories, it is hard to find another one. Here we have a Santa who has a time limit on his role and must train an apprentice, just as he was trained in the past. He is rather unwilling to give up his year job, but the old retiree Santas remind him that rules are rules. But, where can he find an apprentice whose name is Nicholas, is an orphan and who is pure of heart?

Well, the filmmakers have decided that there would be such a boy – in Sydney. Nicholas is a nice boy but can be put upon by a bully (whose name happens to be Nicholas as well). When the Santas do their research and settle on Sydney, it is the bad Nicholas who wants the job and takes over. It is not long before Santa (and the put-upon reindeers) realises

that he has the wrong apprentice. Good Nicholas goes to work in Santa's factory, prepares the gifts and travels on Christmas Eve, even to the orphanage where all is made smooth.

No objections to this variation on the Santa theme (except to lament that Christmas shows no connection to the story that gave it its name and meaning, Christmas without Christ yet again).

Some pleasing Australian voices, with Shane Jacobson as Santa and Magda Szubanski as Beatrice and Jack Versace a nice Nicholas.

The message is obviously, be good, be kind – and look what happens when you are!

SURVIVING GEORGIA

(Australia, 2010, d. Sandra Sciberras and Kate Whitbread)

No, not a drama about the southern states of the USA. Rather, this is a small Australian film about families and relationships. It is set, rather beautifully, in the Victorian town of Warburton at the foot of the ranges.

Georgia is the mother of two daughters whom she abandoned when they were young, and disappeared. She is the over-extraverted type with a penchant for tangling with men. One of the daughters, Heidi, is very reserved and works at a glass factory in Melbourne. The other daughter, Rose, seems to be on a path similar to that of her mother. She has a young son.

Suddenly, they find that their mother is in Warburton but terminally ill. Grudgingly, they go to the town and begin to make a life there. Rose meets up with the local policeman who was sweet on her in the past. He also gets on very well with her son. It actually gets a bit more complicated because of their mother's partner who has persuaded them to come back. And then they encounter their mother.

It is mainly a drama about relationships, of regrets on the part of the daughters and of the mother, and the two younger women finding their true selves.

The daughters are played by Pia Miranda as Heidi and Holly Vallance as Rose. Theatre singer and dancer, Caroline O'Connor, is Georgia. A pleasing presence is Shane Jacobson as Johnnie, the rather large but affable policeman.

Modest and modestly entertaining.

THIS IS NOT A FILM

(Iran, 2011, d. Jafar Panahi)

'This is not a film' has to be the title of this home movie from directors, Jafar Panahi Mojtab Mirtahmasb, - because Panahi has been sentenced to six years in jail and forbidden to make a film for twenty years. An appeal against the sentence has been lost and other avenues to repeal this unjust sentence are being sought. The international community has been vocal in its support of the director. His chair as a member of the 2011 Berlin film festival international jury was left vacant during the festival and there was a retrospective of his films.

'On December 20, 2010, Panahi was sentenced by the Revolutionary Court to six years in prison and barred for the next twenty years from film-making, political activity, traveling or giving interviews. Panahi's colleague Mohammad Rasoulouf was also sentenced to six years in prison.' This information comes from the Internet Movie Database for Jafar Panahi. The heading is, insensitively, 'Trivia'. Even less sensitive is the rubric which follows this dire information, 'See more trivia' which gives information about cinema people protesting his case.

Jafar Panahi is one of the most respected of Iranian directors world wide, his films winning prizes at prestigious festivals (The Circle winning the Golden Lion in Venice in 2000). His films have been selected for awards by the International Catholic Cinema Organisation, The White Balloon and The Circle. This reviewer had the pleasure of being with him at a festival in 2007.

Panahi was under house arrest. What he and his friend, Mojtaba Mirtahmasb, did was to use a camera as well as mobile phone to record what a day confined to a house, life within an apartment, was like. Clearly, it was more comfortable than being in prison, but it is still a curtailing of freedoms and human rights. The camera was placed at various points in the bedroom, kitchen and sitting room. Obviously, there is not going to be much 'action' in this kind of film, so the running time has been kept short, 75 minutes. While watching the director in the morning, beginning his day, having breakfast, we are compelled to identify with him and wonder how we would manage in a similar situation.

When his friend arrives and uses his camera, there is discussion about the situation and what it means personally to Panahi.

There is an interlude where a neighbour comes to insist that Panahi take care of her dog while she is out. He resists – as we would when we see the spoilt dog.

Just when we think the film might come to an end in the evening, Panahi by himself again, a young man comes to the door. He is a student with casual jobs whose task is to collect the rubbish from all the apartments in the block. The director accompanies him from floor to floor – just a little bit of opening up to an outer world even if it is still within the apartment block walls. The young man chats (and we wonder at times whether he is something of a spy). It is a sad thing for house arrest when one of the most interesting activities of the day is to go from floor to floor, looking for rubbish, knocking on doors (including that of the lady with the dog who complains that Panahi had not taken it in).

And the climax of the film? The student and the director arrive at the basement, parking floor. There is activity in the streets outside. The young man advises Panahi that it would not be prudent to go any further. Nothing left to do but to get in the lift and go up again.

And the prospect of the prison sentence...

THE THREE MUSKETEERS (US, 2011, d. Paul W. Anderson)

One of the most filmed books of all time. Ritz Brothers in the 1930s, Gene Kelly and co in the 1940s, Oliver Reed and the spectaculars of the 1970s, Kiefer Sutherland and the younger brigade in the 1990s, and now a mixum-gatherum of international actors for a 3D version with period design and Matrix-like effects, let alone Leonardo da Vinci inspired airships!

Truth to tell, it's all more than a bit silly. But, audiences who want a touch of colourful escapism and are not too discriminating may find it a hoot. After all, there are probably few claims that Dumas' novel is top French literature. So, why not adapt it to the tastes (and even gimmicks) of a later generation?

It certainly is good to look at. Filmed in Bavaria in some castles (with very ornate interiors) to stand in for Versailles, it has costumes to match (and discussions about trendy colours as well). The court of Louis XIV looks quite sumptuous as do the dresses for Milady. The airships look impressive as well, though the engineering for them boggles the imagination, not just the huge exteriors but the spacious interiors as well. And we get time to gaze at two of them as they do battle over Paris and finish up on top of each other on the roof of Notre Dame Cathedral (which gives the occasion for D'Artagnan to have a sword fight with Rochefort on the thin peak of the gables and the battlements, even to hanging from a gargoyle). It is that kind of film – and even more so, with some martial arts choreography and slow motion à la Matrix. And then one airship crash lands in the gardens of Versailles just in time to get the queen's necklace around her neck for Louis (portrayed as a gawky teenager by Edward Fox's son, Freddie).

This should not be surprising since the film is directed by Paul W. Anderson who has made films of video games but is best known for the Resident Evil series. So, Dumas meets Resident Evil. This is more the case since Milla Jovovich who enjoys herself, her gowns and her stuntwork as Milady, is now Mrs Anderson.

It is not so good to listen to. There is the usual, irritating, mix of accents, from accented (Christoph Waltz is Richelieu, Mads Mikkelsen is Rochefort, Orlando Bloom is Buckingham, Til Schweiger is Cagliostro, Juno Temple is the Queen – and that is German, Danish and British). While Matthew McFadyen is resonant British as Athos, Logan Lerman, who was born in Beverly Hills, LA, sounds it as a too young, too unwarrantedly arrogant and haughty D'Artagnan). And there are lots of anachronistic bits of dialogue, many of them intentional, 'are you kidding?', 'sexy', 'is your hair retro?'.

Perhaps the next Three Musketeers will be better – probably!

WHAT'S YOUR NUMBER?

(US, 2011, d. Mark Mylod)

When Anna Farris, as Ally Darling (what's in a name!) mentions an article in Marie Claire which tests young women on how many sexual partners they have had, we suspect that this film is the equivalent of this kind of magazine article, partly prurient, partly sensationalised, probably (because this is an American film), partly moralising by the end. And it is. It is the kind of thing that during the week tabloid newspapers might disapprove of, especially if they are reporting

current events and behaviour, wagging their morally superior finger at less than moral behaviour – and then fill their weekend sections or magazines with several of these stories, often with salaciously inviting titles.

So, Ally tots up her lovers and is shocked to find that her sister and friends are well below the recommended limit before someone is judged to have gone over the top (twenty according to Marie Clare for those who are not going to see What's Your Number?). The statistic means that the next partner for Ally has to be the final one – or to contact each previous candidate and see if till death do us part can be with him. Needless to say, this involves a lot of embarrassing moments with some character actors, including Martin Freeman, Anthony Mackie, Zachary Quinto.

Meanwhile, across the hallway is the rather cavalierly promiscuous Colin (Chris Evans) whom Ally asks to help her find the twenty. Well, you know the rest... but not how it all gets to that final clinch.

One of the troubles with the film is that Anna Farris is very good at portraying and sending up the dumb blonde image which she does here (Scary Movies, House Bunny...). She does some really dumb things here. And, that does not make her character a particularly likeable woman who deserves a solid chance in life. And if Mr Right came along, her life has not indicated that she would become Mrs Right. Nor does Colin's story impress that he would commit forever. So that when they do, it is not very credible at all.

So, while we are taken on self-indulgent side trips, when we arrive at the final destination for Ally and Colin, we are not sure whether we believe that this could be the final destination .

WARRIOR

(US, 2011, d. Gavin O'Connor)

'Go to war'. This is the command of the referee in the bouts for the multi-martial-arts tournament, Sparta, in Atlantic City. And go to war they do in a combination of boxing, wrestling and other techniques. This is adversarial competition – though there seems to be a breakthrough by the end.

This is the story of two brothers who are filled with resentment, especially towards their alcoholic father. The older brother, Brendan, who had fought in bouts, is now a happily married physics teacher. But, with a visit from his father, the old anger surge. The younger brother, Tommy, had escaped the family brutality with his mother who has since died. He is consumed by anger and resentment. When he unexpectedly visits his father, the outpouring of anger begins.

However, Tommy (Tom Hardy) decides to train and enter the Sparta tournament. He asks his father to be his trainer, no bonds, no attachments. When Brendan (Joel Edgerton) is suspended from his job because of participating in a club car park bout to get money because the bank threatens to foreclose, he too enters the Sparta competition, training with an old friend.

While there are a lot of bouts, especially in the final competition itself – and they do remind audiences of Rocky, The Wrestler, The Fighter and other sports films – there is a continued focus on each of the brothers, revelations about Tommy and his time in the marines, on Brendan and his wife's support for his fighting.

However, the big impact of the film is in the character of the father. It is a top performance from Nick Nolte. He admits the past, has found religion and wants to be reconciled with his sons, a seemingly impossible challenge.

Tom Hardy and Joel Edgerton are good as the brothers, but Tommy's behaviour, especially at the end, takes a lot of acceptance and Brendan, training as he does, still does not look as if he could be a champion. Strong, but not as strong as The Wrestler or The Fighter.

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AGES OF LOVE

AMOUR FOU, L'

ARTHUR CHRISTMAS

ATTACK THE BLOCK

BREAKING DAWN PART 1

CAUGHT INSIDE

A CAT IN PARIS (UNE VIE DE CHAT)

COUNTRY STRONG

DEBT, The

HABEMUS PAPAM

IDES OF MARCH, The
I DON'T KNOW HOW SHE DOES IT
IMMORTALS
INBETWEENERS, The
MACHINE GUN PREACHER
MONEYBALL
OAKIE'S ADVENTURES IN THE OUTBACK
PUSS IN BOOTS
SHARK NIGHT 3D
TOOMELAH

AGES OF LOVE (MANUALE D'AMORE)

(Italy, 2010, d. Giovanni Veronesi)

Robert di Nero in an Italian film – and speaking Italian as well as English – and with Monica Bellucci. Must be something special. No, not exactly.

This is the third film in a series called, in Italy, Manuale d'Amore. (Hence the title, Manuale d' Amore.) If this is a manual for love, we are in a sorry state. Rather, this is a series of stories which take up issues of love or, in this film, issues of sexuality and betrayal.

During the screening, a word came into my mind, 'slightweight', even less significant than 'lightweight'.

The first Age of Love is 'Youth' although it is about a young, ambitious lawyer, engaged to a vivacious young woman, who goes to the provinces to persuade an elderly couple to take a payout on their house which is the middle of land intended for an exclusive golf club. He allows himself (pretty easily and quickly, in fact) to be seduced by the local vamp. Will he repent? Will his fiancée forgive him? A story of the Italian roving eye which is too easily taken for granted.

The second story (Middle Age) concerns a vain TV announcer, married with a daughter (rather smugly obnoxious these two) who is stalked and allows himself (again too easily and quickly) to be seduced, with some dire comic consequences in terms of the action of the story, but not for him when he discovers the pathology of his stalker.

Robert de Niro and Monica Bellucci are in the third story. He is a widowed academic living in Rome. She is the daughter of the buildings caretaker – and has what is called a colourful past. The stars give their best but, once again, the love story (a bit more genuine this time) is really not much of a story.

'Slightweight' comes to mind again.

L'AMOUR FOU

(France, 2010, d. Pierre Thoretton)

All you may have wanted to know about designer and celebrity, Yves Saint Laurent – and more than you wanted or needed to know.

As a biography, this film offers some basic information about his origins, his family, his talent, his assisting Christian Dior, his early acclaim, his successful career and his long relationship with Pierre Berge.

As a portrait, the film is more complex. The commentary speaks of Saint Laurent as quiet and retiring, though he tended to overcome this in his public appearances and was, perhaps, something of a snob. The extent of his talent is shown, which will be of particular interest to audiences who follow fashion but may bewilder those not in the know, the perennial puzzle of who will actually wear the exotic creations that are displayed by those models parading on the catwalk and why they are so acclaimed.

Because Pierre Berge offers much of the commentary, there are touches of intimacy in his narration, an opening up of his first meeting with Saint Laurent, their attraction and partnership for forty years. There is also a great deal about the business side of the company and of Berge's role.

Saint Laurent was hailed as a celebrity and feted in the media as well as by other celebrities. It later took some toll on him with a drinking problem and a reliance on drugs. However, in 1990 he made a clean break and remained this way until his death in 2008.

The film-makers have gone to the media, to archives for photos and movie and video clips. There are interviews with models, politicians, movie stars...

One of the main preoccupations of the film, which may not be of such great interest to viewers who are not fascinated by collections of art of all kinds, is the long amassing of so many pieces of art, making their home something of a museum. Actually, the couple had a number of homes in Paris, Morocco and in Normandy. Many of the objects are shown in loving close-up. Throughout the film, there is a continuing appraisal of the worth of the art since there is a planned auction. The film culminates in the auction itself – with a surprising number of buyers offering hundreds of thousands and even millions for some of the pieces.

The title? Yves Saint Laurent's love of his creative design? His relationship with Pierre Burge? The acquiring of and devotion to the art collection? All of the above?

ARTHUR CHRISTMAS

(UK, 2011, d. Sarah Smith)

We remember the Aardman Studios for their wonderful animation short films, especially those with Wallace and Gromit. More recently they have made feature films, *Chicken Run* and *The Curse of the Were-Rabbit*. This time, they have been shrewder in picking their target audience, children, younger children who delight in Santa stories whether they believe in him or not. And the parents and grandparents who take the children along will enjoy *Arthur Christmas* as well. And it was filmed in 3D.

So, who is *Arthur Christmas*? He is the younger son of the current Santa Claus. As with the Australian-French co-production, *Santa's Apprentice* (which has many similarities with this film), Santa's job is only a temporary position (say, 70 years or so). However, the North Pole has been transformed into an extraordinarily well-equipped computer technology production (and wrapping) line (remember *Elf* and *Fred Claus*). It is all under the control of Santa's older son, the imposing body-builder look-alike, Stephen. The film reminds us that the presents have to be delivered worldwide in a short space of time. The computer programming, with the help of a space-ship ultra-speed sleigh and a bevy of elves who deliver parcels, makes this a beyond-Pentagon success story.

But, the little girl who writes a letter to Santa at the opening of the film, through an unobserved glitch, does not receive her present. Potential disaster. Stephen doesn't worry. The statistic doesn't affect his success rate – and it is only one child. Santa is complacent and goes to bed. It is only the geeky Arthur (certainly no body-builder) who causes mayhem wherever he clumsily goes, who sets out to deliver the parcel, with the help of the grumpy and selfish Gransanta and some very old reindeers and a sleigh called Eve. Needless to say, they get lost and have all kinds of adventures, even being chased by lions in Africa straight out of *The Lion King*.

Plenty of activity to keep the young attentive. And an excellent voice cast to amuse everyone. James McAvoy (who is a little weedy-looking in real life) gets us on side for Arthur. Jim Broadbent yo-ho-hos to great effect as Santa (with Imelda Staunton as his practical wife, Margaret). Lots of fun is had with Stephen (and at his expense and comeuppance) since he is voiced characteristically by Hugh Laurie. Old Gransanta is Bill Nighy. So, it's a Santa story for the IT 21st century.

ATTACK THE BLOCK

(UK, 2011, d. Joe Cornish)

Seems as though this film has already achieved 'cult status' after its release in Britain. With Nick Frost appearing in it, it is instantly linked with *Shaun of the Dead*, one of his best-known films, with its blend of humour, horror and spoofing of horror conventions. This is what *Attack the Block* is attempting as well.

Of course, it depends on your sense of humour and whether you are 'blown away' by small-budget films which highlight their poverty while being ambitious in their intentions. While some of it is amusing, *Attack the Block* seemed too silly to make the cult impression.

On an ordinary London evening, a woman is harassed by a local gang. Alarmed, she rushes to her building. In the meantime, some aliens drop out of the sky. So, we are in the spoof alien invaders territory which is not necessarily a bad thing.

But, the black puffball aliens with translucent blue eyes seem to be an admittance of no budget for real effects and seem quite ludicrous (which they are partly meant to be). The invasion multiplies as local authorities try to do combat, the

aliens climb walls and get into the apartment block. The gang, as well as a local slacker calling in to get drugs from his dealer (Nick Frost) are terrified and enlist the aid to the woman they were attacking. In fact, they are just a gang of local kids who are still at school.

Most of the kids are not the brightest and several of them are knocked off by the aliens. This means that the film builds up to a climax (not too bad) for final confrontations.

Probably best seen at one of those midnight cult sessions.

BREAKING DAWN PART 1

(US, 2011, d. Bill Condon)

Bella declares 'undying love' for Edward. She would have to, wouldn't she? After all, that is the fate of vampires even if they are nice like Edward and the Cullen family and have inserted themselves quietly into each of their contemporary worlds. But, we do have an initial confession of a secret by Edward when he was sowing his wild fangs in the 1930s (and going to see such films as *Bride of Frankenstein*, which could serve as something of an image of Bella and her marriage).

The fourth film in the Twilight Saga needs no help from reviewers (and certainly not from so many negative reviews from those who feel themselves above such stories for its niche teenage audience – and their mothers, perhaps). It got its money back in the first few days of its American release.

The undying love, wedding preparation, wedding, reception (and a visit from Jacob who is initially upset with the wedding because of his love for Bella), honeymoon in Brazil, take up the first half of the film – all rather lavish to entertain the fans. Bella's mother and father turn up and, though she has a frightening nightmare about the ceremony, Bella is happy in marrying Edward.

Complications come with her pregnancy, life threatening, which has the Cullen family anxious, Edward anguishing and trying to help his wife. Again, Jacob arrives, this time to defend Bella because his werewolf family is hostile to the Cullens and attack them. A chance to move from the quiet romanticism of the wedding to some snarling, howling and brawling.

Not knowing the story, I was more than a bit surprised to discover what happens to Bella with the birth of her baby – and then guessed what was really happening, via some special effects of her interior, blood stream and heart, which is the final shock image of Part I so that we will be eager to see Part 2 – what undying love really means.

Kristen Stewart and Robert Pattinson have become Bella and Edward incarnate and everyone seems to be pleased to see them again. And Taylor Lautner is Jacob (shirt off in the first minute or so but then looking very respectable).

Those tempted to rush for the exit as soon as there is any hint of a credit will miss a preview of the sequel which gives a different tone to what we have seen in this film. Michael Sheen as the dastardly vampire leader of earlier films makes a campy violent appearance, setting up some melodrama for the finale as dawn finally breaks.

There have been different directors for each of the films so far. This time it is writer Bill Condon whose previous films include the interesting *Gods and Monsters* and *Kinsey* as well as the musical *Dreamgirls*.

CAUGHT INSIDE

(Australia, 2010, d. Adam Blaiklock)

A small-budget Australian thriller which starts out like a holiday story for young adults surfing around the Maldives and then turns into a variation of *Dead Calm* and other menace on boats tales.

The young men and women are more or less the usual suspects, out for a good time. Peter Phelps is the ship's captain who reads them the riot act before they leave. All goes well at first, sea, waves, tropical islands.

One of the men seems an old hand at this but when he loses his temper and beats up an unwary tourist, his true pathological personality begins to emerge. He certainly has a short fuse. But then he molests one of the women, who has had some problems with images of her being put up on the internet. She reacts very strongly, setting up the film for clashes, fights, vengeance. All very melodramatic rather than any real exploration of what has happened, why and what might be done rather than just resorting to revenge.

A CAT IN PARIS (UNE VIE DE CHAT)

(FRANCE, 2010, d. Jean-Loup Felicioli, Alain Gagnol)

Hard to tell whether this is an animation film for younger audiences (some scenes too frightening as a little girl is a central character) or for older audiences (a police investigation of a robbery and the threats of a gangster to waylay a sculpture en route to a museum).

The animation style is quite striking and the plot keeps moving. It has a brief running time.

And the cat? He is the pet of a little girl whose father, a policeman, has been killed and whose mother is in charge of the investigations. The cat goes out at night and meets up with a cat burglar who skims over the roofs of Paris with feline ease. One night the little girl follows the cat which leads to all kinds of trouble with the gangsters and the police – and the cat burglar being nicer than we at first thought.

One of those films that is interesting enough to watch but not memorable.

A specialist documentary which shows many facets of 20th century European culture and style.

COUNTRY STRONG

(US, 2010, d. Shanna Feste)

The world of country and western singing, tours, concerts, recording. And the toll on the singers themselves. And the pressures of fans and the media.

Gwynneth Paltrow is Kelly, a grammy award winning singer, who has had a long career which has taken its toll. She has been drinking and suffered a miscarriage when she fell during a concert. As the film opens she is about to come out of rehabilitation. But, is it too soon?

Her husband, James (Tim McGraw) is also her agent but the marriage love has cooled over the years. He still believes in her and sends her on tour. She has met an orderly who offers to be one of her sponsors. He is a young singer who is hired to keep and eye on her and be a supporting singer. Garrett Hedlund is Beau, quite a sympathetic young man. The other character in the picture is an aspiring singer, Chiles (Leighton Meester) who is initially awkward but is saved during performance by Beau.

Country Strong takes us into the day by day life of this group of people. Often, very often, there are more downs than ups. Kelly is more fragile than people thought and makes a mess of concert appearances. Beau is devoted to her but realises that there is little future in a relationship and looks to Chiles. Chiles, with Beau's encouragement and support from James, goes from strength to strength. We also see the pressures from agents, entrepreneurs and, especially, a pruriently curious and fickle media.

The film is both pessimistic and optimistic. Some succeed. Some fail. There is a fine scene towards the end when Kelly offers Chiles some sound advice about living a career and being a celebrity and then goes out to belt out a range of songs to the delight of fans and of James. Gwynneth Paltrow sang in the film Duets as well as the opening song in the film about Truman Capote. Both Garrett Hedlund and Leighton Meester are impressive in their songs and performances.

Not everybody warms to country and western music, but this is quite an effective behind the showbiz facades interpersonal drama.

THE DEBT

(UK, 2011, d. John Madden)

A remake of a 2008 Israeli film of the same name with a strong cast and director, John Madden (Shakespeare in Love, Captain Corelli's Mandolin).

This is a Mossad story with a number of twists.

We are introduced to a trio of agents who are welcomed home after tracking a sadistic Nazi doctor in Berlin. It is 1966. They are acclaimed as heroes.

Three decades later, a book on their exploits is being launched, written by the daughter of two of the team. When a

long-absent member of the team suddenly re-appears, there is anxiety and a crisis for the other two.

The way *The Debt* is made is to show in some detail what happened in the pursuit of the doctor, their taking him, holding him captive and their attempts to get him out of Germany to Israel. This makes for dramatic tension as the trio use the female member of the team to approach the doctor for gynaecological advice. But, things go wrong. There are tensions between the three as they keep guard, trying to avoid the arrogant taunts of their prisoner. The three are played well by Jessica Chastain, Marton Csokas and Sam Worthington. The doctor is played with eerie menace by Jesper Christensen.

The plot from then on is one of those stories that publicists ask reviewers not to reveal because of the dramatic twists – and, in this case they are very interesting, leading to some surprising tensions.

The actors who portray the older trio are Helen Mirren, Tom Wilkinson and Ciaran Hinds. Top class cast, especially with Helen Mirren being at the centre of the second half of the film.

Some comments say that the Israeli version would have seemed more authentic and gritty because this version has stars, put on accents, and a higher budget for a glossier thriller. This is probably right, but *The Debt* is interesting and entertaining as we watch it.

HABEMUS PAPAM/ WE HAVE A POPE

(Italy, 2011, d. Nanni Moretti)

‘Habemus Papam’ are the words that announce, from the balcony of St Peter’s, the election of a new Pope. Catholic audiences may have wondered about a film on a conclave and Pope in 2011. So might audiences not interested in or hostile to the Catholic Church. Nothing to fear for anyone. This is a genial look at the Church, at its rituals and pomps, at its authority structures and reliance on the Holy Spirit and on human choices, on the burden of the Papacy and what this might do to an ageing Cardinal thrust into the limelight who suddenly realises he is not able to carry out what is being asked of him.

Nanni Moretti has always had a wry sense of humour in such films as *Caro Diario/Dear Diary* as well as a strong sense of pathos with *The Son’s Room*. His previous film might have given Church authorities pause and cause for alarm on hearing of this project. It was *Il Camaino*, a quite blatant satire on Silvio Berlusconi.

This film is beautifully made, the Vatican apartments, courtyards, Sistine Chapel vividly re-created. There are plenty of scenes in the ordinariness of Rome as well. The decor, rituals and robes of prelates are meticulously presented.

And, in the middle of it is Moretti himself, a non-believer, playing a non-believing psychiatrist to attend to the new Pope. It is surprising how nice he makes most things, especially the Cardinals, each of whom is shown praying that he not be elected and how unworthy he is of the task. No ambition in sight or earshot. And, after the election, when they remain in the Vatican, they are generally pleasant and friendly, playing cards, reading and allowing themselves to be organised into a volleyball tournament by the psychiatrist. This gives the audience plenty of time to reflect on and gauge their responses to these glimpses of hierarchy.

Central to it all is the French Cardinal Melville who, after hesitating, says yes to the election but just after ‘Habemus Papam’ is proclaimed, suffers a panic attack and can’t go through with his presentation to the waiting crowds (plenty of St Peter’s square stock footage here giving authenticity as well). When the shrewd PR official (Jerzy Stuhr) allows the Pope to visit another psychiatrist (Margherita Buy), his holiness eludes his adviser and disappears into the crowds.

Actually, this theme is not new. Pope Kiril (Anthony Quinn) did it in *The Shoes of the Fisherman*. Pope Leo (Tom Conti) did it in the delightful *Saving Grace*. This time, the Pope (who has not yet chosen a name) is played most persuasively by 85 year old veteran of decades of French and other movies, Michel Piccoli. We believe his breakdown – we are made to realise just how heavy this task must be on anyone – and follow his trying to cope as he travels in a bus, goes to a small hotel, encounters a group of actors who are rehearsing Chekhov’s *The Seagull* which he knows well as he wanted to be an actor but his sister was accepted into drama school when he was not.

So, the action keeps veering between the wandering and soul-searching Pope, the devices the PR man gets up to by planting a Swiss Guard in the papal apartments to give the impression the Pope is still there and in prayer, and the doings of the Cardinals.

Not sure whether the rescue sequence is quite credible, but it is all make-believe (more or less), so it really doesn’t matter so much.

What remains is a look at the Papacy, a questioning look from the point of view of the psychiatrist (who finds Psalm texts which indicate the author describing a depressed state of mind – an interesting sidelight), a challenging look for the faithful to appreciate what the Papacy requires, and a gentle reflection on the Catholic Church, its old (and eccentric) traditions as well as its belief in God and mediating God's love and the potential of its core spirit to make the world better.

THE IDES OF MARCH

(US, 2011, d. George Clooney)

No need to beware this Ides of March. It is an interesting and entertaining (even though it ultimately surrenders to the cynicism that realpolitik usually leads to) political drama that is based on a play, Farragut North from 2008, the year of Barack Obama's election and now released a year before the 2012 election. More than topical.

The Ides of March meant betrayal and backstabbing for Julius Caesar. While there is a death in this film (though not for one of the central political characters), the main protagonists live to do battle another day.

At first, this is an enthusiastic look at an up-and coming young political adviser who has more than a touch of idealism, Stephen Meyers. He is played with keen calm by Ryan Gosling. He is working for the Democratic Governor of Pennsylvania who is seeking the Democratic nomination for President. It is the week before the vote and he is about to debate with his Republican opponent. The action of the film takes place over one week.

The governor is played with his familiar charm by George Clooney (who chose this role since he is producer, co-writer and director). He challenges voters who hold more conventional opinions by stating that his foundation is the American Constitution. And, he draws crowds and delights them. Included in his entourage is his seasoned adviser (Philip Seymour Hoffman). The Republicans have their equivalent (Paul Giamatti). When the latter flatters our young idealist and invites him to meet to talk things over and offer him an alternate job, he goes but regrets it and makes some errors of judgment. He also does this when the flirtatious intern (Evan Rachel Wood) offers a seduction and is taken up on it. There will be grave consequences which we (and the idealist) do not foresee.

We watch the razzle dazzle of public appearances and events. The media intrudes, as always, and there is quite an amount of mutual favours and of political blackmail going on, especially with Marisa Tomei as a campaign-bitten journalist. Leaks, spin, the usual ingredients. There is a Senator to be wooed with promises of important positions and press conferences to trumpet his backing and bringing numbers for the vote.

There is back-stabbing though, in this scenario, the idealism of Brutus turns into the manipulation of Cassius. Stephen does have a lean and hungry look.

Politics is dirty or becomes dirty and, though this is the world of leadership for us all, it is not a pleasant or pretty world deep down (or on surfaces, come to think of it).

IMMORTALS

(US, 2011, d. Tarsem Singh)

I was going for the word 'silly' as a capsule comment when I came across a reviewer (who generally liked the film) who used the word 'nuttiness'. He was right.

Does anybody really take the films about the doings of the Greek gods and their myths seriously – not that Immortals is really a serious take on the gods but here they are, Zeus, Athena, Poseidon – and find their goings on faintly credible? Clash of the Titans? Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief? The forthcoming Wrath of the Titans? It is all pretty remote. We oldies may have studied some Greek and Ancient History so are on familiar enough ground. But, what do the multiplex audiences really think?

Anyway, here they are in a somewhat lurid and bloodthirsty tale that twists some of the legends of Theseus and the Minotaur, Hyperion, Zeus and the Titans. It is filmed in 3D, with atmospherically artificial sets, with ambiguous light and darkness (as with 300), a pounding score – and directed by Tarsem Singh who has some unusual credits, the Jennifer Lopez thriller, The Cell, and his history and culture bending, The Fall.

Mickey Rourke plays the villain (and quite sadistic in his range of tortures and executions), Hyperion, as if he were on leave from a bender in the Bronx. By contrast, John Hurt is full of dignity and gravitas as an old adviser to Theseus who is actually Zeus on earth (with Luke Evans taking up a more athletic, musclebound Zeus on Olympus). Actually, Henry Cavill is quite a musclebound Theseus, square-jawed and determined. Frieda Pinto is a virginal prophetess who

sees the future and is anxious to be neither.

So, it is another humans-gods-titans clash which can be described as silly or nutty.

I DON'T KNOW HOW SHE DOES IT

(US, 2011, d. Douglas McGrath)

This is an easy film to watch about working mothers and wives. The underlying theme of how a woman manages with family and home as well as a high-powered job pervades the whole film with the repetition of the title (from a popular book by Allison Pearson with a screenplay by Aline Brosh McKenna who wrote *The Devil Wears Prada* as well as *We Bought a Zoo*).

Confession: never a great fan of Sarah Jessica Parker (not just because of *Sex and the City*). But, she is very likeable as Kate in this story of an investment expert who is continually landed with tasks by her boss (Kelsey Grammar), frequent trips away from home in Boston, as well as lots of meetings. At home are two children, one who is little enough to accept what happens, the other a girl who has reached that pouting, silent treatment age. Also at home is a nice husband (who is also very successful at his work, gets a promotion, so no rivalry issues), played by an actor who is usually smilingly genial, Greg Kinnear. Even when he has reason to complain or be upset here, you know he is going to be nice.

Then comes a big (very big) opportunity which requires lots of time, travel and strain. Fortunately, the man in charge is also quite charming and genial and is played by Pierce Brosnan.

One of the pleasures of the film is the voiceover of our busy investor, wife and mother. There are also frequent camera opinions from friends and some catty mothers from school as well as her straight-faced workaholic assistant who finally undergoes a complete makeover (motherhood-wise).

In many ways, this is all as might be expected. However, there is good will all round (except for the catty mother) and so solutions can be worked out, especially when Kate is able to stand her ground with the boss.

So, serious light comedy which husbands can accept (or they ought to be able to) and which women could take for some role modelling in coping and communicating with the family about work and its demands.

THE INBETWEENERS

(UK, 2011, d. Ben Palmer)

Somebody remarked that this is a UK version of the American Pie comedies of coming of age, of sex preoccupation (adolescent male variety in the course of, we hope, maturing into adults, but some of the signs don't look so good), of crass humour. Four young fellows finish at school and go on a holiday to the Greek islands for sun, booze, sex and... sex.

Now you know whether you want to see the film or not.

If you do, it's more or less as expected. If you don't, no loss.

However, there was one lesson to learn. This reviewer, when faced with crass humour, will opt for the British version over the American version. The British can be more subtly funny, especially in their characterisations which do acknowledge stupidity and crassness in a way that Americans usually don't. They also have a sense of irony which means that there can be an edge in the humour, something which is ordinarily absent from the American comedies.

MACHINE GUN PREACHER

(US, 2011, d. Marc Forster)

Of course, this title is intended as provocative. It reminds us of the book and film of the 1970s, *The Cross and the Switchblade*. Both are stories of personal conversion leading to active Church service in an American evangelical Church.

Box-office has not been much. Those interested in the machine gun may lose interest in the religious dimension of the

film. Those interested in the preacher may be put off by the rough life of the drug dealing bkie as well as his warrior-like Christianity in fighting (to the death) for the rights of the oppressed.

Message films like this do not draw crowds. A parallel can be made with the 2003 film, *Beyond Borders* (even with Angelina Jolie as the star) which challenged comfortable first world people, even those who worked for charities, and offered truly grim images of starvation in Ethiopia and brutality in Cambodia. It barely received a theatrical release. (*Machine Gun Preacher* was screened only at 10.45 am for six days at three Melbourne multiplexes, perhaps a contractual issue before the film is relegated to DVD release.)

The setting here is Uganda and South Sudan (before the latter became a nation in 2011). The hero is Sam Childers, a Pennsylvania tough guy who served a prison sentence, loved guns, could be brutal towards his wife but who had a conversion experience after thinking he and a friend (Michael Shannon) had killed a man. His wife, daughter and mother had found God and led him to church and baptism. When he got his life in order, he was impressed by a preacher visiting from Uganda and decided to go there for five weeks and work on a building project.

He discovered the violence of the Lord's Revolutionary Army and made rescuing and helping orphans his mission with the help of South Sudanese militia. He was supported, urged not to give up, by his strong-minded wife (Michelle Monaghan), though it took a toll as Childers became completely obsessed by his mission.

But, his conversion was a brittle one and when he discovered children mercilessly killed, he began to doubt God and aggressively took up arms against the soldiers. He had been warned by a British nurse that, although he had won a great reputation in South Sudan, that was how Joseph Kony began before he formed the LRA. Sam Childers is forced to take stock of himself.

Childers is still working in Sudan. The final credits have photos of him and his family as well as video footage. In the film, he is played by tall, strong Gerard Butler. Had there been more lookalike casting, he could have been played by Billy Bob Thornton as short and burley as he really is.

At the end of the credits, Childers asks the confronting question: if a member of our family were to be abducted and Childers promised to get them back, would we question or object to the way he would do it? That is a key question for muscular Christians who defend the rights but do not countenance turning the other cheek.

MONEYBALL

(US, 2011, d. Bennett Miller)

It is very difficult for a non-baseball fan to respond fully to a baseball-centred film, even *Field of Dreams*. Baseball, especially in the Major League, is American as... well, as Mom and apple pie used to be. This is true of *Moneyball*, although it takes us into issues that are real for any sport.

Those in the know would be aware that *Moneyball* is based on a true story and that some of the characters contributed advice for the film. The action takes place from 2001.

The Oakland Athletics are in the elimination round – and are eliminated. This kind of thing in all sports leads to recriminations, re-examination of players, with some to let go or trade, with changes of tactics. Brad Pitt plays (very well) Billy Beane, the manager of the Athletics. We learn throughout the film that he used to be an up and coming player in the 1980s who came but did not really go up. He is now a shrewd manager and the early part of the film shows him working his phone for trades, arguing for salary deals, confronting agents and his board.

On one visit, he notices a rather rotund young adviser, Peter Brand (Jonah Hill), who is unobtrusively communicating opinions which are taken note of. Billy accosts him, tests him and trades him. He is impressed by Peter's Yale background in economics and his development of criteria and computer programs which enable him to offer more informed detail about a player's abilities and failings. The focus is not on what an individual star can do for a team. Rather, it is a look at particular qualities that are not noticed at first but, when combined with other players' idiosyncratic qualities, could lead to better scoring and wins.

The Board is definitely not impressed, nor is the long-serving talent scout and the coach (Philip Seymour Hoffman) is strongly opposed and does not follow directions from the manager. The team suffers many losses.

Billy Beane does not give up. He capitalises on trading players with Peter's advice. He thwarts the plans of the coach with last minute deals and trades. The Athletics begin to win – and, history tells us – they equal the record of successive wins in a season.

There is some secondary plot about Billy's career and his failed marriage (Robin Wright as his wife) and his bonding with his daughter. Peter, on the other hand, has no life except for his computer, his talents and the games.

Obviously, audiences not really interested in this kind of world may find the film sometimes tedious. But, it is written well by Steven Zaillian (Schindler's List among many others) and Aaron Sorkin (A Few Good Men, West Wing and The Social Network). Director is Bennett Miller (Capote).

We are told that these methods of building up teams continue and the Boston Red Sox (where Billy Beane turned down a lucrative offer to become manager) won a season using them.

OAKIE'S OUTBACK ADVENTURES

(Australia, 2010, d. Troy Dann)

Strange, sometimes, the films one discovers on a plane. I had never heard of this one before – and now wonder why.

This is an animation film for children which teachers might be interested in and might be able to use some segments for classes and for informing children about Australian stories and history.

It may also have been intended for overseas audiences because Oakie is a dog from the US who lands in Australia by mistake. However, he is welcomed by the animals, by an aboriginal girl and by a latterday Crocodile Dundee called Action Dan, who takes Oakie all over the Northern Territory and tells him a lot about Australia. In fact, the film opens and closes with some rather serious and homiletic observations about respect, racial understanding and care of the environment.

Some of the storytelling is quite entertaining. Waltzing Matilda is first to be shown, later The Man from Snowy River. Henry Lawson's The Loaded Dog is included and we hear Click Go the Shears with the final credits have The Road to Gundagai. Along the way there are songs and stories about the Northern Territory, Aboriginal History, Captain Cook, Ben Hall and Ned Kelly.

It is somewhat in the vein of the Yoram Gross' animation films of past decades, the combination of people and talking animals like Dot and the Kangaroo.

The film goes for an hour and a half but could easily lend itself to be watched in many self-contained segments that younger audiences could enjoy and then respond to. An easy way to learn Waltzing Matilda and remember some classic tales.

Not so sure about Oakie himself and his coming from the US – but, I suppose, we do have a lot we could pass on to the Americans!

PUSS IN BOOTS

(US, 2011, d. Chris Miller)

As we all know (and liked), Puss in Boots tended to steal scenes from Shrek, Donkey and the rest. So, why not give him his own movie? Of course. And, here it is.

With Antonio Banderas bringing a certain blend of smoulder and braggadaccio to the voice of Puss and the animators giving him plenty of adventures, this has been a surefire box-office attraction. And, most audiences will enjoy it.

It is not bad but does not stay in the memory. It draws on the Zorro stories and has Puss as a blend of outlaw and do-gooder and something of a ladies' Tom.

The plot also draws on a number of other fairy tale characters who perhaps were upset that they did not make it into the Shrek movies. There is Mother Goose, not as amiable as she should be with her golden eggs. Humpty Dumpty is a shadily ambiguous character. Little Boy Blue is very blue.

But, to challenge Puss and charm him is a masked swordsperson, Kitty Softpaws who, when she takes off the mask, is a chat fatale. And voiced by Salma Hayek, so the full Hispanic accent and purring. They fight. They romance. And, often best of all, they have dancing rivalry that the animators give full burst to.

The film keeps moving, action, comedy, romance (and quite a few double entendres) enough to keep us attentive to the adventures of what one European paper called, 'Cat in Boots'.

SHARK NIGHT 3D

(US, 2011, d. David R. Ellis)

You know what you are in for just from the title – although the 3D is nothing startling (but there are a couple of frights, mainly with sharks leaping out of the water, jaws open, teeth bared, grabbing their victims).

This is a very straightforward tale, all quite serious, nothing facetious or tongue-in-cheek, which is what a lot of audiences want – to laugh and be scared at the same time. This was the kind of thing that worked in the outlandish Piranha 3D. It was also the case with David R. Ellis's film, Snakes on a Plane, though his two Final Destination thrillers veered from serious to sometimes corny.

So, a group of college students go together to a lake resort in Louisiana. The sheriff welcomes them back, especially Sarah who has not been for three years. There is a memory of a bad experience – which will lead to vicious revenge. We meet the group, who are less obnoxious than many in such similar circumstances (and their language is relievedly non-swearing).

Sharks are in the lake and start to get busy on the students. Much of the action and tensions concerns one student whose arm has been severed, trying to get him to hospital. Then two rednecks appear, one bent on vengeance.

Then it is revealed that the two and the sheriff have introduced the sharks into the lake and, why? – to film the attacks and death for sales to sick video clip watchers! This leads to crises, some 'and then there were none' deaths. But, of course, two survive and the rednecks have very, very close encounters with the sharks.

Enough to give an average audience a bit of a fright – and certainly not endear them to sharks.

Surprisingly, during the final credits there is a long music clip from the cast (rather different from their characters in the film, though there are scenes shown again during the song). Dustin Milligan plays the hero who overcomes all odds and is the director of this music video.

TOOMELAH

(Australia, 2011, d. Ivan Sen)

Toomelah, northwestern New South Wales, indigenous community.

Writer, director, photographer, composer Ivan Sen (Beyond Clouds) came from Toomelah. He knows what he is talking about. He knows what he is dramatising. This is very clear in this sometimes quietly compassionate film, a film that sometimes reveals an inherited anger.

2011 has been an impressive year for films about indigenous communities in Australia. The documentary, The Tall Man, raises issues of police action in north Queensland. Here I am is an urban story of prison, drugs and hope/hopelessness. Mad Bastards showed family relationships in the west. Murrundak was a musical reflection on Australian history from the Black Arm Band.

Toomelah tells a story while it offers something of a documentary look at the community in the town. What makes it the more telling for the audience is that a young boy, Daniel, is the focus of the film – and life in Toomelah is seen from his perspective. We watch Daniel sympathetically and appreciate the limitations of his young viewpoint while we can see and appreciate the wider issues that he does not. Audiences sensitive to language will have to accept the swearing that is second nature to the people of Toomelah and to Daniel himself.

Daniel's mother loves her son but has a drug problem. His father is in the town but away from home, out on the road with a meth problem. The stalwart of the family is Nana, a quiet, contemplative elderly woman who offers a final embrace to Daniel which reminds us that a need for being loved is basic to solving all other problems.

Daniel fights at school and is reprimanded (and the whole town seems to know instantly). He stays with his friends, especially Linden, out of jail but still the main supplier of marijuana around the place. He admires these men who welcome him, use him, of course, for deliveries and for framing a man they don't like. They fish, they tell stories of their totems, they drink, they sing. And, they disappear.

School in Toomelah offers some hope. Many of the young children like school, which also helps them appreciate the bitterness of 19th and 20th century racism and massacres of aborigines. There is a photo chart at the school illustrating

all of this as well as the strong aboriginal heritage. Further, the children are being taught words from their own language, instilling a sense of the dreaming, of worth and of cultural inheritance.

Toomelah serves as a state of the question for the second decade of the 21st century. And Ivan Sen is a symbol of achievement.

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WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT KEVIN
YELLOW SEA, The
YES MADAM, SIR

ALBERT NOBBS

(UK/Ireland, 2011, d. Rodrigo Garcia)

A genteel film about gentility.

Based on a novella by George Moore, Albert Nobbs is a project cherished by Glenn Close after she acted the character on stage in the 1980s. She worked on the screenplay and produced the film and offers a tour-de-force performance as Albert, a 19th century woman who dressed and acted as a man, who was comfortable acting as a servant at a hotel in Dublin (meticulous like Anthony Hopkins' character, Stevens, in *Remains of the Day*). Yet, Albert had an ambition to buy and manage a tobacco shop. Having said that Glenn Close's performance is a tour-de-force, it should be said that she is quite self-effacing as Albert.

Pauline Collins plays Mrs Baker, the owner of the hotel, a bumptious woman, fawning on her high-class guests while being severe on her staff. Amongst the staff are Brenda Fricker as Polly, in charge of the kitchen, and Helen (Mia Wasikowska), a pert young woman who hopes for better things. Into this world comes an illiterate handyman, Joe (Aaron Johnson) who takes to Helen and she to him – though, as he will state later, ruefully, that his life and his relationship with Helen is a cliché. There is a great deal of attention given to the details of life and work at the hotel, especially some of the work of the elderly male servants.

But, while Albert is short, small, rather repressed, rather unaware of the gender and sexual implications of the decision to life as a man, the other standout character and performance is that of Janet McTeer as Mr Hubert Page, a painter. Her performance is striking and strong and a persuasively dramatic counterpoint to Albert as they both deal with the decisions they have made. There is an excellent scene where the two put on women's clothing (very awkwardly) and take a walk along the beach (also very awkwardly) which leads to a fall by Albert. It is quite moving.

The dramatic turn comes when Albert says that it would be good for him to have a wife. He gives his attention to Helen and invites her to walk out with him – again very genteel, especially in sitting at a fashionable restaurant, promenading, and going to look at a building which Albert would like to buy for the tobacconist's.

The film builds up, quietly, to an unexpected climax and ending, but there is a genteel poetic justice in the way that the film and its themes conclude.

ANOTHER EARTH

(US, 2011, d. Mike Cahill)

Astronomists discover another planet which begins to loom large in the sky. They call it Earth 2.

A teenage girl is fascinated by the planet, gazing at it, wondering – until she recklessly crashes into a parked car, killing a child, the pregnant mother and putting the father into a coma.

The main action of the film takes place after she is released from prison. She is still fascinated by Earth 2 and writes a short essay for a competition for a place on a shuttle to visit the new planet. She also has a sense of shame and guilt and applies for a job cleaning a school. News that the father has come out of coma leads her to visit him, offering to do the cleaning for him.

This is a small film with a small budget. However, it works well as a character study of the girl (Brit Marling who also collaborated on the screenplay), her relationship with the man (William Mapother) and her not revealing the truth to him. This is a tension in the background, and sometimes foreground, through most of the film. The resolution of the problem is somewhat unexpected but works within the themes being explored: grief, anger, shame, love, self-sacrifice.

There is also an enigmatic final scene which leaves the audience with some thinking and puzzling to do. The girl has said that when the planet was first observed with its resemblance to earth, synchronicity was shattered. Is Earth 2 a parallel world to Earth? That is one of the final questions – and if so, do we have doubles, and is there a parallel and better life there? No answers, just a suggestion.

The film was released at the same time as Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*. With a planet near earth, there are quite some similarities, but quite a different perspective.

Another Earth is modestly ambitious in its themes and scope and succeeds.

COURAGEOUS

(US, 2011, d. Alex Kendrick)

An explicitly Christian film with an evangelical background.

Alex and Stephen Kendrick have made four successful commercial religious features. In fact, their last three films opened on the top ten list in the US. The brothers hail from Georgia, have a media ministry from their Church and have proven that their religious films can be commercially successful and find a wider audience than they might at first have thought.

Facing the Giants was a baseball story. Fireproof was about firemen. Courageous is about policemen. The Kendricks tell a tale that fits into a popular genre and then become more open in terms of God language and morals as the films progress. They also advocate pastoral programs which offer help for marriages (Fireproof) and for father-son relationships in Courageous.

Clearly, they are aiming for a niche market, but one which seems to be expanding.

Courageous focuses on four policemen and their family situations. Not all are ideal. There is a white family where the father does not take enough notice of his teenage son. There is a black family where the teenage girl wants to go out unsupervised. A young rookie has neglected his former girlfriend and her daughter. Another man is separated and has visits from his son. There is a fifth family, a Hispanic family, where the father struggles to find work, but has created a loving family environment.

We see the police at work arresting drug dealers. We see the bonds between the friends who are able to confide in each other, have meals together, talk openly about their faith and churchgoing.

Alex Kendrick, co-writer, producer and director, plays the central role of the white policeman and father. When a tragedy strikes his family, he becomes more conscious of how precious time with his children is. This leads him to read the Scriptures and to formulate what he calls a Resolution, a charter for closer father-son relationships. It is pointed out that the statistics indicate that fatherless sons are more especially prone to criminal behaviour. He persuades his colleagues to go through a formal and family ritual (not in a church) to commit themselves to the Resolution.

For dramatic purposes, one of the fathers lapses.

Speaking of dramatic purposes raises a difficulty with many of the explicitly religious films, including *Courageous*. The earnestness of the film-makers comes through strongly, even in ordinary dialogue which often sounds high-minded and dramatically unreal. And, as the films progress, this becomes even more pronounced with the specific religious references. Sympathetic audiences will not notice or will make allowances. Unsympathetic audiences will be tempted to turn off, not wanting to be preached at but wanting a message through drama and action rather than through sermon.

The film does end in church and with a longish sermon, spoken by Alex Kendrick himself. Which means the film ends in an exhortatory manner.

Another difficulty for many audiences (something which may also alienate the unsympathetic) is the way the father-son difficulties are handled. The father studies the Scriptures and finds many a text on the theme – but they are taken as ‘proof-texts’ without looking at them in their context in the book and in the development of attitudes towards God over the many centuries of the biblical centuries. The result is extremely (and sounds exclusively) patriarchal. It is the father who has full responsibility and will act. The wives look on in admiration but are not included in the commitment. Who will act? ‘I will’ says the father rather than ‘We will’ including his wife.

The motivation is strong. Intentions are admirable. But preaching and proselytising films work more on the converted than not. They would work better, not necessarily being less explicit, but relying on the drama for communicating the message and meaning.

DOLPHIN TALE

(US, 2011, d. Charles Martin Smith)

This is an enjoyable story, based on actual events. It could also be called *Dolphin Tail*, the focus of the drama in the film.

This is one of those films that can be recommended to parents and families. Not only is it designed to be suitable for all ages (though apparently it has a PG rating because of the treatment of the dolphin in trying to attach its prosthetic tale), it actually is encouraging for children to get an interest in life, something which engages their energies beyond sitting in front of a screen or playing video games, as the young boy’s mother tells his teacher, engaging with ‘something real’. With its focus on dolphins and caring for them as well as being creative with them, it entertains as well as inspires.

The setting is Florida, an aquarium that also serves as a hospital for injured sea creatures. Harry Connick Jr is the genial director. Morgan Freeman appears as a designer and maker of prosthetic limbs for wounded veterans who is asked to try to create a tail for the dolphin, Winter, who was caught in a crab trap and whose tail had to be amputated. At the centre of the film, besides Winter, is Sawyer, an 11 year old boy, played very well and unassumingly by Nathan Gamble. Children can identify with film easily – and parents will approve of him. He freed Winter and the dolphin responds better to him than many others. His mother here is played by Ashley Judd. And there is Kris Kristofferson as a rugged but genial grandfather. In her first film, Cozi Zuehlsoord is full of verve as Connick’s daughter.

Besides the rehabilitation of Winter and the blossoming of Sawyer, there are some sub-plots (not a romantic one that we might have anticipated). There is another with a wounded veteran affected bitterly by his injuries but being inspired to choose something more for his life. But, as in this kind of story, the centre is stuck for funding and has to be sold to make way for a hotel. But...

Filmed in quite unobtrusive 3D, which is especially effective for some underwater sequences, the film is a pleasing entertainment.

THE IRON LADY

(UK, 2011, d. Phyllida Lloyd)

‘I don’t understand feelings’.

Sometimes it is more than a little difficult for a reviewer to put aside personal dislikes or even bias when it comes to a film that is a portrait of a person that is disliked. Though, come to think of it, I quite enjoyed some of the films about Genghis Khan! What about Margaret Thatcher!

Margaret Thatcher was stimulated and motivated by an engagement with a very wide world. She was definitely decisive. Her range of interests and perception was wide and intuitive. No trouble in discerning that she favoured the hard-headed approach to politics and to life. But, how would she be presented on screen? How would the screenwriter, in this case, Abi Morgan who had written the adaptation of *Brick Lane*, the series *The Hour* and the provocative, award-

winning Shame? Here's hoping.

The fascinating aspect of the screenplay is that we see Meryl Streep as two Margaret Thatchers. In 1984, F. Murray Abraham deserved two Oscar nominations for his portrayal of Salieri in *Amadeus*. He was superb as the old and bitter Salieri. He was superb as the middle-aged and bitter Salieri. So, it is with Meryl Streep as the 80ish Margaret and the middle-aged Margaret. Alexandra Roach is able to carry the very young Margaret Roberts as well. Meryl Streep does not simply do an impersonation. She incarnates Margaret Thatcher, the voice, the look, the details of hand and eye movement, the determination, the strength, the stubborn adherence to what she saw as principles.

The film is always interesting, moving as it does from the more immediate past to Grantham during the war to her wedding to Dennis Thatcher to her political career and downfall. Meryl Streep is more than ably supported by Jim Broadbent as Dennis, a genial ghostly presence to his wife in old age, a stalwart supporter (sometimes despite her and her ambitions) during her career. Iain Glen is her father, a Conservative Methodist greengrocer who impressed his values on his strong-minded daughter – a bit of God helps those who help themselves, a policy she continued as leader, no sympathy for slackers. British character actors bring the Tory politicians to life.

Another strength of the film is the depiction of Margaret's assertion in the face of male Tory chauvinism and disbelief about her abilities and ambitions, her quick journey from popularity to being disliked in the early 1980s riot times and union challenge to her imperious launching of the Falklands war, to recovery and then her inability to see how it was she who was putting the writing on the wall for her leadership. The cabinet scene where she humiliates Geoffrey Howe has the cabinet members squirming but also us, the audience, as we see her not realising what she is doing.

No problem in seeing Margaret as stimulated by the world from the time she is young during World War II, her determination to stand for parliament, her challenging powers that be and her subsequent election. Once she is in parliament, she starts to throw punches (and in the fashion where male politicians deride women by using vocabulary that they would not use to describe another male (like 'shrill')) and is mocked as 'screeching'. She takes lessons in speech and undergoes a makeover (hair, hats and handbags). On the world stage, she is dominant.

No problem in seeing Mrs Thatcher as being decisive. She has her principles and puts them into action. It is interesting to see her approach to the Falklands war and the behaviour of the 'Argentine thugs'. She seeks advice, listens to the military and the politicians and attacks.

In case anyone doubted whether Mrs Thatcher was comfortable in her objective approach to truth, she is given a speech where she discusses her inability to understand feeling and feelings. She explains that thought, thinking, is most important. This leads to words. Words lead to actions. She is very clear that principles and logic have a priority in living one's life, and certainly in politics. The screenwriter has drawn on many of Mrs Thatcher's policy statements about leadership, about the role of England, about British prosperity and her perceived threats by the unions. It is only at the end, when people, including fellow Tories, saw her as becoming entrenched – her speech about the poll tax applying to everyone no matter what their economic situation for the privilege of living in England during the ill-fated cabinet meeting brings this home most dramatically.

As she is threatened by the 1991 vote for the party leadership (and by that time she was 65), she wavers. She is not herself. She is not decisive. Dennis advises her to throw in the towel. She does, but it is a bitter experience for someone who was convinced of her own supremacy.

But, the film also shows us some personal moments, some more subjective moments, especially with Dennis – though she has no trouble in telling what to do, what to wear, how to behave (even when he is really a ghost). A symbol of this is her love for Rodgers and Hammerstein, particularly, *The King and I* and 'Shall we dance'. This is a recurring motif, even to her having the DVD in her old age and knowing where Yul Brynner came from and how many times he had played the King of Siam on stage. As regards her twin children, she looks at home movies of their childhood, but she takes Carol for granted even at the end whereas she prefers Mark and is disappointed that he does not come to see her.

All the world's a stage. It certainly was for Margaret Thatcher. This film concentrates on her political life in the UK. She is glimpsed dancing with Ronald Reagan. She has views about the emerging European Union (anti). She attends, just as she is to be ousted, an event in Paris celebrating the end of the Cold War.

So, Meryl Streep as and in *The Iron Lady*? A wonderful screen performance (directed by Phyllida Lloyd who also directed her singing and dancing in *Mamma Mia*). helping us appreciate Margaret Thatcher whether we like her or not, whether we approve of her or not. She was a supreme commander, commenting to the press that every day was a battle for her. Sadly, as the film shows, she did not read the final warplay accurately and she lost and retreated into some isolation and experienced some of the ravages of ageing.

JACK AND JILL

(US, 2011, d. Dennis Dugan)

Adam Sandler seems to be acting in two films a year. After *Just Go with It*, earlier in 2011, he is back in *Jack and Jill* and, of course as both Jack and Jill. There are two more scheduled for 2012 release.

Adam Sandler comedies seem to appeal to a wide audience, but not to critics. This film further antagonises critics by starring Al Pacino who they think has no right to be appearing in such a film. He himself seems to be enjoying being in a comedy as a comic variation on himself. Then to make critical matters worse, who should turn up for a cameo with Sandler and Pacino but Johnny Depp? What is the world coming to? One radio critic (who didn't sound as if she had actually seen the film) lamented about Pacino with a an elongated plaintiff, 'Why?'.

The quick answer is why not! Can't Al Pacino and Johnny Depp let their hair down?

So, this is a typical Adam Sandler comedy with a touch of the raucous, directed by Dennis Dugan who has directed so many Sandler films. And it offers the opportunity for Sandler to do a drag role in the *Mrs Doubtfire* vein. Well, that is not quite correct. Jill is quite an annoying character for most of the film, especially annoying her twin brother, Jack. This does, by the way, offer Sandler a chance to act as the 'straight man' foil, Jack, to the more flamboyant Jill.

There is a lot of slapstick (Jill collapsing a pony, Jill KO'd on *The Price is Right*) and Jill is a faux pas personified. We laugh at her. Gradually, we laugh with her. Finally, especially after a morale-boosting speech by Pacino to Jack impersonating Jill, we feel a bit more sympathetic to her.

This is an American comedy so it usually less than subtle and Jill is often gratingly loud.

However, there is quite some comedy in Al Pacino's presence, wanted for an ad for Dunkin Donuts and their Dunkacino (which does happen at the end, our chance to hear Al Pacino rap and see him dance), having a breakdown on stage because of a mobile phone call during a performance of *Richard III*, then taking a long call himself during a later performance.

Interestingly, as he gets older, Adam Sandler is emphasising his Jewish background more strongly, very evident in this film.

Of course, it's always a matter of sensibilities and taste, but this one seems a more than reasonable and funny Sandler comedy – for his fans.

MELANCHOLIA

(Denmark, 2011, d. Lars von Trier)

At one point, director Lars von Trier focuses on a dictionary and the various meanings of melancholia. Already we have seen a pensive, inward-looking bride which suggests the melancholic mental disposition and its emotions. But, we soon learn that a planet veering towards earth, with the potential to destroy and consume it, is also called Melancholia.

Everyone, whether they ultimately like the film or not, will be very impressed by the opening sequences. They consist of a collage of evocative images, contemplative as well as action-oriented: the focus on the bride, birds mysteriously falling from the sky, horses falling and dying, a distant scene of a mother playing with her son, the approach of the planet towards earth. For those who have seen *The Tree of Life*, it is not difficult to begin making comparisons.

The comparisons can go further. Those who like both films have been enraptured by the visual beauty of each film with the evocation of something transcendent. One reviewer noted that she left the theatre in ecstasy. Those who did not warm to the films and their craft and beauty probably wanted something more behind the images, even more questions rather than answers. Obviously, the films are poetic and demand a poetic response, but there can be more hints or clues or suggestions for meaning.

A case in point is the broadly religious meaning. *The Tree of Life* offers an image of life after death, bleak as it may be, though family-oriented. In *Melancholia*, there is a strong family orientation but no religious dimension, nothing transcendent except the nobility of human (flawed) nature.

This is also a film about two sisters, made clear by the nomination of Part I and Part II.

The first sister is the younger, Justine, played by Kirsten Dunst. She is the glimpsed bride in the prologue. Part I is a portrait of her wedding, beginning with a long limousine unable to get through narrow country roads and the couple

being late for the celebration. To the anxiety of the older sister, Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg) and her husband (Kiefer Sutherland). Initially, playful, Justine begins to act erratically (understatement) to the growing bewilderment of her gracious husband (Alexander Skarsgaard). Among the guests are the bon-vivant father (John Hurt) and his acidic ex-wife (Charlotte Rampling) and Justine's employer (Stellan Skarsgaard). Enough enigmatic events occur which make us wonder about Justine, her state of mind and her future. As a visual and dramatic exploration of a disturbed character, the film is sometimes masterly.

Part II is not exactly a portrait of Claire because Justine is still to the forefront of the picture. Justine is in Claire's care as she suffers from depression. There is a love-hate relationship between the two. It is mostly hate on the part of Claire's husband. But their son is attached to his aunt. Claire is not only preoccupied with coping with Justine but she grows more and more afraid that the planet is moving dangerously towards earth. Her husband reassures her. However, as the planet nears, she goes into panic mode while Justine seems calmer, a touch fatalistic. How will they deal with imminent destruction without any resources except themselves, no transcendent hope?

Von Trier has chosen to confine all the action to the mansion that serves as a hotel for a golf course for the wealthy. Apart from the wedding guests and the staff, there is no actual contact with the outer world. Media contact is through the internet. So, this isolated group serves as a microcosmic metaphor for macrocosmic events. In terms of realism, it doesn't really work, so the audience is asked to suspend disbelief and focus on the symbolic few. Easy for those who are absorbed. Not easy for those not persuaded by the premiss.

Which means, as with all von Trier's films, that there are contradictory opinions, enthusiasm and hostility or, as one unsympathetic reviewer remarked, he was indifferent. Whatever one's response, von Trier makes distinctive films. [The small budget American film, *Another Earth*, was released about the same time as *Melancholia*. There are similarities in plot concerning a new planet and its relationship to Earth, but quite a difference in outlook between the two films.]

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE: GHOST PROTOCOL

(US, 2011, d. Brad Bird)

Who would have thought that from a popular TV series, such a popular franchise for the movies would emerge and survive for fifteen years? And, depending on how fit and able the now-almost-fifty Tom Cruise can keep up his athleticism, there could easily be another Mission Impossible.

This one moves at quite a pace – and, for those who examine plots for credibility and realism, there are the mysteries of how the team can move from Moscow to Budapest, Budapest to Dubai, from Dubai to Mumbai (and so instantly) without any obvious sources of money, bookings, let alone firearms, gizmos and other espionage paraphernalia that appear (also so instantly). Be that as it may, and otherwise the missions would be hardly impossible, it all moves along at a fairly cracking pace.

A mysterious death in Budapest leads to an elaborate prison escape in Moscow – which is where Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise's alter ego) is interned – and then a gathering of a new team for the missions. Since a mad professor (played by the Millennium trilogy's star, Michael Nykvist) who has an ideology of survival of the fittest and wants to detonate nuclear warheads to sift out the survivors, the team have a lot to do to save the world. Which, of course, they do.

Simon Pegg is back to offer some British humour to the screenplay and some IT expertise. Paula Patton brings both action and glamour. They are joined by a mysterious adviser, Jeremy Renner, who soon gets into the swing of things and has to repeat that stunt of being lowered into a dangerous machine that Tom Cruise did in the first one.

Some of the scenes were shot for Imax projection and are worth taking the trouble to see on that giant screen: vistas of Budapest, of Dubai, of a desert sandstorm, as well as some of the action shots like Tom Cruise scaling the world's tallest building or a fight in a very modern car-parking facility in Mumbai.

The director is Oscar winner, Brad Bird, who directed those popular Pixar animation films, *The Incredibles* and *Ratatouille*, as well as *The Iron Giant*. He has done very well by directing this like action variation on an invincible team.

What else can one say except that fans will feel that they got their money's worth.

NEW YEAR'S EVE

(US, 2011, d. Gary Marshall)

From the director and the writer (Katherine Fugate) of *Valentine's Day*, that star-filled sweet concoction of multi-stories

centred on that romantic day. So, why not New Year's Eve in New York City and Times Square?

During a swanky dinner, the chef has designed desserts in parcels parachuted towards the guests on the floor below. Some are very light. Some are heavier. The guests reach out to catch the dessert they can. Seems a useful enough image for the whole film. A lot of sweet stories that might please the sweet toothed audience, will be too much for those who can't take sugar and will be ignored by those who don't like desserts.

This is a film for a night out, not for a character study nor a sociological study of American habits (being in Times Square or among the alleged millions who watch it on TV) and behaviour on New Year's Eve.

Most of the stories are short and slight, generally undemanding. But, there is a crisis for the ball that falls in Times Square to mark the New Year. Can it be fixed in time? Hector Elizondo to the rescue. There is also an old man dying of cancer. There is a Skype-like call to a soldier in Iraq. (And, in good advertising, since the action takes place on New Year's Eve 2011 into 2012, there is a huge poster in the Square for the new Sherlock Holmes film that would be screened at that time!).

And the stars! We are surprised at a very dowdy-looking Michelle Pfeiffer who is taken around the city to fulfil her wish list by Zac Efron. Caterer Katherine Heigl has romantic problems with a pop singer who had proposed to her and then run, Jon Bon Jovi. Hilary Swank is responsible for the success of the event in Times Square (and gets to give the homily on national television about good will and generosity). Sarah Jessica Parker has to cope with her fifteen year old daughter, Abigail Breslin. Two couples want to win a money prize for the first baby born in 2012. And, it's Robert de Niro who is dying of cancer and Halle Berry, looking plain in nurse's uniform if that is possible, who is his nurse (but then changes into glamour, expensive, for that call to Iraq). Ashton Kutcher exercises his boyish grin with singer Lea Michele spending most of their time trapped in a stuck elevator.

There is also a nice sequence of attention misdirection as Josh Duhamel hurries to meet the woman he met last year. That's the menu. Emphasis on the sweets.

THE ORATOR/O LE TULAFALÉ

(New Zealand/Samoa, 2011, d. Tusi Tamasese)

Not often do we see a film made in Samoa – since this is the first feature film from Samoa.

We slow down to Pacific time to become involved with a story of struggles in village life. Beautifully photographed, we see the natural beauty of the Samoan islands and country side. We also experience the traditions, benign and harsh, the hierarchical structures of authority, and the ordinary lives of people in the villages.

The orator of the title is Saili, a dwarf. He has inherited land from his parents but it is being encroached on by villagers who feel free to plant their own tara and harvest their crops. What will he do about it? He approaches a chief to make his case, since he has not been given his chief's title, but he is rather timid in the circumstances. Saili also has a job as a night watchman at a local store but falls foul of the young men and one of the police. What complicates matters is that he has taken in a woman long since, a woman who had been exiled from her village with her daughter, and has given her love, shelter and care. When she dies, her relatives want to take over, so the orator has to take a stand for what he believes in.

The funeral sequence brings matters to a head, accusations and reconciliation, the importance of food and gifts for the authorities to be esteemed and to do their duties.

This is not high drama, well not for the audience as it is for the main characters. We have the leisurely pace to observe, to sympathise and to learn more about a Pacific culture that we do not always know much about.

RESTLESS

(US, 2011, d. Gus Van Sant)

A story of love and grief, of illness and death.

The protagonists are a young man and a young woman who might be described as free spirits. He lives with his aunt after his parents' death. She cares for him, but he is absorbed in his own preoccupations. One of these is attending funerals of people that he doesn't know. Sometimes he is accepted. Sometimes he is invited to get out. She notices him at a funeral and decides to follow suit. They have a lot in common and an attachment grows that leads to love and a sexual relationship. The difficulty is that she is terminally ill. Nevertheless, Van Sant (whose films are sometimes

accessible, Good Will Hunting, Finding Forester, Milk, sometimes a little rarefied, Gerry, Paranoid Park, Last Days) really tells a short story here that younger audiences will identify with, older audiences finding it a little twee.

There is more.

The young man has a lively imagination and has created a ghostly friend, a Japanese kamikaze pilot, who appears and disappears and who serves as a companion and challenging alter ego. He has many reflections on death and choices which sometimes help, sometimes confuse the young man in his relationship with his sick friend.

The stars are Mia Wasikowska (Alice in Wonderland, Jane Eyre, Albert Nobbs) and Henry Hopper, the son of Dennis Hopper. The film is quite short, more like a short story. A light addition to Van Sant's film list.

THE SKIN I LIVE IN

(Spain, 2011, d. Pedro Almodovar)

It is only in the latter part of this film that we discover (are shocked) to discover the identity of the I of the title. We are wondering why we are being shown particular events as the film moves from present to past and back, and then it suddenly makes sense. But, of course, one has to see the film to experience the meaning of the whole film.

Pedro Almodovar has been Spain's leading director for more than two decades. His films are usually flamboyant, colourful (bright colours often enough), emotional and melodramatic. This one is no exception. In fact, by the end we realise just how melodramatic it is.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, Antonio Banderas appeared in a number of Almodovar's films, a striking screen presence. Then Hollywood lured him away. He has returned to his mentor in the role of a professor, a doctor who lectures but who also has a laboratory and assistants for experimenting with skin tissue. While Banderas looks handsome and urbane, not someone that we would immediately discern as a variation on Dr Frankenstein, it soon emerges that he has a human subject for his experiments, a young woman whom he keeps solitary, who resents him. It is only the housekeeper (Almodovar veteran, Marisa Paredes) who has access to his patient. The housekeeper also has her secrets.

Just when we have come to terms with all of this (plus an intrusion and attack by the housekeeper's criminal son) and have learned that the doctor's wife was killed in an accident some years earlier and that that has had a traumatic effect on his daughter, we are taken back six years. We see the doctor coping with his wife's death, and his attempts to keep her alive. We also see the shy daughter at a party where she is hit on by a young man who works with his mother in a clothing store.

And that is probably all a reviewer should reveal of the plot.

As indicated earlier, we are left puzzling about the connection between the past and the present and the motivation that drives the doctor, which becomes more perverse as we move back to the present.

While the film has many common themes from other Almodovar films, especially his portraits of women, especially the fine and challenging Talk to Her, this is serious in tone but presented in a highly theatrical and melodramatic style (more Mediterranean than that of colder climates).

THE TALL MAN

(Australia, 2011, d. Tony Krawitz)

Cameron Doomadgee was a tall man, an aboriginal man, from Palm Island. Arrested for drunkenness one night in 2004, he swore at the arresting officer and less than an hour later he was dead. The officer, Christopher Hurley, was also a tall man.

Aboriginal deaths in custody has been a serious issue for many years. This one raised headlines because the arrested man had not even reached his cell. What happened and who was responsible?

This documentary is based on a book by Chloe Hooper (who is interviewed in the film) who is critical of the police procedures and the trials and inquests.

However, director Tony Krawitz is sometimes at pains to present the many sides of the discussion. The aboriginal community of Palm Island, especially Cameron Doomadgee's partner and sisters, are quite vocal about what happened and the way the courts dealt with the matters. A reporter for The Australian is quietly spoken but very convincing in his

criticism of procedures and the credibility of the police and their reports. Lawyers also detail anomalies in proceedings.

On the other hand, there is testimony that Christopher Hurley was a good policeman and had served in many difficult communities with racial differences. But, there are also reports of his being charged with violent behaviour. One of the major difficulties is that Hurley changed details of his story and the reconstruction of what happened – a fall, with both men collapsing which does not correlate at all with the injuries Doomadgee suffered, especially breaks in his liver, facial injuries and other cuts and bruising. An aboriginal witness in custody claimed that Hurley beat the fallen Doomadgee in anger. Hurley declined to appear in the film.

Proceedings lasted years. Hurley was freed of all charges, especially manslaughter, but the Queensland government intervened and another hearing was held in 2009.

There are some powerful scenes of the police union meetings and a very gung ho support for Hurley who continues in police work at the time of the release of the film.

In only 80 minutes, the film shows us the episodes and the immediate explanations, the changes in testimony, the history of racial disputes on Palm Island and life there, especially riots after the death, the attitudes of the police and their union, raising many questions for Queenslanders and for all Australians.

TOWER HEIST

(US, 2011, d. Brett Ratner)

Exactly what the title says.

However, like so many films these days, it takes its cue from the global financial crisis and the criminal behaviour of financial investors who take the savings of the working class for crooked investment plans while living the high life.

When one of these charmingly callous crooks is arrested and the hotel staff discover that he has lost all their pension fund savings, and that he might get off, what else can they do but make a plan to raid his apartment and take back the cash he has secretly stashed away? Well, there could be other options but, in the tradition of the movie heists, they decide to go for broke.

The first part of the film consists of introducing us to the characters, the bad (Alan Alda playing smarmy and ruthless), the good (Ben Stiller as the meticulous manager of the tower) and the ugly (Eddie Murphy back to his old style repartee, thank goodness, as a con whom they call in to train them and take part). The 'them' includes Casey Affleck as a nice but inefficient concierge, Matthew Broderick who has lost his money and is to be thrown out of the hotel, and Gabourey Sidibe a Jamaican on the staff whose father taught her how to open safes, and Stephen McKinley Henderson as an old, likeable doorman. Judd Hirsch is also around and Tea Leoni heads the FBI investigations.

No real surprises, but that does not matter. It's how they do the heist and the twists in the execution, one of which concerns a valuable car which finds itself at one stage swinging wildly from the side of the Trump tower in New York which serves as the film's tower (with, one supposes, no connection between Donald Trump and financial situations!).

Everyone does what is expected of them. There are plenty of awkward situations, near misses and clever misleading of the police and the audience.

It's an easy holiday show – which can also get people going about the financial crooks of recent years.

WAR HORSE

(UK, 2011, d. Steven Spielberg)

War Horse has been a very successful theatre drama (with actors using masks for the horses). It has been adapted by Lee (Billy Elliot) and Richard Curtis (Four Weddings, Love Actually) and directed with his usual fine craft by Steven Spielberg.

Most audiences will find this a very moving film and not just those who like stories which feature horses.

The first forty five minutes show ordinary farmers, landowners and tenants, on impoverished properties in Devon. Ted Narracott (Peter Mullan) and his wife (Rose) are in debt to the wealthy Mr Lyons (David Thewlis). They have a teenage son, Albert (Jeremy Irvine). Spielberg obviously loves the countryside and immerses us in it. And we share the anxieties of the farmers, especially when a horse is auctioned which Ted sees as having great potential – when all he

really needs is a draft horse for ploughing the hard fields. Albert volunteers to look after and train the horse, naming it Joe. They develop a great bond which is tested when Albert volunteers to guide Joe in ploughing. The neighbours and Lyons gather to watch and we are all moved by the spirit of the horse in succeeding in ploughing the whole field.

The World War I begins and Ted Narracott decides to sell the horse to the army. The friendly Captain Nichols reassures Albert that he will look after the horse. He does, even sketching Joe to send to Albert. The young English officers, like their French counterparts seen in so many films critical of them, are caught up in spirit and pride so that when they charge a German camp at dawn, presuming they have the upper hand, they are led into a forest where they are mown down. Joe and the other horses are taken – and almost destroyed when they are judged as too fine and too useless for the work of transporting weapons and goods.

Joe has several adventures during the war, episodes set in France and Belgium, which also illustrate how the war affected soldiers and ordinary people. A young horse trainer decides to desert to protect his younger enlisted brother. They ride away and hide in a windmill, but to no avail at all.

A grandfather who makes jams (Niels Arestrup) cares for his granddaughter who some across Joe and takes him in. However, the German troops come to the farm demanding food and, tragically, the horse is taken.

As the war goes on, Joe is involved with transport. Spielberg creates a powerful sequence where the exhausted horses drag large cannons up a hill. He then tops that with an extraordinary sequence where Joe breaks free and gallops wildly through the lines, through the barbed wire, tangling it around his body and comes to a standstill in no man's land. There is a fine sequence where a British soldier comes out of the trenches and enlists a German soldier and his wire-cutters to free Joe. This is one of those scenes where the futility of the hostilities is dramatised as each side works with the other and join in a common cause which is peaceful.

The war ends. Will Joe find Albert again?

Beautiful to look at, with a moving John Williams score, an emotional film that appeals to the best feelings in us. It does not aim at the critique of World War I as in films like *Paths of Glory*. But, it offers some of the best of British heritage and a reminder that World War I is passing into history as modern warfare is so technological compared with the human endeavour and suffering in the trenches. A story where we focus on the horse's heroics symbolises the harshness of the human experience as well.

WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT KEVIN

(US/UK, 2011, d. Lynne Ramsay)

If you are looking for a film with difficult themes, offering a challenge and something to reflect on, *We Need to Talk about Kevin* is probably just the film.

It is based on the best-selling novel by Lionel Shriver who has given her imprimatur to the film version.

Lynne Ramsay has directed arthouse films, *Ratcatcher* and *Morvern Callar*. She brings this sensibility to the present film, making more demands on the audience through a complex structure, akin to a jigsaw puzzle or mosaic of events in the life of Eva whose son Kevin is. We need to be alert all the time to register at what stage of Eva's story we are at, noticing her hair, her clothes, her manner. At times, we are back before her marriage when she used to travel. We are the beginning of her marriage and the birth of Kevin. We can build up a linear awareness of Kevin growing from a troublesome and continually crying baby to a malevolent child of four and six and finally into the cold, calculating and malicious teenager. But, we do not see it all in order.

While this is sometimes difficult, it enables us to build up the complexities of Eva's character, her love for Kevin despite his treatment of her, her attempts to communicate with him. It is the same for Kevin as we piece together his life and follow the progress of his animosity towards his mother. Of course, there are the perennial questions about the influence of nature and nurture.

Then there is Eva's husband, Franklin, who loves his children, with Kevin playing up to him, but who cannot understand his wife's feelings towards her son. One hopes that all will be well when a daughter is born, but that is not to be.

For those who do not know how it will end, we are shown some of the outcomes very early in the film and the treatment of Eva by parents at Kevin's school. Given the violent nature of American society and its right to bear arms culture, we are not surprised at what Kevin does – but we are still horrified.

At one stage, this reviewer (used to dramatic shocks) jumped and shuddered at one particular plot development that was in no way anticipated. All the more shocking for that and in its context.

Tilda Swinton is a persuasive actress. She makes Eva a sympathetic character, though there is some detachment about her. As the butt of Kevin's animosity, she suffers a great deal. (The scene where she takes her wailing baby near men drilling in the street to drown out the baby's cries makes an impact.) John C. Reilly brings his talent to the role of Franklin. While Ezra Miller is the teenage Kevin who is the focus of the crisis, the two children who portray him as a boy (and they could pass for his brothers) have been directed to act in such a way that the cumulative effect of Kevin's behaviour is credible and horrifying.

THE YELLOW SEA (HWANGHAE)

(Korea, 2010, d. Hong-jin na)

Director Hong-jin Na has written and directed only two films, *The Chaser* and *The Yellow Sea*. The films belong to the action school of Korean film-making popular since the 1990s. Films like *Old Boy* and *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* made this genre of police and gangster thrillers popular and critically respectable. *The Chaser* screened at the Cannes Film Festival.

The films are complex in their presentation of characters, the law and the exercise of violence.

This film opens in the seemingly remote area between Korea, China and Russia, home for many migrants after the Korean war, the Cho-Sun-Jok. The inhabitants are not highly regarded, especially in Seoul where most of the action takes place. There is a lot of crime, gangs and bosses, killers for hire. They can be employed by seemingly respectable criminals in South Korea to handle their dirty work.

While this makes for interesting plots, though there is always a problem of who is working for whom, there is a grim perspective on life, often life being cheap, and difficult to find redeeming characteristics in the gallery of characters. The central character here is a cab driver in Yanji City whose wife has left for Korea and disappeared. He is an inveterate gambler and is hired to go to Seoul to assassinate a professor. This leads to tangles with underworld characters and, in something like the style of Charles Bronson action films of decades ago, this unlikely looking killer uses his wits to survive the increasing attempts on his life.

The film is quite long and becomes repetitive in its confrontations. But, what makes it difficult for some audiences, is the visual and action brutality in the assaults and killings, the close-up gashing (this is a film of blades not guns) and an atmosphere of crime, greed and betrayal that is not for the squeamish.

YES MADAM, SIR

(Australia/India, 2008, d. Megan Doneman)

What to make of a title like this? Once we learn that it is a documentary about the first Indian policewoman, the title makes more sense. That is the reply that many police gave when asked by her to do various jobs. They were certainly not used to a policewoman. And, judging by some sequences where high-handed male authorities officially vent their spleen about this particular policewoman, Indian men, despite the leadership of Indira Gandhi, are definitely not used to policewomen.

This is the story of Kiran Bedi who joined the police force in the 1970s.

Needless to say, Kiran Bedi is not a blushing violet. Rather a tomboy, she joined the force in the 1970s and put up with a lot of mild ribbing as well as serious discrimination. The film has footage of her from the past, so we see her in action over the decades. She does her work rather fearlessly, which gets her into trouble when she manages a training centre and trainees react against her. She is continually passed over for promotion when her long service and her rank would demand that she move up in the police hierarchy. Finally, she leaves for New York to do police work for the UN – but, ultimately finds the same discrimination against women there.

A Kiran Bedi interview for BBC TV offers the woman herself reflecting on her life. Family and friends also give interviews, especially her very proud father who encouraged his daughters to study and to build careers for themselves. The enigmatic side of Kiran Bedi's life is her relationship with her husband, separating from him in practice. He too is interviewed when she goes to see him after several years. There are interviews also with her daughter.

Not easy to be a pioneer. Not easy to be a pioneer woman in a man's cultural world let alone professional world. The narration is by Helen Mirren, also a strong-minded career actress.