M*edia* Ma*gazine*

Global film collaboration
Stars
Waltz with Bashir
Noir & the city
Shocking cinema
Shane Meadows

MM

English & Media Centre

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editorial

Welcome back to *MediaMag* and our special Film issue – and if you're wondering why we're not imbued with the seasonal festive spirit it's because we're bulging at the seams with cinema-related goodies.

Star studies and issues of representation are two of the major debates running through this edition. Elaine Homer's excellent overview of critical approaches to the phenomenon of stardom should be a gift for Film students. Try reading them alongside our case studies on Tilda Swinton, and Brad'n'Ange (aka Mr and Mrs Smith) – which in turn also raise interesting questions about gender representations and sexual politics. If you're finding it hard to get your head round these areas, a good starting point might be Steph Hendry's beginner's guide to post-feminist film theory (yes, it's pretty complex, but not as hard as it sounds, especially when applied to James Bond).

Representation issues also feature in Jerome Monahan's in-depth comparison of two classic film noirs (ideal texts for genre and comparative study), Tom Brownlee's overview of Christianity on film, and Martin Sohn-Rethel's discussion of the authenticity and realism in *The Lives of Others*. In contrast, Wayne O'Brien's article on Shocking Cinema compares two highly contrasting and disturbing movies which question what we find shocking and why, and how such representations impact on audiences.

International film is strongly represented, with a searching interview with Israeli director Ari Folman on his unique animated docu-feature *Waltz with Bashir*, and Nick Lacey's fascinating look at the importance of context, memory, and sub-text in three Spanish movies which deal with the horrors of the past. And for a fantastically comprehensive, informative and well-documented overview of global cinema collaborations and the massive changes in non-Western film industries which are transforming Hollywood's world domination, Roy Stafford's

article 'Enter the Dragon' is an essential and fact-packed read – look no further for an introduction to the cinema industries of South-East Asia.

All that should keep you busy over the Christmas holidays … But if you've got time on your hands (ha!) sneak a visit to our amazing new feature: MediaMagClips, where you can view video soundbites on key concepts from the great and the good in Media Studies (www.mediamagazine.org.uk).

Next up: MediaMag 27 – The 'Foreign' Issue

Aliens, monsters, and metaphors

Japanese cinema

Persepolis

The US election – as seen by an Englishwoman in New York

BrandRossSachsgate

Student writing – and much more.

From mid-December

Our first two galleries of MediaMagClips for web-subscribers:

Professor Martin Barker on Media Audiences and Effects

Professor David Buckingham on Media Research, Globalisation, Ideology, Media 2.0, and the rest of the Universe.

Cover: *From Hell*, d. Allen and Albert Hughes, 2001
Credit: 20th Century Fox/ The Kobal Collection

contents

Front Page News

E-Advertising

The news that Channel 4 is to cut **150 jobs – nearly 15% of its workforce – to trim £100 million in expenditure** over the next two years reflects the tough times commercial TV is going through, as a result of falling advertising revenues. Recently the regulator Ofcom even suggested that the likes of Channel 4 should benefit from some of the license fee money that currently goes exclusively to the BBC. The steady migration of advertising from traditional media to online – £3 billions worth in 2007 – might make sense if such advertising was effective; but apparently web-surfers are uniquely resistant to ads on websites – now known as **'banner blindness'**. One solution has been to program online ads to appear each time people print web pages. Research carried out at Hewlett Packard's labs in India suggests this may work – 33% of users recalled ads they inadvertently had to print out, compared to zero recall after only online exposure. But how long will this last? And how receptive are people who have wasted valuable printer ink to some ad they didn't want in the first place?

Documentary

Honouring Pilger

The enduring popularity of documentaries continues, with a steady stream gaining general cinematic release. Recent examples include *The Putin System*, an exposé of the former Russian president, and *Never Apologise* in which actor Malcolm McDowell tells tales of British director Lindsay Anderson.
http://www. neverapologize.com/#. Veteran investigative documentary-maker John Pilger has been at work for 50 years; a box set of his work, *Heroes*, is now available and should be on your school's media resources shelves, if not your own. The 16-disc ensemble contains some of Pilger's most famous films including *Death of a Nation* (1994) about the Indonesian invasion of East Timor, and his most recent film essay about the US's covert foreign policy across the world – *The War on Democracy* (2007). Even if the box set is too pricey, do check out Pilger's blog – essential reading for any of you interested in broadcast news:
http://www.johnpilger. com/page.asp?partID=3

Celluloid sleuths

The UK Film Council has recently put out a call to the nation asking us to delve through basements and attics in search of lost moving-image masterpieces. You too can join the treasure hunt. The exercise is part of the Film Council's goal to create a comprehensive survey of moving image collections across the land. You may not have access to an abandoned cinema store room or a regional film archive, but who knows what gems may lurk in the corners of your home, garage or shed? Your Great Uncle George's amateur films may prove to be important historic 'documents' – after all, a stash of 800 rolls of nitrate film in a derelict shop in Blackburn turned out to be unique footage of late Victorian and Edwardian England: *The Mitchell and Kenyon* collection.
http://www.shcsurvey. org.uk/
http://www.bfi.org.uk/ features/mk/

Film

The credit crunch – no one is immune

Know the old Chinese curse – 'may you live through interesting times'? Well we're certainly doing, that, with banks being nationalized and going bust, and worries for the entire financial structure of global capitalism. So too for the film industry – a business built upon smoke and whispers and the old adage that when it comes to hits – 'nobody knows anything'. Deals are becoming increasingly difficult, and many projects have been held up or cancelled. One hard-hit studio is **Paramount**, since Deutsche Bank decided to pull the plug on a $450 million loan backing some 30 movies. One of them, *Tropic Thunder*, has launched, suggesting some titles *will* get funded and survive. But clearly much belt-tightening is going on and if the big studios are feeling the heat, you can bet independent film projects are going to suffer badly too – and they can least afford it.
http://www.independent. co.uk/arts-entertainment/ film-and-tv/news/ credit-crunch-hits-hollywood-868729.html

Who needs critics?

In the age of the blogger and social networking, is the day of the specialist film critic over? Film reviewers in print media are facing hard times – many have been sacked in the US. The subject was exhaustively covered in October's edition of *Sight and Sound* by editor Nick James – well worth reading as it is a great guide to a changing landscape (**http://www.bfi. org.uk/sightandsound/ issue.php**). One worrying trend for UK critics is distributors' habit of by-passing mainstream critics, often to smuggle poor product into cinemas without reviewers spoiling the fun. The article shows how advertising-conscious editors can conspire against critics in changing the poor ratings they give blockbusters. It also celebrates those critics still willing to discuss film as an art form, while championing smaller international films that might otherwise slip under the radar.

However, one film-related book you should own is David Thomson's *Biographical Dictionary of Film*. It contains entries on (almost) everyone who is or has been anyone in the movie business, written in a quirky, entertaining style. And now there's a companion volume, *Have You Seen? A Personal Introduction to 1,000 Films*, in 500-word profiles per entry – check it out!

Coming to a screen near you soon-ish

Over the next months look out for film projects involving favourite literary figures – tried-and-tested recipes which make sense to movie executives in troubled times.

■ The Hobbit

The latest Tolkein epic to be adapted for the big screen has *Lord of the Rings* director Peter Jackson as Executive Producer and scriptwriter, and Guillermo del Toro of *Pan's Labyrinth* and *Hell Boy* fame as its director. The two-film package will be made mostly in New Zealand – so expect more breathtaking scenery, and art design and special effects from the Weta studios as for *LOTR*. In interview del Toro explains his concerns about taking on *The Hobbit* as he likes to develop his own schemes; but the second movie will be based on new material, bridging the gap between *The Hobbit* and *LOTR*. Far from being a light children's tale, del Toro reads *The Hobbit* as a book about lost innocence – an innocence sacrificed in the First World War, in which Tolkein served. It's an interpretation he intends to represent in the film. The first film is not due until 2011.
http://www. wetaworkshop.co.nz/; http://www.imdb.com/ title/tt0903624/
Link to an ITN recent interview off the Guillermo del Toro fansite: **http://itn.co.uk/ news/ba5471109d11 99392b4708895ddf2a64. html**

■ No shit Sherlock?

Guy Ritchie's projects have flopped since 1998, so *MM* is slightly dismayed to learn that he's due to deliver a new *Sherlock Holmes* film in 2010; although on the plus side it stars talented (and hunky) actors including **Robert Downey Jr** (Holmes) and **Jude Law** (Watson). Better still (or not?), Columbia Pictures is planning to release a rival starring **Sacha Baron Cohen** in the main role. Soon after his death in 1930, Conan Doyle's wife held a huge spiritualist gathering at the Albert Hall in the hope that

her husband would put in a ghostly appearance. He didn't but perhaps the prospect of Borat playing his famous character for laughs alongside Will Ferrell will prompt an outraged return from beyond the grave. **http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/7499055.stm**

http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0988045/fullcredits#cast

■ **Tintin lives!**

Another film with Peter Jackson as producer (and **Stephen Spielberg** as director). However, the project is hitting problems. Universal Studios is reluctant to stump up half the $130 million budget; they need to generate over $425 million in sales before reaching break-even because Spielberg and Jackson are due a 30% cut from all the sales associated with the movie.

http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0983193/news#ni0570984

Other films to look out for:

■ **December 12: The Day The Earth Stood Still**

A remake of the 1951 cold war sci-fi classic with **Keanu Reeves** playing an alien with an important message for the human species. If you get a chance, see the original starring Michael Rennie. 'Klaatu barada nikto!' – you'll get the reference when you see it. **http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0043456/**

■ **December 19: Bicycle Thieves**

A great treat for *MM* readers – the original **Vittorio De Sica 1948 film**, and a special experience on a big screen, even if its distribution is limited. Head for your nearest art house! It would compare well with the two film noirs featured in this edition, not least for its depiction of the 'urban'. It's *the* **neo-realist film** – so it's also a chance to develop yourself as a committed film buff. **http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bicycle_Thieves**

January 16th: The Road

Definitely not cheerful viewing, but intriguing if you enjoyed *No Country For Old Men*, the last film adapted from a **Cormac McCarthy** novel. McCarthy's bleak and beautiful book about the increasing brutalization of American society is here represented by a post-apocalyptic world through which a man and his son travel. Its great cast, which includes Viggo Mortensen, Charlize Theron and Robert Duval, should help make it a success. **http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0898367/**

Games
The Byron Review

Earlier this year the government-commissioned Byron Review suggested there should be a new age-rating system for video games. Keep an eye out for developments and whether they are effective. From November stores should have been policing video games more carefully and early in 2009 we can expect a consciousness-raising campaign highlighting the new regulations and parental controls. Up to now the **British Board of Film Classification** has only provided ratings for games on the basis of the violence or sex they contain.

The Byron Review: **http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/byronreview/pdfs/actionplan_final.PDF**

BBFC analysis of *Grand Theft Auto*: **http://www.parentsbbfc.co.uk/gameDetail.asp?gameID=68**

Spore

Mentioned back in *MM18*, **Spore** has finally arrived and will be around for some time. The game enables you to play God, colonizing a universe from the bottom up starting with single-celled creatures and evolving your creatures all the way to the point where they can take on space exploration. **Electronic Arts** has sunk $20 million into its development, giving creator Will Wright the chance of coming up with something every bit as all-consuming as his previous hit – **the SIMS**. This would make a great study in its own right and could be one of the most important games innovations during your A Level course. *The Observer* article referenced below includes some deep background on the state of the games industry right now, making the point that EA is taking quite a gamble given the growing popularity of 'casual games' available over the internet and mobile phones. **http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2008/sep/14/games**

TV
Broadcast news – sexism on show?

The next time you watch a TV news broadcast keep a count of the number of reports being filed by female reporters compared to male journalists. The count may be revealing. Recently reports of disquiet in the BBC emerged due to the relative lack of women reporters getting slots on the newly revamped *Ten O'Clock News* – the Corporation's flagship news bulletin.

http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2008/may/31/bbc

Branded news

The world has become used to brands buying a place in movies – **'product placement'** has been around for ages, as evidenced by recent fascinating revelations about how Hollywood stars of the 1930s and 1940s were recruited by tobacco companies to endorse cigarette smoking: **http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2008/sep/26/tobaccoindustry.smoking**

But surely broadcast news should be free of **onscreen commercial promotion**? Not in the USA, where regional news programmes are now featuring McDonald's products such as iced coffee displayed prominently on the desks of the news readers. The worst offenders are apparently local TV stations owned by **Rupert Murdoch's Fox network**. Speaking for *Fox 5 News*, news director Adam Bradshaw argued that the trend will not impair the station's independence – for example its freedom to criticise McDonald's should they need to – but he would say that, wouldn't he?

Freshers online

Bebo has entered the TV scene with its own brand of **vox pop documentary broadcast exclusively online.** If you don't know the show already, *Meet The Freshers*, airing each Friday, aims to investigate life for first year undergrads across the land. From a Media Studies perspective, it's the latest evidence of **the encroachment of social networking sites on TV's territory** – and it also demonstrates the problem of programmes delivered in this way. *Meet the Freshers* is cheap and cheerful (or nasty depending on your taste), and may need to progress beyond drinking anecdotes, hangover cures and the chance to spy into messy college bedrooms to win much of an audience. Then again social networking is all about catering to niche audiences – so this may be the show for you …

www.bebo.com/meetthefreshers

Front Page News is compiled by Jerome Monahan.

MM

Berlinale 57

SOMER(STOWN) MEADOWS

Student **Owen Davey**, now in his final year of a Digital Screen Arts degree, looks back to his first encounter with his personal hero, Shane Meadows, and pays homage to the man and his movies.

The dream ...

As far back as I can remember I always wanted to be a filmmaker.

Cue the triumphant opening horns of Tony Bennett's *Rags to Riches* and a swooping close-up onto my face in the sickening red taillight glow as I shut the bloody Billy Batts in my murder-scene trunk ...

Okay, so it's not my face, it's Ray Liotta's. And it's not filmmaker, it's gangster. And we all know it's boot and not trunk. But it is true that I've grown up wanting to be a filmmaker. And it is true that just saying so triggers a narcissist's recollection of one of the many moments in cinema that have shaped such a desire. The moment – the climax of *Goodfellas'* opening scene – is a common choice amongst aspiring youngsters. We love the bravado of cinema. We love violence, sunglasses and steaming manhole covers. We love Drill Sergeants, Terminators and women smoking cigarettes. We love editing, colouring and camera angles; twist contests, taxi drivers and Russian roulette. High heels, high noon and what we think is High Concept.

These things inspire us, certainly, and we think we want to be them, want to be in them, want to make them. But that is why we are not really filmmakers – and probably never will be. We are fantasists and geeks, at best.

The personal back story

A man once visited my class at college. He was not Jean-Luc Godard or Martin Scorsese. He walked and talked and looked like a plumber from Nottingham, or any other 'real life' person that you could expect to meet. But he'd brought

some short films in to show us; films he'd made – which made him a filmmaker. And they were good, too. They didn't have any graphic matches, or symbolic meaning, or Odessa Steps, but they were affectionate, funny, moving and simple; makeable, even. The filmmaker's name was Shane Meadows.

In truth, I had seen one of his feature films before, late night and barely advertised on the telly, and recognized the filmmaker (minus a comedy wig) as the chip-shop owner in that film. Other details also distinguished this likeable, relatable-to filmmaker from the rest of us, and would later, upon repeated viewing of his previous and future films, become familiar and welcome signatures: the presence of the diverse and excellent actor, **Paddy Considine**, the calm and **unpretentious shot simplicity,** the appreciative dedication to **actors, characters and therefore stories**, and the Big Arty Production company title that appears in the naïve Final Cut fonts to make me smile before each of his films begin.

The film that he was in town to screen was his fourth feature, *Dead Man's Shoes*. Despite having been moved and impressed by the short films that he had shown us, and the late night screening of *A Room For Romeo Brass* on the telly, I regrettably submitted to my appetite and made the long slog home for my tea after the lesson's end, rather than attend the screening in town. I say regrettably because a couple of months later, whilst working in a video shop like any real clichéd film student should, I swiped *Dead Man's Shoes* from the catalogue and took it home to watch after my shift. I wished, as the end-credits rolled, that I had seen it in the cinema.

Thankfully, I was alone in the dark in our family sitting-room as those credits rolled, allowing me the guilt-free privacy to absorb the type of

emotional impact I had only ever experienced from the likes of *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*, *Dancer in the Dark* or *Mean Streets*.

Meadows: the man and the movies

Mean Streets, as it happens, is my favourite film, and one which the director Shane Meadows cited as a personal inspiration that afternoon in my Film Studies classroom two months previously. Perhaps if our ideas of what constituted the best film of all time were the same, then there was hope for me yet. Because here was a man – and not just any man, but a Bloke – who had made a film that was entirely natural and comfortable in its own low budget, digital, do-able and British body. Something that had seemed so far removed from my slick inspirations, now so easily rivalled them in impact, making me question what it was I *really* loved about the films I *said* I loved, and why I would want to make such films.

Meadows had expressed, with the casual openness of a man who isn't sitting in front of twenty Film students, how his jaunt into the British mainstream with his third feature, *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands*, had left him disillusioned, pissed-off and eager to return to the guerilla-shoot days of his first feature, *Twenty Four Seven*. He told funny stories of his childhood, of his ill-conceived and short-lived career in petty crime as a young boy, and of his unexpected and ongoing career in filmmaking. In the short time he spent chatting with us that afternoon he conveyed the anger, the humour, the experience, the appreciation and, most of all, the ability to relate to people and tell stories that seemed, as those credits kept rolling in that dark family sitting-room, to crystallize in my head into reasons why someone would truly want, and be able, to make a film like *Dead Man's Shoes*: a film

by someone not too different from myself, about people and places and stories not too different from my own.

This is England: empathy and emotion

Then, last year, came *This Is England* (see *MM* 21). No hiding the emotion this time, on either the first or second trip to the cinema. *This Is England*, after Meadows' matured but vengeful return to creative success, was a cut that had been getting deeper since the start of his career and, in coming closer to the bone than ever before, resulted in his most accomplished, personal and, ironically, commercially successful film to date. It seemed to solidify everything good about Meadows' films; the affection and awareness he has for real life as he knows it or knew it, and his uncanny dedication and ability to portray it, whether through actors or setting, in such an 'as it is'/'as it was' way. And, as a film fan who once would never have thought of including the name Meadows in my top-ten list of directors, I was happy to see many others finally appreciating this bloke named Shane as they walked out of the cinema.

So I thought about my list of moments and reasons for loving cinema, and the bag of memorized cool that would one day make me Quentin Tarantino, and I realized that, while cool is cool, **telling an honest story about something you understand** seems to make for the most affecting and timeless of all films. The moments that demonstrate the appeal of these films are harder to define. Not the thrill of a gun-fight or a famous line but a feeling of **memory and empathy**, triggered by something between a mother and her young boy as she tries to convince him to buy smart shoes instead of Doc Martens. Hard to define and harder to capture, but worth it if you can do it. And perhaps that's

why these films and these directors seem to stand out. Meadows made *Dead Man's Shoes* because Clarke made *Scum* because Scorsese made *Mean Streets* because Truffaut made *The 400 Blows*. Each probably tried to be the other, but if you take your cues from a **personal, honest and emotional** filmmaker, your films are bound to end up, if not like theirs, at least personal, honest and emotional. And anybody can relate to that.

Or, at least, that's my current hypothesis for directorial success. The trouble is that Meadows makes it look so easy. His most recent feature, *Somers Town*, which scooped the big prize at Edinburgh and numerous accolades for the young leads, Piotr Jagiello and Thomas 'This is England' Turgoose, is a short, sweet and mature film. Although still described as the young hope of British cinema, at six features in, Meadows could be said to be reaching veteran status. The experience shows in *Somers Town* which is keenly shot in black and white in that familiarly understated style, and refrains from the dramatic crutch of violence that has always been present in previous films, allowing the director's instinctive and always enjoyable tradition for comedic flourishes – and the actors – to step quietly and confidently into the limelight.

The story, which sees Turgoose, a runaway from Nottingham, and Jagiello, a bored Polish migrant-worker's son, form an unlikely friendship amongst the quiet weekday concrete of an inner-city London council estate, flits casually between Polish and English without alienation. I think it constructs a rare story of optimism and acceptance within our increasingly child-and migrant-phobic society.

Perhaps, due to its seventy-minute running time or its close proximity to recent successes, *Somers Town* has received a slightly more mixed response than Meadows' other recent films, but I think it's refreshing for an organic filmmaker like Meadows to allow projects to come to fruition how, where and when they feel right. A skinhead he may look like, but a bit of a hippy is what I think he really is. Better that than a yuppy, on a crane shouting down a megaphone at the latest car-chase-gun-fight-swear-smoke-sex-camera-angle…

So, if you find time to peel your eyes off YouTube (or Smegbox or Peehole or whatever it is us kids are watching these days), go and support your local (bankrupt) arthouse cinema and watch a film by a director who should, according to the law of averages, be churning out mediocre studio projects or floundering in his post-premature success by now. And, after that, rent *The 400 Blows*, then *Mean Streets*, then *Scum*, then *Dead Man's Shoes*, and just have a long hard think about that little list of yours.

Owen Davey is completing a degree course in Digital Screen Arts at the University for the Creative Arts, Surrey.

ENTER THE DRAGON

how hollywood is learning to work with the film industries of south-east asia

Since the turn of the 21st-century, relationships between non-Western film industries and the powerful Hollywood majors have begun to shift. **Roy Stafford** explains the rise and rise of Asian markets, and the ways Western movie moguls are moving towards more global collaborations.

Did you watch the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games earlier this year? How is it connected to the third instalments of two Hollywood franchises, *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *The Mummy* and this year's summer blockbuster from 20th Century Fox, *The Happening*? The answer is that they all point towards the increasing co-operation between Hollywood and the film industries of South and East Asia.

What is now known as **'filmed entertainment'** (films in cinemas, on DVD and on broadcast television) is a dynamic industry, constantly experiencing expansion and contraction. It's a global industry and has been so since the 1930s, if not earlier. Over the past seventy years there has tended to be one certainty in all of this – the dominance of the Hollywood studios, often referred to as **the hegemonic power of Hollywood**. Hegemony is the concept of domination by consent. In other words, audiences across the world will often choose to watch American movies in preference to those from anywhere else, including their own domestic industries. (Of course they can only 'choose' from what is actually distributed.)

'Hollywood' in this context means **the six major studios: Warner Bros, Sony, Disney, Paramount, Universal and 20th Century Fox**. These six comprise the **MPAA – the Motion Pictures Association of America** – the most powerful international lobby group in the entertainment industries. The three sectors in the American film industry are usually defined as:
– the six MPAA studios
– their 'affiliates' or independent brands which tend to make 'smaller' films
– the rest – the smaller, genuinely independent companies.

Each of the six majors distributes around 30 big budget films each year. For our purposes, 'Hollywood' comprises the 200 or so films distributed by the six major studios. You can download all the MPAA statistics from **http://www.mpaa.org/researchStatistics.asp**. In 2007, MPAA members distributed 179 films (411 other films were also distributed in North America).

Hollywood and the 'overseas market'

Up until the 1990s, Hollywood had taken the view that the so-called **'domestic market'**, i.e. North America (US and Canada), was the most important source of income. Over 50% of Hollywood's box office income came from the domestic market, and success at home was the marker of a box office hit. Gradually, however, it became apparent that the **international market** (i.e. everywhere else) was growing faster than the domestic; and in the last few years, the profit shares have reversed. **Where international profits were once just a bonus, now they are essential to the financial health of the studios.** The studios now have to consider how to maximise that overseas box office. Most of those 179 MPAA films in 2007 will have opened in nearly every film market in the world. Although Hollywood has often appeared to be quite isolationist, looking inwards to American concerns rather than outwards to global issues, it has always scouted other film industries to buy rights to successful films (i.e. for remakes) and talent (actors, writers, directors etc.). Now it is going much further.

Global status

Pirates 3 and *The Mummy 3* were both constructed to incorporate Asian characters and Asian settings. **Chow Yun Fat** and **Jet Li** are just two of the stars from the commercial cinema of Hong Kong who have begun to appear in Hollywood films. This process began in the 1970s with American-Hong Kong co-productions such as *Enter the Dragon* (1973) starring **Bruce Lee**. Lee was American-born but brought up as a child star in Hong Kong cinema; and though he returned to America to appear on TV, his film career was rooted in Hong Kong. When he died, aged only 32, in the year that *Enter the Dragon* was released, he became an international cult icon.
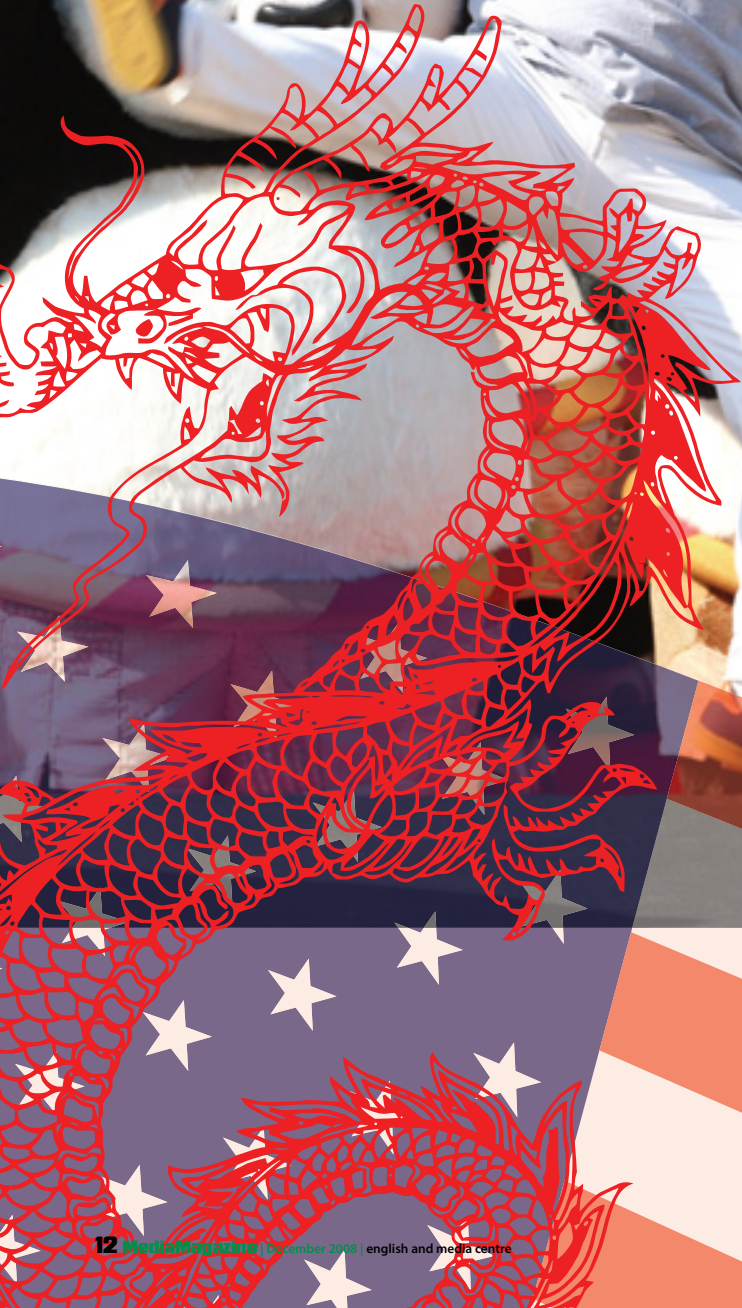
Images courtesy of OutNow:CH
http://outnow.ch/Movies/2008/RedCliff/Posters/

Enter the Dragon courtesy of image.net

Jackie Chan was the next major star to make the move to Hollywood, with *Rush Hour* in 1998. He had appeared in minor roles since *Enter the Dragon* and in Hong Kong films made in the US (e.g. *Rumble in the Bronx*, 1995) but it was the *Rush Hour* franchise that made Jackie Chan a major Hollywood star. At this time, of course, he was arguably one of the biggest stars, not just in Asia, but worldwide. Like the Indian star **Amitabh Bachchan**, he could reasonably claim to be better known across the world than any Hollywood star.

However, although the *Rush Hour* franchise has taken over $500 million in North America and $345 million in the international market (a fantastic result for New Line, then one of the MPAA 'affiliates') Jackie Chan's appearance in Hollywood films didn't mark a real change of direction for the studios. The clue is in the figures – international audiences didn't embrace the films as warmly as Americans. Contrast this with the *The Forbidden Kingdom* (2008), a less successful film overall, but one that attracted a bigger international share. Also in 2008, Jackie Chan had a voice role in *Kung Fu Panda* (a massive success taking over $600 million worldwide (and again, more of this came from outside North America than inside). *Kung Fu Panda* was Jackie's first **'studio tentpole'** – a film from one of the majors designed to 'hold up' the whole release schedule, or perhaps to proclaim the schedule from the top of the flagpole. *Pirates* and *The Mummy* are **'tentpole' franchises** for Disney and Universal respectively. Locating at least part of the story in China, and carrying a major Chinese star is part of a strategy to ensure 'presence' in the major markets of East Asia. As of September 2008 this seems to have worked. Although *The Mummy 3* was deemed a flop in North America ($98 million), it has succeeded internationally **($260 million and counting)** with East Asia providing a strong conclusion to the roll-out. In 2007, *Pirates 3* **took $309 million in North America and $642 million internationally – nearly $1 billion in total.** These are the kinds of figures that the major studios understand.

Chinese film without compromises

The director of the Olympics opening ceremony in Beijing was the Chinese director **Zhang Yimou** (see *MediaMag* 21). Zhang is a unique figure. He's a director who first made his name with films seen in the West as 'art films' – i.e. films that won prizes at festivals but had limited box office potential. In 2002, however, he produced the large scale 'martial chivalry' (wu xia) epic *Hero*, which became the first Chinese film to top the American box-office charts.

Hero was released in America by Disney and it did have a recognisable star (in fact the film was re-titled as **Jet Li's** *Hero* in some American contexts). It followed Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* into the American charts, but the difference is that whilst Lee is a Chinese director with American training, Zhang has remained firmly in China. *Hero* is definitely a Chinese film with no concessions to American audiences.

The other headline at the time of the Olympics was the release of the biggest grossing film of all time at the Chinese box office, *Red Cliff*, another martial epic, this time directed by **John Woo**. Woo, trained in the Hong Kong industry of the 1980s and 1990s, had transferred to Hollywood with mixed success, but he committed himself to working in China on *Red Cliff*. Although identified as a Chinese film, the Internet Movie Database (IMDB) shows that American, Taiwanese, Japanese and Korean companies were also involved in the production. *Red Cliff* has not competed with *The Mummy 3* for Chinese cinema tickets; the Chinese authorities ensured that the Universal release was delayed until September. Back in the 1980s, before it was killed off by video piracy, the Chinese cinema audience was counted in the billions. Now it is returning and the Hollywood studios want to get the best conditions for distribution of their films.

Film as business in India

A film needs to take two to three times its production and marketing costs to break even. *The Happening* demonstrates how co-production can support this process. It looks like an American movie, with familiar US settings and stars. Its director, **M. Night Shyamalan** was born in Pondicherry in South India but grew up in Pennsylvania. *The Happening* was a flop in North America ($64 million), continuing the downward trend of box office for Shyamalan's films since his mammoth success with *The Sixth Sense* (1999), but thanks to a **co-production deal between 20th Century Fox and Indian media group UTV**, its dismal American performance was balanced by an international take of **over $100 million**. This means that with DVD sales and television rights, a film that cost up to $90 million will still see a profit. To properly understand what this kind of co-production means, we need to consider film as a business in India.

Understanding the context of Indian film

Since the 1990s India has produced more films than any other country and these have generated **the world's largest audiences.** Each year there are **over 800 films** made in India and audiences are **over 3 billion** – more than twice the size of the audience in North America. Most cinema tickets in India are very cheap, some as low as 20p each, and as yet the industry is not comparable with Hollywood in revenue terms. However, a number of factors mean that the situation is changing quickly:

– **new cinema building in India** is bringing modern multiplexes with digital screens to major cities
– **the Indian middle class**, with enough money to match Western spending patterns, is growing rapidly
– **NRIs or 'non-resident Indians'** in the UK and North America pay Western prices to watch Indian films.

Two things have happened in response to these factors. In Los Angeles, Hollywood studios have started to think about how they can sell films in India. Up to now, Indian audiences have generally ignored Hollywood films. Even those that have been successful, such as *March of the Penguins* and the *Spider Man* films, have not topped the biggest Indian films. Hollywood has reacted in two ways: **Sony,** a Japanese company with long-standing interests in both China and India, last year produced its first Bollywood film in India, *Saawariya*. The other option is to co-operate with Indian distributors who know the local market. *March of the Penguins* was released by Adlabs, an innovative company in the Indian media market.

Not just Bollywood!

Filmed entertainment in India faces a unique set of problems and opportunities. Contrary to what you may have read in many textbooks and newspaper articles, **'Bollywood' is not the whole of the Indian film industry**. It isn't even the biggest sector in terms of the number of films it produces. There are about **200 Bollywood films per year, made largely in Mumbai, in Hindi**. Bollywood is therefore roughly the same size as Hollywood in terms of the number of features. However, **a larger number of films (over 300) are made in the South of India, especially in Chennai and Hyderabad, in the Tamil or Telugu languages**; there are 75 million Telugu speakers and 60 million Tamils in India. Films are also made in as many as six other languages. Bollywood films have the biggest budgets, but not necessarily the biggest stars – the Tamil cinema star **Rajnikanth** is often listed as the highest earner and his last two films have topped the Indian box office. Adlabs was careful to release *March of the Penguins* in English and also dubbed into Hindi, Tamil and Telugu.

So it's important to know and understand the Indian market. You can download a free guide to Indian Cinema from **http://www.cornerhouse. org/education/schoolsandcolleges. aspx?page=48260**

The new Indian 'majors'

Until recently, Indian film production companies have been relatively small. Although India had a Hindi 'studio system' (in Bombay, Pune and Calcutta) not unlike Hollywood in the 1930s-60s, it didn't develop the 'media conglomerates' of modern Hollywood. But something like the Hollywood model is now emerging. Four companies stand out: **UTV,**

Adlabs, Eros and Yash Raj. Each of these companies has interests in television, DVD distribution, film distribution and 'new media'. One of the most important mergers this year has seen **Eros, a largely Bollywood-focused company, merge with Ayngaran**, the major distributor of Tamil language films worldwide.

These new Indian media majors see the need to think both nationally and internationally. Over the next few years we will see **an increasing number of co-production deals between the six Hollywood majors and the four Indian majors**. One of the most eagerly anticipated moments in international cinema is the first **crossover film** that will bring Indian cinema to American audiences (i.e. not just the NRI audience). Where is the Indian *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*? Where is the Indian Jet Li or John Woo? We probably won't have too long to wait to find out. There are plenty of talented filmmakers in India. What Indian producers need to do is to **professionalise** their practice. Some producers in India have simply stolen ideas from other film cultures – re-making successful films without paying for rights. But this is changing. As the Indian middle class becomes more affluent it is more able to pursue the leisure habits of the West, so a distribution for American, European and East Asian art films is emerging (see Shackleton, 2008) in the new India.

Whether the Indian majors are yet able to properly exploit the potential of their films in the West is another question. Although they have successfully marketed to the NRI audience in the UK and North America, they haven't yet joined the UK or North American industry in following 'institutional practice'. So, in the UK and US, you will rarely see their films reviewed in mainstream press or on television, because they aren't previewed for journalists outside the Asian

media; and distributors seem unconcerned to get the films into cinemas outside what they deem as Asian local markets. This will change.

Asian markets

The other 'giants' that have re-emerged to meet Hollywood are **Japan and South Korea**. In 2007, for the first time for many years, four major film territories saw Hollywood's share of their own domestic markets fall below 50%. India has always kept Hollywood at bay, but in 2007 it was joined by Japan, South Korea and China. **Twice in film history, first in the 1930s and again in the 1960s, Japan had the world's largest film industry.** From the 1970s that industry declined in the face of competition from television and video. However, production remains high and, as in India, Japanese media companies show signs of developing as counterweights to Hollywood. **Since 1997 and the 'handover' of Hong Kong to China,** the major East Asian nations have to some extent glossed over their political differences, and co-productions and film exchanges have increased between Japan, China and South Korea. These countries share a **broad cultural perspective, different to that in the West**. They produce high quality films on relatively modest budgets (certainly by Hollywood standards) and they have the potential to export films to other growing South East Asian markets such as **Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines. Malaysia** is a good example of an Asian market with a growing middle class and both Chinese and Indian (Tamil) diaspora populations. In the period from 2000-2006, the biggest impact was made by South Korea. The **hallyu** or **'Korean wave'** saw Korean, films, television and pop music sell very well across East Asia, often taking custom away from American offerings. Significantly, Hollywood put pressure on the Korean government to reduce the impact of the quota system which had ensured that Korean films were shown in Korean cinemas. In 2008, Hollywood has increased its share of the Korean market, moving back above 50%.

Conclusion

So what can we conclude from all of this? **The Hollywood majors have remained dominant in both North America and internationally, not because they make films but because they distribute them and own the rights to exploit their studio brands.** To survive in the future, they will have to work hard to make sure that their brands remain in distribution in all territories, and

The Happening courtesy of image.net

especially in Asia. They may have to make some compromises. We have seen one aspect of this developing slowly for several years. The Malaysian star of Hong Kong cinema, **Michelle Yeoh**, first appeared as James Bond's sidekick in *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997). In 2005 **Ken Watanabe** starred in the opening sequence of *Batman Begins*. When the film opened in Japan, it was Watanabe who made the public appearances, re-introducing a franchise which on its previous outing had seen disappointing results.

As Naman Ramachandaran (2008) points out, quoting **Shekhar Kapur**, Indian director of *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (2007):

In future sequels, when Spider-Man takes off his mask in Asia, he will probably be either Chinese or Indian. And he will no longer swing from the high-rise buildings of New York, but from Shanghai or Mumbai.

If the movie breaks records in Beijing or Bangalore, will it matter if the audience in Iowa finds this a little odd? It might happen at the same time that an Indian film, made in English, opens wide across America. Women in the West have bought L'Oreal cosmetics advertised by ex-Miss World Aishwarya Rai; why shouldn't they accept the world being saved by a beautiful young Asian man or woman in a blockbuster?

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Enter the Dragon image courtesy of BFI Archive

star struck

the significance of stars past and present

The film and PR industries construct them, box offices rely on them, our culture is obsessed by them ... stars are the crucial link between producers and the audiences who adore them. **Elaine Homer** explores ways of investigating the phenomenon of stars and their value to fans and to the film industry.

After selecting my in-flight movies this summer it struck me that my choice was largely because of the actor rather than the type of film. Both films starred Robert Downey Junior, who I admire for his talent and who I am intrigued by because of his controversial personal life.

Whilst many of us might admit to being persuaded to see a film by the allure of a star, how can we go beyond a personal response to explain their continued appeal?

As the film industry capitalises on our fascination with stars, it is crucial to have a critical framework to understand the phenomenon. For **WJEC Film Studies FM2 British and American Film**, contemporary stardom provides a case study to explore the relationship between producers and audiences. Here are five ways to think about the phenomenon of the star, and some key questions to help you to examine their importance to the industry and to their fans.

1. Star as persona – How is the star image constructed?

Stars have a **persona**; a recognizable image constructed through their physical appearance, on-screen roles, and media coverage of their off-screen life.

Stars in the Hollywood Studio System

The construction of star image occurred in Hollywood as far back as the silent era with portrayals such as Charlie Chaplin's vagrant character, defined by his bowler hat, oversized trousers, cane-twirling and distinctive walk. Actors and actresses were **groomed** by studio professionals, **promoted** by press agents, and **typecast** into similar roles. **The seven year contracts that tied stars to studios** provided them with security and continuous employment. However, the studio bosses were in control, as stars could be forced to take on roles or face an extension to their contract. **Typecast stars** became linked with specific **genres:** the means by which the studios standardised and differentiated their products. For example, following the success of *Dracula* (1931) Bela Lugosi was typecast as a horror villain at Universal.

RIP Paul Newman, acknowledged as one of the last great stars with integrity. He resisted typecasting and playing to his good looks, and controlled his star persona with dignity.

Paul Newman in *The Hudsucker Proxy*, courtesy of image.net

Star image in contemporary film

Persona continues to be a crucial component of contemporary celebrity status. Jim Carey capitalises on his gangly frame and protruding teeth to comic effect with an acting style characterised by exaggerated facial expressions and movements. For cinema audiences watching a typecast actor or actress with a familiar persona **simplifies the reading** process and provides a **semiotic short-cut** that takes the effort out of interpretation.

Some movie stars resist being typecast whilst other have been tempted to repeat roles. Tom Hanks progressed from comic to more serious roles to play an assassin in *Road to Perdition* (2002). The association of a major star with a franchise can be a valuable lever in negotiating lucrative contracts, a possible motive for Bruce Willis, Harrison Ford and Sylvester Stallone's recent reprise of their action hero roles in *Die Hard 4* (2007), *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008) and *Rambo* (2008). Other stars refuse to accept roles based on purely commercial considerations. Joseph Gordon-Levitt, child actor from the television series *Third Rock from the Sun* is known to have sought good roles in quality indie films to critical acclaim.

Personas change over time with shifts in production contexts and institutional relationships. Johnny Depp's portrayal of eccentric misfits emerged out of his collaboration with director Tim Burton whose distinctive gothic-style films provided an ideal vehicle for this. De Niro's collaboration with Scorsese established his image as a conflicted tough guy gangster. In recent years his shift to mainstream comedy in *Analyse That* (2002) and *Meet the Fockers* (2004) has attracted new fans.

Since the emergence of **method acting** in the

Images courtesy of image.net
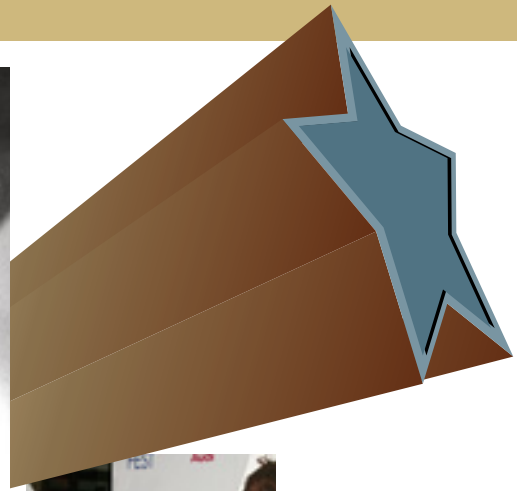
1950s actors have sought to create an authentic performance. To this end stars have manipulated their image, in extreme cases by reconstructing their bodies. Notable examples include De Niro's 60lb weight gain for *Raging Bull* (1980) and Christian Bale's dramatic weight loss of 62lbs for *The Machinist* (2004).

2. Star as promotional tool – How do stars contribute to film marketing?

If the Hollywood moguls of the past were quick to use stars to promote movies, the industry today continues to capitalise on the 'power of the name' to attract an already established fan base to a film. Examine a range of contemporary film posters and it becomes clear films are marketed through star image, genre or a combination of the two. Pictures of Cameron Diaz and Aston Kutcher, on the poster for recent romcom *What Happened in Vegas* (2008; see right), generate audience expectations of a mainstream comedy. According to Dyer this is one of the ways stars contribute to the **'narrative image,'** the idea of the film circulated outside the cinema. Images of stars on film posters can also signify a familiar character type (in Diaz's case a ditsy blonde), suggest narrative elements and the scale of a movie.

Cross-media promotion

In addition to being featured in above-the-line advertising, stars are promoted across a range of media institutions by film promoters, journalists and the materials they produce. Stars make television appearances; do interviews; evade paparazzi; attend awards ceremonies; make public appearances and endorse products. These become reviews; magazine articles; press reports; gossip columns and online articles that film fans consume. Contemporary stars also use publicists, stylists and photographers to control how they are presented in an attempt to manipulate the media to further their careers.

Although stories about their private lives can benefit stars and the film industry, publicists sometimes cover up scandals and suppress controversial stories. (See *Hollywood Babylon by Kenneth Anger* for examples.) Occasionally negative press can boost stars' careers as notoriety ensures the stars remain in circulation. Hugh Grant's arrest by L. A. vice officers for lewd conduct with a prostitute kept him in the spotlight, and his apologetic response to this misdemeanour minimized the negative impact on his popularity. In other cases over exposure and the volatility of the press can damage careers. The press coverage Tom Cruise received after his couch jump on *Oprah* to proclaim his love for Katie Holmes, coupled with coverage of his Scientology beliefs, contributed to his release from a lucrative contract with Paramount.

Poster for *What Happened Next*, Robert de Niro and Sylvester Stallone, Robert Redford courtesy of image.net

3. Star as commodity – What is the commercial value of stars?

'You are only a good as your last film.'

Stars are products, whose success is judged in terms of their capacity to provide revenue for the film industry. The fact that stars can guarantee commercial success through their box office drawing power has upped their status, autonomy and scale of rewards. As listed in **Forbes Celebrity 100, Cameron Diaz** is currently the highest paid female actress in Hollywood earning $50 million while **Will Smith** tops male actors with earnings of $80 million. Visit Forbes.com to see their annual list of bankable stars.

Risky business

In the high stakes film industry, attaching a star name to a project can mediate risk. Consider how British film production companies ensure box-office success by casting American female leads. Securing **Julia Roberts** as the female lead in *Notting Hill* (1999) helped the film achieve **worldwide gross of $363,889,678**. (Boxofficemojo.com)

Stars' bankable ratings get films funded, widen distribution and determine how much to spend on the marketing campaign. Distribution deals are agreed at script stage based on predictions of how successful a film might be. Signing a particular star can be pivotal in a film progressing to the production stage.

4. Star as meaning – What ideologies and values do stars represent?

To be a star is to represent glamour and an aspiration to succeed. Stars like Marilyn Monroe who embody those qualities become icons. Onscreen roles also connote particular messages and values. Sylvester Stallone as *Rocky Balboa* represents individualism and the American Dream through his determination to succeed. The use of iconography such as the American flag draped around Rocky's torso and embossed onto his boxing gloves evokes patriotism in the spectator.

5. Star as object of desire – What is the appeal of the star to fans?

Film fans can develop strong emotional attachments to stars. Fans identify with character roles and the social values they represent. Stars like Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie have sex appeal, glamour and status as a celebrity couple. These stars can become subjects of erotic contemplation as fans derive a voyeuristic pleasure from gazing at the star image in the safe context of a one-way relationship. A tension exists because the star is present and absent at the same time; this creates a desire to know the star that cannot be fulfilled, known as the photo-effect.

Final thoughts

Bombarded with images of stars, stories about their lives and onscreen appearances we can falsely believe that we 'know' the star. Stars seem **accessible;** but don't confuse your perception of the star with actual experience or understanding of them as a person. Remember that stars are **representations: mediated constructions that can be defined in terms of their economic and social importance**. At the same time they are human beings who seem both ordinary and extraordinary. It is this inherent contradiction that will continue to intrigue.

Elaine Homer is an AST in Media Studies at Kidbrooke School.

Follow it up

Hollywood Babylon by Kenneth Anger (Dell Bantam, 1998 and other reprints available via Amazon) was the original film industry 'scandal bible'. Essential reading for film buffs and star gazers.

Get Lucky.
Cameron & Ashton
what happens in VEGAS
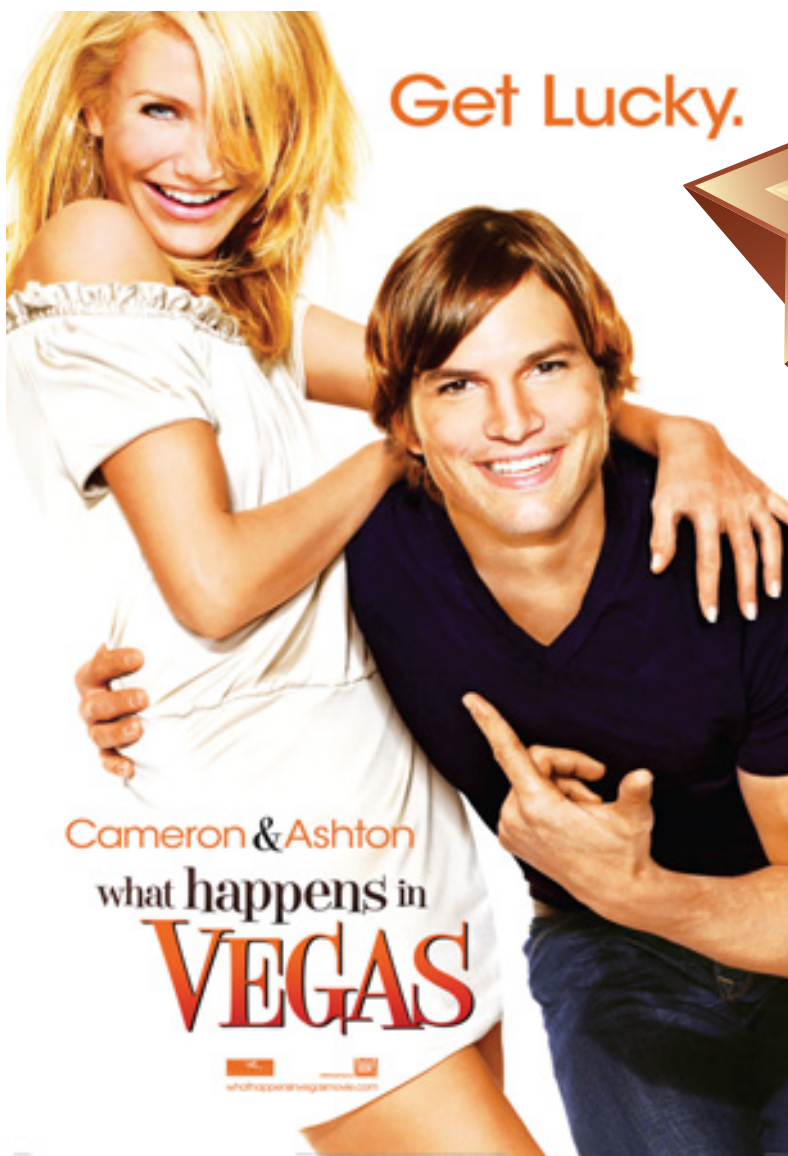
brangelina

how a hollywood super-couple can unravel spectatorship theory

Stars are the lifeblood of the cinema industry – but they also open up interesting theoretical debates and challenges. **Sean Richardson** explores the Brangelina phenomenon and what it can teach us about theories of spectatorship, pleasure and gender.

Charismatic stars are the ultimate box office draw, generating millions of pounds in revenue. Few would disagree that **Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie** epitomise male and female beauty and charisma. In cinematic history, they may eventually be as important as Bogart and Bacall, or Burton and Taylor. They seem to embody some core elements of intense masculinity and femininity which attract the global audience. Their individual claims to 'A' list star status became even more powerful when they married; and they have since been at the centre of a worldwide media frenzy that follows their every move. An interest in the pairing of such powerful stars stems from the eternal fascination with Hollywood private lives and loves. They are **key icons** to look at for **film work on representation and gender**.

Laura Mulvey is frequently quoted as a key theorist on spectatorship and the gendered consumption of media texts. Her 1975 essay on spectatorship, **'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'** is undoubtedly one of the most significant and influential film theories. Unfortunately, it is also one of the most widely misused and misunderstood theories in A Level Film and Media Studies.

However, we can draw on Mulvey's approach and take film analysis into the 21st century if we use a combination of **star theory** and **ideas on spectatorship and identification** to analyse some of the key texts of Pitt and Jolie, the golden cinematic couple.

It was the 2005 star vehicle, *Mr and Mrs Smith* which unleashed the famous on and off-screen chemistry between Pitt and Angelina Jolie. Later I'll explore why this film is crucial in revealing a deeper understanding of the **'screen gaze'** and how both men and women consume film.

The theory

> **Laura Mulvey's Theory of Film Spectatorship: (based on analysis of classical Hollywood film).**
> – **Film spectatorship** is gender based, with male/female binary opposites.
> – The 'gaze' or 'look' of the male audience member/protagonist in the film is active.
> – The female is passive, an object 'to be looked at'.
> – It is limited to active/passive spectatorship of film.

Students often apply Mulvey's approach as a very blunt tool to all sorts of media texts, including advertising, music videos and, of course, film. However, her analysis was based on classical Hollywood cinema texts, and should only be used – with caution – for film analysis by the 21st-century student. To apply it with any real success, you will ideally need a basic grasp of Freudian theories of psychoanalysis – heavy stuff at the best of times, even if you're doing Psychology A Level. But don't be put off by psychoanalytic approaches to film analysis. The experience of film has been linked to such approaches as it is said

to be the closest thing to a waking dream that we have as human beings. The projection of images in a darkened room is like a dream, flickering and registering on many levels.

Mulvey's theory is a fantastic starting point and should be the beginning of research on a film text. She herself has said she wanted to prompt a conceptual debate but, too often, students focus unproblematically on this one theory from 1975! The central problem with the theory is the gender binary opposition of active and passive spectatorship. Professor Yvonne Tasker sums it up in *Spectacular Bodies – gender, genre and the action cinema* (Comedia, 1993):

> **What once may have provided an enabling critical concept, now seems almost completely disempowering in its effects.**

She argues that this is because we can get terribly bogged down in reading a text as disempowering

for the male/female. The static binary opposition of passive women and active men is perhaps nowadays more fluid than Mulvey suggests. Men and women can identify with many characters during the spectacle of a film.

The 21st-century film supercouple

To explore the meanings of the iconic male/ female stars of our age, Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie (aka **Brangelina**), the ideas of **Yvonne Tasker** and **Richard Dyer** offer new and dynamic approaches to film analysis and spectatorship.

Few people on the planet can fail to be aware of the 'Brangelina' brand, the global superstar coupling. Other examples would include our own Posh'n'Becks, or TomKat (Tom Cruise and Katy Holmes). Wikipedia terms this new phenomenon the 'supercouple':

> A supercouple (also known as a power couple or dynamic duo) is a popular or financially-wealthy

pairing that intrigues and fascinates the public in an intense or even obsessive fashion.

Mr and Mrs Smith, directed by Doug Liman in 2005, was the film which paired Jolie and Pitt together in a **High Concept spy/relationship action-movie** which, according to Hollywood mythology, led to the break-up of Pitt's marriage to Jennifer Aniston. The celebrity magazine and tabloid feeding-frenzy has continued relentlessly ever since, culminating in the July birth of the twins Knox Leon and Vivienne Marcheline, an event which provoked offers of around **$20 million dollars for exclusive pictures**. This intense fascination with two film actors is nothing new in Hollywood, but with their symbolic union, audience interest has bordered on the obsessional.

Richard Dyer's Stars

Richard Dyer's work on star theory suggested that **a star persona is made up of many aspects, only one of which is the actual film texts.** (See Elaine Homer's piece on page 16 for a fuller analysis.) Pitt and Jolie's extraordinarily documented life off-camera feeds into their star images and leads us to re-evaluate them. This is particularly true of Angelina Jolie, who has moved from 'wild child' to 'earth mother/global citizen', eclipsing even Madonna. Dyer identifies the **lack of control** stars have in the era of the telephoto lens of the invasive paparazzi. The film texts, studio publicity and interviews are the only controlled aspects of the star persona. Yet 'Brangelina' is the ultimate film couple, despite this lack of control.

Yvonne Tasker's Spectacular Bodies

Tasker rejects the rigid idea of a male/female binary for cinema spectatorship, as proposed by Mulvey, and argues that **the cinema space is a place where a spectator can identify with multiple perspectives.** She describes it as a **'utopian social space'**, where in a small, ideal environment (perhaps your local multiplex?) you can dream and enjoy multiple cinematic pleasures.

She suggests that **we can enjoy the pleasure of the cinema and identify with who we want to, regardless of gender.** If we analyse other media such as computer games, where teenage boys and girls spent thousands of hours 'being' Lara Croft, the 'Tomb Raider', this is a powerful argument. Tasker looked in particular at action cinema and action heroines in the 1980s arguing for a reassessment of the action spectacle cinema. She discussed the multiple pleasures of texts such as *The Terminator* (1984), *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985) and *Alien* (1979) and questioned long-standing elements of film criticism, including Mulvey's famous theory.

Back to the supercouple

This leads us back to *Mr and Mrs Smith*, a film where Angelina Jolie is as heroic and skilled as Brad Pitt. Traditional film theory would use gender-based assumptions to analyse the position of the audience in relation to this text. However, Tasker argues that the viewer can identify with either Pitt or Jolie, or both, a process she has termed **'perverse identifications'**. Indeed, the text itself seems to promote this, with a hero and heroine with strong star quality.

Mr and Mrs Smith

The film cleverly exploits the two huge star personas, casting them as married suburban Americans, who both have secret lives as assassins. They are attending marriage guidance counselling and are unaware of each other's secret life. This extraordinary twist allows for spectacular and violent action sequences, where the viewer could potentially **perversely identify** with either Pitt or Jolie or both, moving on from Mulvey's static binaries. In the first opening sequence we see Pitt and Jolie in a two-shot, their dress codes symbolizing their 'ordinary' natures. Yet their star power shines out even here; the chemistry and charisma they generate is palpable.

As secret assassins, both are trained in weapons and martial arts. The film's major sequence of confrontation between the pair occurs in the family home. The iconic white clapperboard house is the perfect counterpoint to the carnage which follows and the destruction of the house is the climax of the fight. Jolie is seen brandishing a high-powered assault rifle, in black combat dress and in full action heroine mode.

Director Doug Liman positions the spectator equally between the two protagonists, giving them equal screen time, framing them with similar symbolic objects. Pitt exhibits expertise with a meat knife, followed by Jolie twirling a bread knife menacingly. It is wonderfully perverse in offering multiple identifications, with the darkened cinema allowing such fantasy pleasures. This is 21st-century filmmaking that has a deep psycho-analytic undercurrent, with Freudian gender issues bubbling away; yet we can use current theory to deconstruct it. As Pitt kickboxes Jolie to the floor, after blowing up the kitchen à la Jason Bourne

in *The Bourne Identity*, he beckons her and says, 'Come on, honey…come to daddy'. She the responds with a blow to his head, headbutts him and retorts, 'Who's your daddy now?' The visceral pleasures of the action cinema spectacle allow utopian identification possibilities. Angelina Jolie is as active in the frame as Pitt and often upstages him, arguably eclipsing him. Male or female gazes can be dispensed with as audiences experiment with the voyeuristic pleasures of looking – sometimes known as **scopophilia**.

The symbolic destruction of the marital home is engineered as the assassins decide to kiss and make up, but have contracts put on their lives by their paymasters. The explosive, flaming house blows up as Pitt and Jolie emerge running onto the lawn. Again in equal two-shot, brandishing powerful symbolic handguns, the two spray deathly bullets into the lesser assassins sent to kill them – disposable, everyday actors, who demand only momentary screen time. The iconic explosion that fills the screen, jolting the stars into the air, has become a Hollywood code with Tom Cruise's masterclass in *Mission Impossible III* (2006). The explosion in *Mr and Mrs Smith* is significant as both Jolie and Pitt are launched, guns raised, both now clothed in innocent white, allowing the spectator to pick and choose their preferred star. In this era of 'Web

2.0', personalized media and ultimate choice, this self-created identification theory is very powerful.

The image of Jolie's slender arms grasping powerful weaponry has become a modern cinematic symbol, powerful, contradictory yet resonant. The ending of *Mr and Mrs Smith* sees Jolie brandishing two guns, back to back with Pitt, who also mirrors her with two guns. They are impossibly outnumbered (in a self-reflexive nod to the final scene of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, the classic 1969 buddy movie). The director reverts to slow-motion, almost bullet time (as in *The Matrix,* 1999), as Pitt gets wounded. Jolie sprays a fatal volley into the shooter. To get tied down here with gender theory would be a mistake, as theory can and has evolved into something much more dynamic and fluid.

Mr and Mrs Smith earned over $478 million worldwide, one of the biggest hits of 2005.

Wanted

With the success of the recent blockbuster *Wanted*, Jolie's star has risen even further. *Wanted* made over $131 million in the US and over $226 million worldwide, grossing more in its opening weekend than any previous live-action film starring Angelina Jolie.

Wanted (2008), directed by Timur Bekmambetov and co-starring James McAvoy, utilized Jolie's action star persona cleverly. Arguments from Dyer and Tasker can both be applied to deconstruct its appeal and constructions, revealing how Jolie embodies a 21st-century multi-gendered ideal. She is presented as super-human, feeding off the humanitarian super-selfless compassion she is associated with in the global media. The poster marketing campaign you probably saw on bus
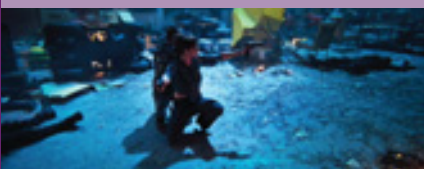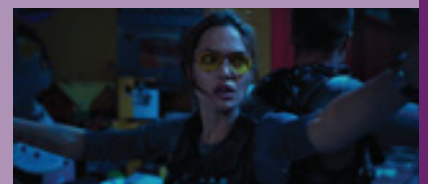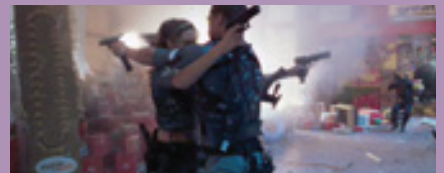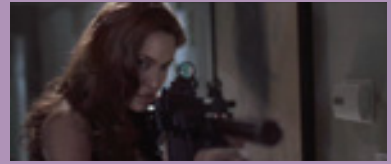
shelters and in magazines used the slender, gun-brandishing arm already featured in *Mr and Mrs Smith*, but further fetishised the arm with multiple tattoos.

As magazines and biography programmes have revealed, tattoos are part of Jolie's star persona. This is not studio marketing information, but part of her mythology as a wild child who used to carry her ex-husband's blood in a vial around her neck. In an ironic twist, the UK *Hello* magazine photographs of new mother and twins, (released in the August issue), portray her as maternal, simple – and tattoo-free. With the aid of air-brushing or cosmetic intervention, she can, like all successful stars, be all things to all men and women.

Narrative in *Wanted*

Jolie plays Fox, a glamorous assassin for 'The Fraternity', a group who kill to restore justice and order in the universe. Fox recruits James McAvoy's character, Wesley Gibson, a depressed office drone who dreams of escape. She is essentially a donor/protector which, in its narrative arc, echoes *Fight Club,* a film in which metrosexual male rediscovers his strength and inner masculinity. Jolie is the star, however, as indicated by the massive marketing campaign. The action spectacle of the film is centred on Jolie's body and the myriad ways she can shoot a bullet from a gun. The director creates some impressive post-*Matrix* bullet effects, with sequences that showcase Jolie's physicality to the full. Rumours were circulated, possibly by the studio, that Jolie cut many sequences of dialogue to intensify the impact of the character of Fox; however, we should question all information about a star and a film text, as Dyer suggests in *Stars*:

The importance of publicity is that, in its apparent or actual escape from the image that Hollywood is trying to promote, it seems more 'authentic'.

Guns, bullets and spectacular bodies

In *Wanted*, Jolie's character Fox rescues the inept office worker, Wesley, via a high speed chase in a bright red sports car, with all the obvious Freudian undertones of phallic symbols. Fox is a super-skilled driver, blurring any gender stereotypes, yet very sexualized and glamorous. In a key sequence she has to hand control of the car to Wesley. Bekmambetov offers a tight shot of the interior of the car, with Jolie straddling the dashboard, to lean out and fire her weapon.

The cinema viewer can choose to identify with either Jolie or McAvoy, depending on which synapses fire in the brain during viewing. The utopian social space that cinema creates can allow us to dream, identify or reject as we enjoy the spectacle. In an entertainment such as this text, the pleasure can be derived simply from the spectacle of the frenetic, kinetic camera play.

I would argue that Jolie is a Hollywood star who transcends normal categorization, with alternate, subversive, rebellious elements. Her **star persona** is a fascinating set of contradictions, made even more complex by her marriage to Brad Pitt. Their star power has intensified and this supercouple reign supreme at the moment.

Sean Richardson is Head of Media at Penistone Grammar School near Sheffield.

Glossary of Key Terms

Star Theory: The study of film stars and their associated texts to analyse film and film reception.

Star Persona: According to Richard Dyer, the star image that is made up of promotion, publicity, films, criticisms and commentaries.

(This *MediaMagazine* article is part of Angelina Jolie's Star Persona, if you use it in your work!)

Perverse Identifications: When a cinema spectator identifies with any number of stars or characters on the screen. As the narrative progresses, spectators can identify with the position or feelings of multiple characters.

Utopian Social Space: Updating and moving on from Mulvey, Professor Yvonne Tasker identifies the space in which we view the film spectacle. Perverse identifications are clearly possible and probable.

Scopophilia: The pleasure of looking, enjoying the spectacle put before you at the cinema. It could be argued that human beings are inherently scopophilic as cinema is such a popular global medium.

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TILDA SWINTON

queen of the avant-garde

You'd probably recognise her even if you don't know her name. Pale, red-headed, ultra-cool, Tilda Swinton is anything but the conventional star – yet she has acquired iconic status through her eclectic choice of roles and defiance of stereotypes. **Lucy Meade** deconstructs the image and its meanings.

Tilda Swinton in *Michael Clayton*, *Constantine*, courtesy of image.net

Background

Tilda Swinton is one of Britain's most striking actresses. She has proven herself to be rebellious, challenging, intelligent and a 'cinematic gender buster' having played both men and women in her career. (Kirn, 2005).

However, her family background is steeped in tradition. Her family can be traced back to the 9th century. Her father a 'totem of masculinity' (Picardie, 2000), was a Major General, a Lord and former head of the Queen's Household Division; she was the only girl amid three brothers. Swinton has said that she became boy-like in order to fit in with family life. After graduating from university she met the avant-garde filmmaker **Derek Jarman**, 'a legendary figure of British cinema [who] trained his camera on the anger and violence of the punk movement' (MacCabe, 2007) in his film *Jubilee*. Tilda Swinton has also been involved in experimental art, and has been the muse for cult fashion designers **Victor and Rolf**.

Despite Tilda's rigid family background, her career has been dedicated to art forms that challenge and defamiliarise. She gained critical acclaim for her performance in American indie *The Deep End* (Scott McGehee, 2001) and since then has made a distinct move towards the mainstream, in films such as *The Beach* (Danny Boyle, 2001), working opposite Leonardo DiCaprio and with Keanu Reeves in *Constantine* (Francis Lawrence, 2005). She took the central role of the White Witch in *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* (aka *Narnia*, Andre Adamson, 2005). She has mostly recently starred in the political thriller *Michael Clayton* (Tony Gilroy, 2007) opposite George Clooney.

The look

Swinton's unique look is one of the most striking aspects of her film performances. She has extremely pale skin, which has been emphasised by her consistently being dressed in white, such as in *Constantine*, *Young Adam* (David Mackenzie, 2003) and *The Beach*. To add to this her hair (naturally red) is often dyed white-blonde for her parts (*Constantine, Narnia, Young Adam*), which has resulted in a 'grandly virginal' and 'unsullied' look (Picardie, 2000). Her bone structure is sharp, angular, almost feline. She has a symmetrical face, which makes her striking, but also quite hard-looking and cold. It has been suggested that there are 'only hints of features to her face', with 'eyebrows and lips that are barely visible' (Wood, 2005), a 'translucent mask' 'ethereal beauty' (Picardie, 2003). With 'something of the unicorn about her, mythic, rare, unsullied'. She looks 'other planetary' (Picardie, 2003). Interviewers have described her as having 'magnificent height and physical stature' (Belewien, 2007) and in publicity photos of her at the premiere of *Michael Clayton* she stands arm in arm with George Clooney, an international symbol of masculinity, literally towering over him. She is also is very slim, her body again angular rather than curvy.

Her eye-catching costumes have included angel wings, mummy-like white bandages, pinstriped suits and cropped hair. She has black eyes in *Narnia* and glowing eyes in *Constantine*.

Overall she is something space-age, a future being, something quite unlike anyone else.

Her forays into art and fashion have complemented this image with her modelling the androgynous pinstripe suits, shirts and ties of Victor and Rolf. This shows a look that is again lacking definition in terms of gender, with the emphasis on the straight lines and straight features.

For the **art installation 'The Maybe'** at the Serpentine Gallery in London, she lay in a glass case apparently asleep for eight hours a day 'reducing herself purely to an object to be looked at' (Mackenzie, 2003), not 'speaking, not playing a role just being beautiful and immovably serene' (Mackenzie, 2003). This describes a kind of cold beauty, detached, asleep, separate, but also emphasises the strangeness of her look, like a rare animal in a zoo.

Corrupt characters

During her career Tilda has consistently chosen extremely **morally ambiguous roles**, from the tyrannical ruler of Narnia to the 'charismatic, yet ultimately sinister' Sal in *The Beach* (Picardie, 2000). She has also played the fallen angel Gabriel in *Constantine*, and the corrupt mother covering up the death of her son's lover in *The Deep End*. These characters are all **independent, tough, and 'steely' strong** (Mackenzie, 2003). However, critics have also discussed that her characters share an **emotional detachment**. Her dialogue is often interestingly brief, particularly in the films where she is the central character. In *Young Adam*, for example, where she says very little, what she *does* say is cold and surprisingly hostile considering that the only characters she speaks to are her closest family and her lover. Her dialogue is sharp, authoritative, cold and demanding. In *The Beach* she makes orders in a military fashion and even in her most family-orientated films such as *Thumbsucker* (Mike Mills, 2005) and *The Deep End* her relationship with her children is strained, cold and detached. In *Thumbsucker* her dialogue is almost crushing when she tells her insecure son that he must prepare for failure in life and not to get his hopes up. These are cold, detached characters who are not easy to understand and may be hard for audiences to sympathise or identify with.

The gender trap

It is interesting to explore whether Tilda Swinton, 'queen of the avant-garde' (Picardie, 2000), an actress celebrated for her challenging and groundbreaking performances has been able to escape or even to defy the stereotypes set out for women in film.

Firstly, Tilda is certainly not denied action in her films. She is the central and dominant character in most of her films, particularly *Orlando*, *Young Adam* and *Female Perversions*. Even in her smaller roles she has made a tremendous impact as noted in a review of her first mainstream Hollywood production *Constantine*. The reviewer states: 'the film side-steps (Keanu) Reeves in order to spotlight the weirdly inspirational Swinton,' (Newman, 2005), and this a character that is only onscreen for a matter of minutes.

Another powerful aspect of Tilda's performance in the majority of her films is her **sexuality**.

Tilda's characters are nearly always extremely sexual. It is interesting that she does not visually define herself by her sex appeal; for example she has no obvious curves or breasts, which are the features we often use to define women as sexy. She is sexy yet sexless. However, the audience are clearly encouraged to gaze upon her. This is demonstrated by the constant lingering shots of her in *Young Adam*, where the camera gazes on the tiniest stripe of white skin, her neck, her leg, a bare arm.

However, when it comes to sex Tilda's characters are far from frozen objects. Her sexuality is represented as very positive and again active. For example, she uses Richard, played by Leonardo DiCaprio, for sexual pleasure in *The Beach*, saying to him 'Go to sleep, I may want to have sex again in the morning'. She has a passionate love affair with Ewan MacGregor in *Young Adam*. Their relationship is described as having a 'mutual erotic charge' (Mackenzie, 2003). She has affairs with both men and women in *Female Perversions*. These sexual relationships all show Tilda as positive and active, never weak and giving in. She is shown as desiring and acting on sexual desire and is never a victim. There is pride in her body; for example she undresses with pleasure in *Young Adam*, and stands naked with no inhibition. Her sexiness is not seen as repulsive, it is seen as exciting and life-enhancing, and her character becomes alive and passionate. The key emphasis is on the satisfaction brought from sexual pleasure.

Gender bending

Cross-dressing in film has been discussed by the **theorist Annette Kuhn in her article 'Sexual Disguise and Cinema'** (Kuhn, 1985). She argues that cross-dressing 'shakes a spectator's convictions' (1985) and challenges social conventions. Kuhn's examples highlight the fact that the comic effect of men dressing as women is the most common form of cross-dressing in cinema. Therefore Tilda's frequent choice to take on roles that require her to play men or to be masculine again demonstrates her desire to resist stereotypes and the mainstream. This is seen most famously in *Orlando* she plays a man who dies – only to awake as a woman. Tilda's line at this sudden point of transition is 'Same person – no difference at all' and her swap doesn't seem problematic. Orlando's personality is the same whether male or female. S/he is romantic, naïve, a person who sees everything as if for the first time. This is quite **a radical message: that you can be the same person whether male or female and that gender does not determine us**. Also, rather than exploring what it is like to be feminine or masculine, as other cross-dressing comedy films may do, Orlando denies there is any difference.

Star persona

There is no doubt Swinton's career is one which has broken boundaries and challenged the norm. However there is still something frustrating about Tilda Swinton as a star. First, her unusual look denies definition almost as if her face lacks feature and expression, while her silent and controlled performance style has had mixed responses:

The strange feeling she gives off as a screen presence – someone more concerned with detachment, to create objective passion.
Mackenzie, 2003

A frustrated fan argues that 'her impassivity and lack of expression are annoying' (Miles, 2007).

She separates herself and is maybe too detached:

The pattern of her work has been to abstract herself from feeling, which suggests that she does not give any of herself to the role, this desire to 'set herself apart' (Mackenzie, 2003).

Finally she may challenge with her gender bending; but as Kuhn points out, 'gender is what crucially defines us,' (Kuhn, 1985) and 'an ungendered subject cannot be human'. Certainly people have described her as 'a supernatural creature' (Kirn, 2005), 'mythical' (Picardie, 2000) and 'as if she dreamed herself into existence,' (Kirn, 2005). But if the person is not real, a mythical dream-like creature, then is it possible for the audience to understand her? It may be effective to confuse and challenge – but is there also a danger of losing audience engagement?

It is interesting that perhaps the one thing that inspired her to become so controversial and challenging – her family background of rigidity, and the feeling of being set apart that came from that – is also perhaps the one thing that holds her back from fully delivering her message of defiance.

Lucy Meade teaches Film and Media at Stratford Upon Avon College.

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Images courtesy of image.net

DANCE of DEATH

Waltz With Bashir is an animated documentary. This fact alone would set the film in a class apart, but there is much more to this thoughtful and powerful text than its unique form. It is an examination of memory and remorse surrounding the invasion of the Lebanon by Israeli soldiers in 1982, and their subsequent lack of intervention in the massacres at the refugee camps in Sabra and Shatila by the Christian Phalange militia following the murder of their hero (and newly elected Lebanese Prime Minister) Bashir Gemayel. **Mike Hobbs** talked to the director Ari Folman, who was serving with the Israeli forces at the time.

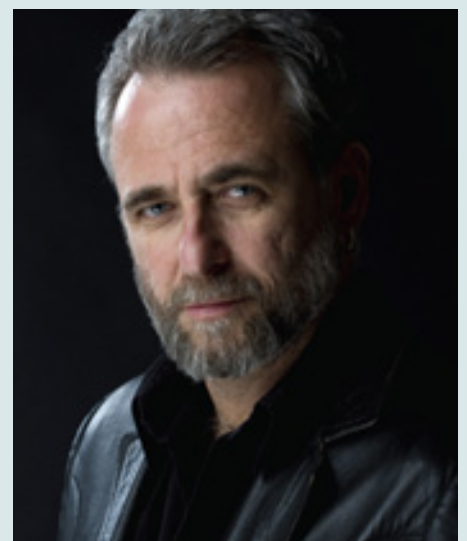**MM: What came first – the plan to make a documentary or the desire to make an animated film?**

AF It was always my intention to make an animated documentary. Since I had already made many documentary films for both TV and the cinema, I became really excited by the concept of trying to make an animated one – hardly an overcrowded genre. In my documentary series for TV in 2004 *The Material That Love Is Made Of* I had experimented by opening each episode with a three-minute animated sequence introducing various scientists talking about 'the science of love'. It was basic Flash animation but it worked so well that I realised that the process could be used to sustain a feature-length documentary successfully.

MM: So did you start this project as an animated documentary?

AF Yes, indeed – I'd been mulling over the basic idea in my mind for a few years but I just wasn't happy about shooting it in 'real life' video. What would that have looked like? A succession of middle-aged men being interviewed against a black background, telling stories about what had happened to them over twenty five years ago, without any archival footage to support them. That would have been so boring … My breakthrough came when I figured out it could only be done in animation, using fantastic drawings. Basically, war is so surreal and memory is so tricky that I thought I'd better reconstruct the memory journey with the help of some very fine illustrators.

MM: What sort of animation process did you use in the film?

AF *Waltz With Bashir* was made first as a 'real' video based on a 90-page script. It was shot in a sound studio and cut as a 90-minute feature film. This was then made into a storyboard and drawn with over 2300 illustrations that were turned into animation. The animation format we used was invented in our studios 'Bridget Folman Film Gang' by **our director of animation Yoni Goodman**. Fundamentally it's a combination of **Flash animation, classic animation and 3D**. It's very important for me to stress that the film was not made by rotoscope animation, meaning that we did not illustrate and paint over the real video. We drew it again from scratch, utilising the great talents of our art director David Polonsky and his three assistants.

MM: The horrors of war and its aftermath resonate from your documentary on the Gulf War *Comfortably Numb* through the fantasy *Made In Israel* to *Waltz With Bashir* – do you regard this as the central theme of your work?

AF Unfortunately, yes. However, due to its surreal nature, I try to put this across in a fantasy way, or at least on the borders between reality and fantasy. I'm always looking to place war in a different dimension.

MM: The final images of camp survivors are the only non-animated pictures in the film. Was this to underline the stark message?

AF I'd always meant it to end this way. I didn't want the reaction to the film to be summed up as, 'Oh, the animation was very good, the music and the images were great'. My intention was to put everything into proportion. For justice's sake, those pictures had to be real.

MM: Is Waltz With Bashir therefore partly an attempt to expiate guilt?

AF No it isn't, although I wish I could say that it was. The main points of the film are, generally, that if you want to forget, you can; and specifically, I wished to reconstruct the chronology of the massacre from information I picked up from many different sources.

MM: Was it strange to be making a film about memory (among many topics) concerning events you did not really remember?

AF Yes, of course, it was a very strange experience, although it's not true to say that I had forgotten everything, because there were really only a few parts missing. In fact, I could recall most of what had happened, but I had made a deliberate decision to forget some aspects.

MM: So is the story based on your actual personal experiences?

AF Sure, at its core, the film revolves around my own experiences, buttressed of course by the experiences of my friends and others who were in the Lebanon at the time. The storyline follows what I went through from the moment I realised that there were some crucial episodes in my life that were completely missing from my memory. It's no exaggeration to say that I went through a major psychological upheaval during the four years I worked on *Waltz With Bashir*. On the one hand I discovered a whole heap of heavy stuff regarding my past that had been lying dormant for years. On the other hand, during the four years of production, my wife and I brought three kids into this world. This made me wonder whether maybe I was actually going through all this for the sake of my sons. When they grow up and watch the film, it might help them to make the right decisions. By that, I mean not to take part in any wars whatsoever.

MM: Are all the interviewees in the film the actual people portraying themselves?

AF Mostly – seven out of the nine interviewees are the actual people. They were interviewed and filmed in a sound studio. For personal reasons, two of my friends did not want to appear on camera, even in animated form, so they were played by actors. However, their testimonies are real.

MM: Were all other potential interviewees keen to talk about their experiences and memories, or were some reticent?

AF Funnily enough, some of my best friends were very reluctant to talk, including the two friends in the film who did not want to appear. But we got plenty of information from elsewhere. We had advertised four years ago for people to tell us their memories and many came forward – in Israel, many are keen to hang onto their days of military service. I'm atypical (as are some of my friends) in having tried to suppress them …

MM: Was the making of Waltz With Bashir therapeutic for you?

AF When you undertake a journey trying to figure out a traumatic memory from the past, it's essentially a commitment to long term therapy. My therapy lasted as long as the whole production process of the film: four years. There was a shift from the dark depression I suffered from as a result of the traumatic memories I was discovering, to the state of euphoria I reached when the film was finally in production, with all the complicated animation processes being carried out by the team much faster than I expected. If I was the type of guy who believed in psychotherapy I'd swear that the film had performed miracles on my personality. But due to all my previous experiences, I'd just say that the therapy aspects sucked, but the filmmaking process was very good indeed.

MM: Have you been surprised at the international success of the film so far?

AF Yes, I have been and it was only when the film went to the Cannes Film Festival (where it was made an Official Selection in competition) that I realised it could strike a chord. Basically, until then, I was just engaged in a perpetual struggle to complete it. I think it's always the same with anything I do – I never think about how the work is going to be received, so I'm always surprised by favourable reactions.

MM: What has been the reaction in Israel to Waltz With Bashir?

AF This is a case in point. It's been very well received, which has been a large and pleasant surprise to me. People have been

coming to see it in relatively large numbers, which is obviously good news, and the message hasn't been dismissed as overly left wing or liberal. I can't yet tell you about government reaction to the film, however.

MM: At one point, you compare the complicity of the Israeli troops around the Sabra and Shatila camps to that surrounding the Nazis – has that shocking point struck home?

AF Funnily enough, I'm only ever asked this question outside Israel. I should stress that I don't make the comparison directly myself, but that it is made by two of the interviewees. The thing is that Holocaust memories are wired into our DNA, so the references are perhaps more shocking to foreigners.

MM: What are your feelings about the Sabra and Shatila massacres today?

AF The same as I've always felt: it's the worst thing that human beings can do to each other. I know for sure that the Christian Phalange militiamen were fully responsible for the massacre – the Israeli soldiers had nothing to do with it. As for the Israeli government, only the people themselves know the extent of their responsibility. Only they can say whether or not they were informed in advance about the imminent violent revenge the militia were going to take for the death of Bashir.

MM: And your feelings about war?

AF Having made the film mainly from the point of view of a common soldier, I've come to one conclusion: war is so useless that it's unbelievable. It's nothing like you see in some of the self-aggrandising American movies. There's no glamour, no glory, just a bunch of very young men going nowhere, shooting at nobody they know and being killed by unknown hands. After that, any survivors go home and try to forget. Sometimes they can: most of the time they cannot.

MM: Are there others like you who have had similar experiences?

AF I believe that there are thousands of Israeli former soldiers who have kept their war memories deeply repressed, consciously or unconsciously. They might live the rest of their lives in that state, without anything ever being dredged up. But the waters could always burst the dam one day, causing all sorts of things to happen to them or those around them. That's what Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is all about.

MM: What do you reckon were the most instructive experiences in developing your filmmaking technique?

AF Well, I don't really know if I have a technique as such, although I very much admire some of the people who do. For me, it's all a question of trying different things, seeking new dimensions that fit the subject matter, and making sure that I don't get bored. For instance, I won't be making another animated documentary.

MM: You tend to oscillate between film and TV work – are these media more similar than different?

AF Actually, I think they're very different. Here in Israel I tend to confine my TV projects to writing because some of the jobs you can be asked to perform as a director are akin to factory work. But that doesn't mean I regard film as intrinsically superior. I believe that some of the best work coming out of the USA in the last ten years has been on TV such as *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under*.

MM: What advice would you give current film students in order to pursue their careers successfully?

AF My suggestion is that you should always try to do your own thing; don't just try to be one of the gang. If you can establish a personal difference with your point of view then you won't always be fighting with the mainstream. And never, ever give up – if you're not prepared to cope with setbacks, then you won't succeed in this industry. Keep going!

Mike Hobbs is a freelance journalist.

Postscript

The day after this interview, *Waltz with Bashir* won all its categories (6 prizes) at the Israeli Film Awards and was selected as the country's Oscar entry. It has since been deemed ineligible for the 2009 Best Documentary Oscar following a change of rules. Find out more at:
www.guardian.sco.uk/film/2008/oct/07/ oscar.documentary
www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/ thecultureshow/2008/10/waltz-with-bashir. html

DOWN THESE MEAN STREETS

noir and the city

Jerome Monahan investigates representations of the city in two classic examples of film noir made in 1950 on opposite sides of the Atlantic: *Night and the City* and *The Asphalt Jungle*.

Harry, Harry – you could have been anything. Anything. You had brains … ambition. You worked harder than any ten men. But the wrong things. Always the wrong things.

Gene Tierney (Mary Bristol) in *Night and the City*

Put in hours and hours of planning. Figure everything down to the last detail. Then what? Burglar alarms start going off all over the place for no sensible reason. A gun fires of its own accord and a man is shot. And a broken down old cop, no good for anything but chasing kids, has to trip over us. Blind accident. What can you do against blind accidents?

Sam Jaffe (Doc. Erwin Riedenschneider) in *The Asphalt Jungle*

If you want fresh air, don't look for it in this town!

Anthony Caruso (Louis Ciavelli) in *The Asphalt Jungle*

Sterling Hayden in *The Asphalt Jungle* d. John Huston, 1950
Night and the City courtesy of the BFI Archive
Mary / The Kobal Collection

This article will help you tackle a comparison of two American films as required by **FM2 Section C of the WJEC Board's Film Studies AS Level.** While the overall demand is that you compare two films from a specific genre, the questions will lay special stress on the films' **narratives and their social and political context.** WJEC offers a number of possible film combinations as guidance, all of which couple **an older movie with a later film in the same genre**, and two of which involve **an original and its remake.** However, in this article I'll be proposing a comparison of **two films both released in 1950**, to show that there's plenty of comparison and contrast to be drawn from two contemporaneous screen stories (both later defined as film noirs). And as well as providing a chance to rehearse some of the key ingredients of this most influential genre (or is it a film style?) these films allow the opening up of one of the most important noir motifs – that of **the city as a place of paranoia, alienation** or, as critic Frank Krutnik puts it **'dis-ease'.**

On both sides of the Atlantic

In an interview provided on the British Film Institute's recent DVD of *Night and the City*, the film's director Jules Dassin (pronounced 'Dassan') admits that when he made it he had no idea he was making a **'film noir'.** Not surprising; the term was unknown among American directors. It was coined by **French film critic Nino Frank in 1946** as a catch-all term to describe the cynical, gritty thrillers such as Huston's *Maltese Falcon* (1941) and Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944), which were finally being screened in France following the end of the Second World War.

Dassin was also resistant to the suggestion that his London-set movie owed a great deal to John Huston's *The Asphalt Jungle.* He would have known little of Huston's project, since both were being made at the same time on opposite sides of the Atlantic – Huston's in Los Angeles and Cincinnati, and *Night and the City* in a London still bearing the signs of the Blitz.

From page to screen

That said, there's plenty to connect the films stylistically and philosophically. Both were adapted from examples of 'hard-boiled' crime fiction popular between the 1930s and 1950s – Dassin's from a 1938 novel by Gerald Kersh and Huston's from a W.R. Burnett tale of 1949. Both deviated from their source material in significant ways too. Significantly, *Jungle* focuses more closely than the novel on the **criminal characters** and their procedures leading up to the 'caper' (a jewel robbery) they hope will make them all rich, while downplaying the forces of law and order (although the Production Code Administration (PCA), which in those days vetted Hollywood scripts, was able to approve it for its 'crime doesn't pay' approach).

The gap between novel and film of *Night and the City* is even more revealing. In the novel the main protagonist, Harry Fabian, is an English pimp seeking to corrupt a young woman called Mary Bristol, who he hopes will supplement the

earnings he already receives from other prostitutes. Meanwhile he pursues a series of 'get-rich-quick' schemes, over-reaching himself in the process. He is so loathsome that no leading man of the time – least of all an American star – would have risked his reputation playing such a character. A US Studio – **20th Century Fox** – owned the rights to the novel, which meant the film must have an American leading man; the job eventually fell to relative movie newcomer Richard Widmark. The film was made in London on the back of 'frozen funds' – British-generated box-office money from US films held in the UK in order to kickstart the UK film industry after the war. The London setting enabled Fox to access this money, and produce a film that would hopefully also generate healthy profits in the US.

In the film Fabian is transformed into a trickster, employed to steer unsuspecting tourists to a seedy, over-priced drinking club. Mary Bristol still features as a singer, but her innocence remains intact; she offers Fabian the possibility of domestic bliss, an offer he ultimately rejects thanks to his over-weaning ambitions, though he does eventually perform a final selfless act on her behalf that goes some way to redeeming him.

Narrative contrasts

The stories of the two films could not be more different. *Night and the City* remains focused throughout on Fabian's desperate **quest for fame, fortune and validity**. At the start of the 'second act' of the film (about 35 minutes in) the screen is literally filled with a variety of treatments of the character's name, spelled out on a street sign as it is lowered into place, on a newly painted glass door and a just-delivered table plaque. It is a fleeting moment of rest and satisfaction for the character – a point where Fabian's self-promotion and reality actually appear to have gelled. But in true noir-fashion, success is always fragile; pride always comes before a fall, and soon Harry is again on the streets running and sweating as fate inexorably closes in on him.

The Asphalt Jungle is seen as the prototype of what was to become a significant thriller sub-genre: **'the caper picture'** – still popular today. Indeed it's been argued that a knowledge of the film is a necessity in order to understand films such as *Ocean's Eleven*, *The Italian Job* or *Heat*. A robbery needs a team; and that in turn imposes a completely different narrative structure on the film, breaking its focus into a number of arcs describing the changing fortunes of its principal criminal characters. It is because of the strength of the assembled cast and Huston's commitment to telling their tales with as much depth as possible that the film remains a classic.

This is particularly true in the portrayal of Dix Handley (Sterling Hayden, giving a career-making performance), the strong-arm 'hooligan' recruited

to the gang to provide it with muscle. We learn his back story, including the loss of his family's Kentucky farm during the 1930's Depression (a period all-too-fresh in the memories of many audience members, which would evoke sympathy for a character clearly seeking a simpler, purer way of being seemingly forever closed off to him). In a telling moment, Dix recounts a dream in which he managed to ride a black stallion and gain his father's approval. With his next breath he dismantles the tale, remembering how he was thrown and injured. Thanks to such reminiscences we identify with his loss – but also sense that the idyll he hankers for probably never existed in the first place. And here we enter Steinbeck and Arthur Miller territory.

Thematic connections

Where the two films overlap is in their **unremittingly bleak vision** of humanity and its hopes of redemption. It's said that one reason why film noirs are so extraordinarily different from normal Hollywood fare is that they offer a picture of society in which there are **no second chances**. This is quite a cultural phenomenon in a country that then, as now, portrays itself as a place of opportunity and ultimate success for those prepared to strive. Of course, **noir heroes rarely strive towards socially acceptable ends.** Fabian's desire to control wrestling in London is based on lies and compromises, and eventually founders because of the resentments he stirred up along the way. Similarly, there is nothing edifying about the jewel robbery in *The Asphalt Jungle* – though its execution is detailed and compelling – almost too detailed back then for the PCA!

Both films also share the same **stylistic darkness** too – the pattern of shadows, night-time scenes, characters seemingly dominated by their surroundings or threatening shapes filmed in the foreground. In Huston's film the robbers approach and retreat from their jewel-store objective along a dismal tunnel; *Night and the City* opens with Fabian scurrying from shadow to shadow through foetid alleys while faceless enemies pursue him. In both cases the rodent-like behaviour demanded of the characters is all too apparent. **Fate** also looms large in both films, with the best laid plans going desperately awry, thanks to unforeseeable mischance. This is wonderfully summed up by Sam Jaffe's speech quoted at the top of this article.

Close companion to fate is **time,** and here too these two noirs are united. In *Night and the City* the final act takes place on a single night as Fabian attempts to escape a London filled with informants prepared to betray him for the reward placed on his head. Time, one of the defining elements of film as an art form, is also inextricably a part of any caper film, suggestive perhaps of why such movies are so beloved of directors; so enduring a sub-genre. *The Asphalt Jungle's* action takes place over two or three days culminating in the ten central minutes when the robbery is orchestrated and starts to unravel.

The bleakness of film noir

Where does such darkness come from? Film noir's bleak outlook may in part derive from **the role of European émigré directors and their darker vision of cinema and life drawn from artistic movements such as Expressionism, and**

the experience of Nazism in the 1930s. World War Two itself bred a degree of world-weariness and anxiety that frequently found its way into the films, and perhaps suited audiences seeking more challenging entertainments alongside Hollywood's traditional glamorous fare.

Many 'noir' directors were, if not Communist, certainly left-leaning, with a particular take on American values. In film after film during this period, we witness characters' quests for security, satisfaction and fulfilment crash and burn. This political stance – in contrast to the introspective and nationalistic views of America in the face of the perceived Cold War threat posed by Russia and China – led many noir directors to portray **crime and criminality as a fundamental part of the fabric of society**. In their vision their protagonists operated in a **ruthless world corrupted by the nature of capitalism**. Fabian desperately tries to get on but is thwarted by the bigger fish above him; while in *The Asphalt Jungle* corruption extends beyond the greasy gambling joints and backstreet cafes to the rich and powerful in the shape of a corrupt lawyer Emmerich (Louis Calhern), who says of the awful people he deals with:

> Oh, there's nothing so different about them. After all, crime is only a left-handed form of human endeavour.

Crime is ultimately futile, and the film's final message (see page 35) is that, despite the odd crooked cop, the city would be an even bleaker place if there was only silence in answer to people's cries for help. The film significantly undermines the demonization of Dix, described as 'a man without human feeling or mercy', by focusing on his last desperate moments in the final scene in the film, as he staggers across the Kentucky field his family used to own, to collapse and die, an object of mild curiosity to the horses grazing nearby – a particularly poignant ending given the desire Dix expresses throughout the film to return to his roots.

Representations of the city

How the city is represented in film noirs is worthy of a study in itself. It would be hard to distinguish the decaying urban landscapes in *The Asphalt Jungle* from *Night and the City's* locations around the bombsites of London's South Bank which in 1949 were just being cleared to make way for Festival of Britain site. Both show a city of nightmare – lonely streets, looming dark buildings and an overarching sense of dread. As critic Terrence Rafferty says:

> All cities generate a certain amount of anxiety that film noirs feed on. And all cities, somewhere, have dark scary streets that can, in noir's violent allegories of moral ambiguity, stand in for the dimmer, grubbier recesses of the soul.
>
> *New York Times,* 22 July 2007

For evidence, watch the opening sequence of *The Asphalt Jungle* as Dix tries to evade a patrol car. The landscape dominates him, and even when there are glimpses of sky, the view is crisscrossed by wires and cables compounding the sense of enclosure.

The **real-location, night-time filming** that features in so many noirs was also a product of **technological advances** – **faster film stocks and lighter-weight cameras** developed during the war

to enable the shooting of documentary features in peacetime brought the seedier and darker parts of modern cities into range. A **documentary style of filming** born of the newsreels so many had relied on for information during the war, fed into mainstream films, particularly thrillers, upping their energy and grit.

There is contrast here between the films too. *The Asphalt Jungle's* urban landscape is completely unidentified – possibly somewhere in the Mid-West, but anonymous, generalized: it represents all US cities. *Night and the City* is unmistakably set in London, and what's lost in terms of non-specific menace is gained in suggestive specificity. For example, Fabian flees a debtor early in the film across the steps of St Paul's – yet the cathedral offers no sanctuary to our desperate hero. Recognisable locations such as Trafalgar Square also take on extra significance in the narrative, as in a rare daytime meeting between Fabian and his nemesis; despite the cheerful background of passers-by and pigeons, there is betrayal at work.

The social and political context

It's important to stress that the problematic vision of the modern world served up in films such as *Night and the City* and *The Asphalt Jungle* was probably not one shared by many ordinary cinema-goer:

> …the atmosphere of death and disillusionment in *The Asphalt Jungle* and most of the other crime pictures of the day has relatively little to do with the nation as a whole and a great deal to do with the specific community that could no longer maintain its Depression era faith that America would evolve into a socialist democracy. James Nasemore, *More Than Night: Film Noir and its Contexts*

This view was echoed by the **director Joseph Losey** who in 1979 remarked that:

> … the Left in Hollywood was utterly demoralized by Truman, the atomic bomb and the House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) investigations and were beginning to recognize 'the complete unreality of the American Dream'.

The gathering **anti-communist witch-hunt in America** was an important part of the cultural context surrounding both films. Huston knew Sterling Hayden when they had both participated in protests against HUAC and would, reluctantly, testify before it soon after the film's release. Dassin was even more precariously placed, having been long associated with left-wing causes, and defended members of the Hollywood 10 who were jailed for refusing to testify to HUAC against their friends and colleagues. Dassin was facing blacklisting when Daryl Zannuck, the boss at 20th Century Fox, encouraged him to direct *Night and the City*

in London, urging him to film the most expensive scenes first in order to make it harder for the executives to bounce him off the movie. This would be the last film Dassin would make for an American studio. For several years his career in Europe was also stalled; producers would receive calls from America telling them that if they employed him, the resulting film would not be distributed in The States.

To conclude: a speech from towards the end of *The Asphalt Jungle*:

> It's not anything strange that there are corrupt officers in police departments. The dirt they're trying to clean up is bound to rub off on some of 'em but not all of 'em. Maybe one out of a hundred. The other ninety-nine are honest men trying to do an honest job … (One by one, he flips the switch on police radios that broadcast.) We send police assistance to every one of those calls. Those are not just code numbers on a radio beam, they're cries for help. People are being cheated, robbed, murdered, raped. And that goes on twenty-four hours a day, every day in the year. And that's not exceptional, that's usual. It's the same in every city in the modern world. But suppose we had no police force, good or bad. Suppose we had (he flips off all four radios) – just silence. Nobody to listen, nobody to answer. The battle's finished. The jungle wins. The predatory beasts take over. Think about it. Well gentlemen, three men are in jail, three men dead, one by his own hand. One man's a fugitive – we have reason to believe seriously wounded. That's six out of seven, not bad. And we'll get the last one too. In some ways, he's the most dangerous of them all, a hardened killer, a hooligan, a man without human feeling or human mercy.

Jerome Monahan is a freelance writer.

Follow it up

There's a wealth of information here to enable you to carry out any number of US film comparisons focused around representations of the city.

Many classic noirs from the period immediately after WW2 feature grim urban settings. See Rudolph Mate's *DOA* (1950); Alexander Mackendrick's *The Sweet Smell of Success* (1957); and even Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) with its central depiction of Pottersville.

Try comparing one of these films to a more modern urban-set neo-noir such as Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973) or *Taxi Driver* (1976), or perhaps one of the off-shoot science fiction/animated noirs of recent years such as *Blade Runner* (1982), *Dark City* (1998) or *Sin City* (2005).

At the other extreme, pair one of these two films with other Hollywood genres with urban settings such as the musical *On The Town* (1949) directed by Stanley Donen or comedy such as Woody Allen's *Manhattan* (1979).

Links

Trailer for *The Asphalt Jungle*: http://filmsnoir.net/category/trailers

Trailer for *Night and the City*: Compare the 1950 trailer with the one made for the 1992 remake with Robert De Niro: http://filmnoir.suddenlaunch3.com/index.cgi?board=video&action=display&num=1183510817

Online articles

Tony D'Ambra's film noir Site http://filmsnoir.net/film_noir/night-and-the-city-1950-a-near-perfect-noir.html

What is film noir? http://filmsnoir.net/what-is-film-noir

Noir and the City Dark, Dangerous, Corrupt and Sexy by Terrence Rafferty http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/22/movies/22raff.html

The Asphalt Jungle – review by Tim Dirks: http://www.filmsite.org/asph.html

The Asphalt Jungle – Wikipedia site: http://www.filmsite.org/asph.html

Night and the City – Wikipedia site: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Night_and_the_City

Jules Dassin – obituary: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/7323746.stm

The United States Motion Picture Production Code (1930): http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Production_Code

HUAC and its influence on Hollywood films: http://www.moderntimes.com/huac/

Podcasts

Out of the Past – Investigating film noir: http://outofthepast.libsyn.com/index.php?post_id=24412

DVD extras

Night and the City: commentary by Paul Duncan and interview with Jules Dassin (Bfi video 2007)

Other sources:

James Sanders (2001): *Celluloid Skyline: New York and the Movies*

David B. Clark (ed. 1997): *The Cinematic City*

Alain Silver and James Ursini (ed 2004): *The Caper Film in Film Noir*

From Stuart Kaminsky (1978): *John Huston Maker of Magic* NFT/bfi screening notes *The Asphalt Jungle* (2003)

James Nasemore (1998): *More than Night: Film Noir and its Contexts*

more than meets the eye

What lies beneath the surface plots of the film genres we love to watch – and what social and historical knowledge might we need to make sense of them? What meanings and messages can we take from their themes or motifs? **Nick Lacey** explores three films which demonstrate how context can inform your study of film narrative, genre or representations.

If you ask students new to Film or Media Studies what a film was about they will often describe the narrative. However, while virtually all films have recognisable narratives, many films offer more than meets the eye in terms of what they are trying to say. For example, *El Orfanato* (*The Orphanage*, 2007) tells the tale of a woman who is determined to find out what happened to her son after he disappeared; however, it is actually about the dangers of digging up the past.

In many cases, working out what the film is trying to say on a sub-textual level (the deeper meaning 'under' the obvious narrative) often requires knowledge of the time and place in which the film is set and/or when the film was made. So in order to understand the 'message' of *The Orphanage* we need to know some Spanish history.

It will probably surprise you to learn that holidaymakers travelling to Spain in the early 1970s, were visiting a country governed by the **fascist dictatorship of General Franco**. Franco was victorious in the **1936-9 Civil War that pitted his right wing Nationalists, supported by the Catholic Church, against left wing Republicans**. The Nazis, unsurprisingly, backed Franco and notoriously bombed civilians in Guernica, immortalised in Picasso's famous painting. Many Britons fought on the side of the Republicans, memorably detailed in George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) and Ken Loach's *Land and Freedom* (1995). The Civil War forms the backdrop to three fascinating Spanish films and knowing their historical context is essential to understanding their message.

In addition to the modern day setting of *The Orphanage*, we shall consider two films set during the war: *El Espíritu de la Colmena* (*The Spirit of the Beehive*, 1973), made during the last few years of General Franco's reign, and *The Devil's Backbone* (*El Espinazo del Diablo*, Spain-Mexico, 2001).

Telling horror stories

The Orphanage focuses on a mother who is determined to find her missing son who, she believes, has been taken by ghosts inhabiting an orphanage that she had attended as a child during the Franco era. As you would expect, she does find out the truth; but it is a truth that she would have been better off not knowing. Because the film references the Franco era (the mother could easily have been younger and so not have experienced living under a dictator), it necessarily becomes a significant issue in the film:

> As millions of Spanish moviegoers were riveted to *The Orphanage* last year, making it into the nation's top-grossing movie, the Spanish government was passing a Law of Historical Memory and families across the country were excavating mass graves from the Spanish Civil War in search of the remains of loved ones.
>
> Brenels, 2008

To my knowledge neither **scriptwriter Sergio G. Sánchez or director Juan Antonio Bayona** have publicly stated their film is a warning about remembering the Civil War. However the film readily yields such a reading. During the War many people were buried in unmarked graves – something very distressing for devout Catholics. The Law of Historical Memory is allowing the past literally to be dug up in an effort to find out what happened. As you might expect, given this was a *Civil* War where Spaniards were pitted against Spaniards, the consequences are likely to be extremely unsettling. Rather than elaborate on the film, and thereby spoil it for those yet to see this terrific horror movie, I'll move on to consider *The Devil's Backbone* directed by **Guillermo del Toro**, who also produced *The Orphanage* and directed *Pan's Labyrinth* (Mexico-Spain, 2006; see *MM* 21 for an in-depth analysis).

Telling ghost stories

The Devil's Backbone is also a horror movie or, more specifically, a ghost story but this is set in 1939 toward the end of the Civil War, when Franco's Nationalists were about to be victorious over the Republicans. The setting is also an orphanage, full of children of left-wing Republicans; in the middle of its courtyard a massive unexploded bomb sticks up as a reminder of the conflict. On the day the bomb landed, a boy – Santi – disappeared and it is his ghost that the newly arrived Carlos sees.

The central conflict is between the janitor, Jacinto, and Carmen, the matriarch who runs the institution. Jacinto is desperate to steal Carmen's gold, which she uses to protect the children. He is a Nationalist whilst his rival for Carmen's affections, Dr Casares, is a Republican. Their political sympathies are signified, in part, by the music they listen to:

> the conflict between brutal Spaniard Jacinto … and kindly Casares … is played out through their choice of music: the traditional Spanish songs of Imperio Argentina (Spanish collaborator with the Nazis) or the tangos of Argentine national hero Carlos Gardel[1].
>
> Smith, 2001

The orphanage becomes a microcosm of the Civil War, and the civilised values of the left-wingers are contrasted with the craven greed of those on the right. Unsurprisingly it is the mystery of Santi's death, which Carlos uncovers, that encapsulates the film's message. Unless the audience has some knowledge of the Spanish Civil War, these references will not be understood anymore than in *The Orphanage* – although the

Belen Rueda in *El Orfanato*, d. Juan Antonio Bayona, 2007 Credit: [Warner Bros Pictures Espana/The Kobal Collection

The Devil's Backbone d. Guillermo Del Toro, 2001 Credit: Canal+Espana / The Kobal Collection

GUILLERMO DEL TORO
PRESENTS

BELÉN RUEDA

THE
ORPHANAGE

A J.A. BAYONA FILM

films can still be enjoyed as genre pieces. *The Devil's Backbone* is also a melodrama in its use of emblems (the embalmed foetuses; the unexploded bomb; the ghost in the cellar and so on) and in its emphasis on music

In *The Orphanage* the children's home becomes a symbol of a buried past, a gothic building that would better be left alone with its secrets. In contrast, in *The Devil's Backbone* it is a sanctuary, literally in the middle of nowhere, for its displaced and parentless children. As in del Toro's later film, *Pan's Labyrinth*, the fascist character is obsessed with his dead father, emphasising the hysterically patriarchal nature of fascism. In *Pan's Labyrinth* Ofelia uses fantasy to escape from a world where the last pockets of resistance to the Nationalists are being wiped out in 1944. In *The Devil's Backbone* the horror of the ghost story reveals the desperate truth about Spain's future; as Santi says, 'Children will die'.

Child's-eye view: The Spirit of the Beehive

The focus on **children being able to see ghosts** is a common trope of the genre. Their presumed innocence enables them to embrace the irrational. For children, also, good and evil are relatively simple concepts and they were also central figures in a film, set a year after *The Devil's Backbone,* but made whilst Franco's regime was still running the country: *The Spirit of the Beehive.* Although it is not a genre movie, it does evoke horror in its use of the classic 1931 *Frankenstein* at the start of the film. Seven-year-old Ana wonders why the villagers killed the monster in the film; her elder sister explains that the monster isn't dead but lives in an abandoned farmhouse outside the village. Unable to tell the difference between reality and film, Ana seeks out the monster and finds a fugitive Republican. But, like the monster, he is killed.

It's difficult to do justice

to such a complex film in a brief article. The title refers to Ana's father's investigations into the society of bees and their house itself has hive-shaped glass in its windows as if it is a microcosm of Spanish society:

> [in the] observations of the beehive … [we] recognise a keen philosophical metaphor for the human condition … The dulling of the bees with smoke therefore suggests an analogy with the suppression of free thought and will by means of intimidation and the propaganda of the dictatorship.
>
> Stone, 2002

If **Victor Erice**, who both wrote and directed the film, had openly criticised Franco's regime then the film could never have been made. Indeed the film opens with the title, 'Once upon a time …' suggesting that it is a fairy-tale and so shouldn't be taken seriously. A key moment in the film takes place in a classroom, where a child recites a grim poem about oppression. Tellingly, the girl looks directly into the camera as if addressing the audience.

Fear and resistance

People allow themselves to be oppressed if they are afraid. **Adam Curtis**, in his brilliant trilogy of BBC documentaries *The Power of Nightmares* (2004), argues that the 'war on terror' is designed to make us feel afraid and so justify governments putting into place anti-democratic policies that consolidate their power, with the excuse that they are necessary to protect us. Overcoming oppression is, in a deadly fashion, dramatised in *The Devil's Backbone* when Jacinto's estranged girlfriend, Conchita, tells

him that she is no longer afraid of him and will not apologise for helping the children; he mercilessly stabs her because he feels she's made him look a fool in front of his companions. Fascism can only succeed if people are afraid to challenge its power; Conchita dies a free woman because she refused to bow to tyranny.

It remains to be seen what effect 'digging up the past', will have upon contemporary Spain. However, the messages of both *The Devil's Backbone* and *The Spirit of the Beehive* continue to resonate in very different places, and times, to Spain of the Civil War years. Whilst the former **'disguised' its message as entertainment**, the latter buried what it wanted to say in **metaphor**.

It's worth remembering that political sub-texts are not restricted to European or independent

cinema. Hollywood films, too, can 'hide' a serious message in the sub-text of an entertaining film. *The Dark Knight's* (2008) 'stand-off' between two ferries was surely being critical of United State's policy of pre-emptive (that is, 'getting your retaliation in first') action, as too was the disturbing torture scene with its echoes of what's happening in Iraq. And del Toro's *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* (2008) makes a plea for 'freaks' everywhere to be treated as normal.

Nick Lacey is Head of Media Studies at Benton Park School Technology College, Leeds.

Follow it up

Sara J Brennels (2008): 'The Orphanage' http://www.flakmag.com/film/orphanage.html, accessed August 2008

Paul Julian Smith (2001) 'The ghost of the civil dead' *Sight and Sound*, December, http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/review/1904, accessed September 2008

Rob Stone (2002): *Spanish Cinema*, Pearson Education Ltd

[1]Tangos originated from working class communities, 'barrios', and so are associated with left-wing politics.

IS NOTHING SHOCKING?

the rules of attraction (2002) and united 93 (2006)

Whether you're an AS Film student thinking about the ways audiences respond emotionally to popular film, an A2 Film student currently tackling the Shocking Cinema option for FS6, or simply interested in films which 'push the boundaries', you'll be dealing with films with shock factor. Here, **Wayne O'Brien** suggests two very different case studies which might help you to get a handle on the aspects of film form and content which create powerful responses.

Ian Somerhalder in *The Rules of Attraction*, d. Roger Avary, 2002 Credit: Kingsgate Films/The Kobal Collection/Alston, Lynn

Images from *United 93* courtesy of image.net
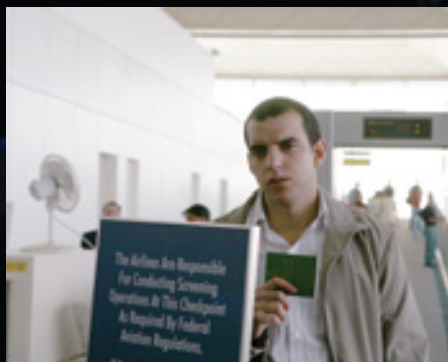
What is 'Shocking Cinema'?

One of the more popular topics for the A2 Film Studies is that of **Shocking Cinema**. At first, it might seem quite straightforward to give examples of what could be considered Shocking Cinema. However, the more you think, the harder it becomes. Is *The Dark Knight* (2008) an example of Shocking Cinema because it dares to work through some serious issues in a genre not seen as being serious – namely, the action-adventure? Not many summer blockbusters deal with heavyweight contemporary issues about when it's right or wrong to use violence to achieve your goals, or about the rights and wrongs of Extraordinary Rendition (the practice of kidnapping suspected terrorists and flying them around the world for questioning and interrogation), something which has been an integral part of George W Bush's so-called war on terror. *The Dark Knight* (2008) dares to tackle these issues – but does this make it a shocking film? Maybe, maybe not – depending on what your expectations of what an action-adventure could and should deliver to its audience.

The term Shocking Cinema very often gets applied to films which feature graphic sex, violence or a combination of the two. The history of cinema is littered with examples of films that have shocked censors, critics and audiences because of their representations of sex and violence – *The Public Enemy* (1931), *Psycho* (1960), *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *The Evil Dead* (1982) and *Trainspotting* (1996) to name but a few from decades gone by.

Defining shock

The first thing to consider is what the word 'shocking' actually means. *The Collins English Dictionary* defines shocking as **'causing shock, horror, or disgust'**. This does not help a lot. So what's the meaning of the word 'shock'? The dictionary offers a variety of definitions, but one particularly stands out in the context of cinema. Shock is:

> something that causes a sudden and violent disturbance in the emotions.

This definition can provide a fruitful starting point for investigating Shocking Cinema. From here we can explore how Roger Avary's *The Rules of Attraction* and Paul Greengrass's *United 93* can be seen as wildly different examples of Shocking Cinema.

Form and content

In analysing any moving-image media, whether film, TV, or videogames, a number of aspects demand attention. It is worth remembering that analysing a film is about looking at both **form** (genre, narrative, camera, editing, performance, sound) and **content** (messages and values). To return to the example of *The Dark Knight,* it's possible to analyse the **content** and argue that it is a shocking film in terms of the issues listed above; it is equally possible to look at the **form** and argue just as convincingly that this is a conventional Hollywood film: clear hero and villain, a narrative structure which can be readily applied to a number of theoretical models such as **Todorov's** equilibrium/disruption/new equilibrium

and **Vogler's** 12-step 'Hero's Journey' model. Perhaps to really convince someone that a film is genuinely shocking, it might be fair to say that it needs to **use both form and content to cause 'a sudden and violent disturbance in the emotions'**. Arguably, both *The Rules of Attraction* (2002) and *United 93* (2006) do exactly this.

Genre and audience

These are very different kinds of films. *The Rules of Attraction* is a fiction film, a **teen movie** adapted from the novel of the same name by the author **Brett Easton Ellis** – who also wrote the (in)famous *American Psycho*. It explores the lives of a group of white, middle class Americans at university. *United 93* is a non-fiction film based on the experiences of the people who were onboard the United Airlines aeroplane which crashed in a field in Pennsylvania on September 11th 2001 rather than hitting its target of the White House. This film belongs to the **docu-drama genre** similar in nature to the director **Paul Greengrass's** earlier film *Bloody Sunday* (2002).

Films of different genres are most likely to be geared towards different target audiences and different modes of exhibition. Neither of these films make for conventional multiplex fare – they are not easy to watch, and the 'pleasures' they offer the viewer are not the same kind of pleasures to be found in watching something like *Indiana Jones and the Crystal Skull*, for example.

So, how and why can these films be considered examples of Shocking Cinema?

The Rules of Attraction (2002)

The film follows the lives of a small group of white middle-class American youths through part of their time at university. It features star-crossed lovers, popular people, unpopular people, heterosexual people and homosexual people; the narrative is structured around a series of parties that are held throughout the course of the academic year. Summarising it in this way, it could be *Romeo and Juliet*, it could be *Pride and Prejudice*, it could be *American Pie*. What separates this film from others in the genre is through the way **film form** is used to tell the story and also because of the **content** of the film, which certainly pushes at the boundaries of what is socially acceptable in a teen movie.

Whilst the narrative shape of the conventional Hollywood film closely adheres to Todorov's 3-act structure, film students of the 21st century are also well accustomed to seeing films which work in a **non-linear structure**, where the start of the film is the end of the story. *The Usual Suspects* (1995) and *Memento* (2001) are fine examples of this type of storytelling on film. However, *The Rules of Attraction* dares to go in a different direction. Not only does the film start at the end of the story, the action of the film moves backwards and forward in front of your eyes – people move backwards, talk backwards, dead leaves rise from the floor back onto trees and bloom into life once more. Working in this way, we are fully 15 minutes into the film before we get the conventional scene-setting opening elements of a teen movie – with shots introducing the key characters, the university campus, and an 80s soundtrack heavily influenced by British 'indie' bands.

In the preceding 15 minutes the viewer has been thrown in at the deep end, and fleetingly introduced to some major and minor characters. The opening of the film is set at 'The Edge of the World Party' which features the usual student party goings-on – people drinking, dancing, and flirting. It is in this opening scene that

a controversial rape scene occurs. A female character, Lauren, finds herself coming back to consciousness after passing out on someone's bed. As she does so she realises that she is having sex – given that she had passed out, it would have been impossible for her to give her consent to sex, making the act one of rape. However, rather than physically fighting back against her assailant she submits, and drifts into a dreamland until the male raping her throws up, presumably through over-consumption of alcohol. Even worse, the whole episode is being filmed by someone Lauren considered a friend.

When exploring Shocking Cinema, there is plenty to consider in this scene alone. How is the audience supposed to interpret what they are presented with? Is this a sexist, misogynist film which downplays the horrors of rape? What is the more shocking act – the rape itself, Lauren's apparent acceptance of it, the fact that it's being filmed, or the 'jock' being sick on Lauren? What do our answers to these questions tell us about ourselves and our own beliefs and attitudes? The working out of answers to these questions is the business of film students at A Level and beyond. These events all occur within the first few minutes! What can happen next?

Not content to confuse the audience with the unusual narrative technique of rolling the action backwards, forwards and back again, the director **Roger Avary** also uses the 'split screen' style which is a hallmark of landmark film director **Brian de Palma** (*Redacted*, *Carrie*, *The Untouchables*, *Carlito's Way*, *The Black Dahlia*) to surprise the audience, tell the story economically and do so in a way that the overwhelming majority of film directors don't dare to – or don't know how. The variety of stylistic flourishes works to keep the spectator off-balance and unsure of what to expect next – *that* is Shocking Cinema.

Another key shocking sequence is set in and around 'The Dress to Get Screwed Party'. The manner in which some of the characters are dressed is only a small dimension in what makes this an example of Shocking Cinema. During this party, the central character, Sean Bateman (in a nice postmodern, intertextual touch, the cousin of Patrick Bateman from the novel and film *American Psycho*) goes off with a girl and leaves a secret admirer reeling. This secret admirer, whose name is not revealed, takes this setback very hard, going back to her halls of residence and committing suicide in a scene which once seen will not easily be forgotten.

If this scene were not shocking enough, Sean Bateman then enacts a 'pretend' suicide in order to get Lauren's attention. This scene, coming straight after the real suicide scene, works as a form of 'gallows humour'; but of course, should you laugh you'll then need to ask yourself the question: precisely what is funny about someone pretending to kill himself …? These are simply a few examples from a film packed full of shocking moments – both in terms of form and content.

United 93 (2006)

The heightened fantasy of *The Rules of Attraction* is far removed from the in-your-face intimacy of *United 93*. Where the former offers

the spectator a world inhabited by characters who are so self-absorbed that they cannot remember names and faces even of friends, *United 93* offers us a glimpse into a different world where we are able to observe the intimate minutiae of peoples lives – hearing about one of the stewardesses who has 'a crush on the maintenance man', about how the pilot is planning on taking his wife to London for their wedding anniversary. The intimacy offered by the script, the performances of the actors and the filming style go on to offer an example of Shocking Cinema unlike many others.

Much of the shock value of this film derives from the audience's foreknowledge of the outcome – that none of the people we see represented in the film made it alive off flight United 93. This knowledge lends a touch of pathos to the details we see – terrorists and passengers sitting side-by-side in the airport terminal – at this point there is no division between them, we see a passenger make a last minute rush to get onboard the doomed aeroplane – the kind of ordinary details which we might see at any airport, but we know that the vast majority of flights don't end in the way that flight United 93 did.

In the hands of another director, *United 93* would have been a more gung-ho action film than Paul Greengrass's vision. Whilst the film is titled *United 93*, this film is not just about that plane – it is also an attempt to tell part of **the wider story of 9/11**. The film does this by taking the audience into the air traffic control centres and the military base where the unfolding disaster was being watched but where the staff was mostly powerless to meaningfully intervene. This enables the film to recreate the sense of chaos and panic that was pervasive on September 11th 2001; and through the incorporation of news footage into the film we get to see once again the images of the planes smashing into the twin towers of the World Trade Center.

The film cuts from scene to scene at breathless pace, simultaneously setting the context for the actions of the crew and passengers of flight United 93, and ratcheting up the drama and tension for the audience by making us wait longer for the fight-back against the hijackers to occur. Indeed, the film does not rush to the point where the plane is hijacked – this event only happens 58 minutes into the film. Even though we have been able mentally to prepare ourselves for the hijack through the detailed contextual

foundation work, the killings of the pilots with knives and bare hands is brutal and offers a 'shocking' reminder of the fragility of the human body.

With the inexorable build-up to the passengers' failed bid to recapture the plane, some of the most poignant and shocking moments in the film are revealed. Through well focussed and economical use of cinematography and editing, the spectator gets to witness the last messages of many of the plane's passengers and crew – the agonising phone calls to loved ones. In these moments, **film form** is used to very good effect to tell a powerful story in a very human way. With the huge loss of life that day it is too easy to forget about the individuals involved. Through the way the narrative is progressed and through the ways in which film form is used, this film brings these details into startling focus.

Perhaps what is most shocking of all in this film is how close the passengers seem to have got to achieving their goal to recapture the plane from the terrorists. Just at the point where the passengers have managed to fight off the terrorists and get a pilot into the cabin to fly the plane, the end comes, swiftly, without pyrotechnics. Unlike the crash that opens the first episode of *Lost*, there is no ball of fire and plane debris flying around – just a **simple cut to black** at the moment that the plane hits the ground.

The shock of form and content

If 'shock' means 'something that causes a sudden and violent disturbance in the emotions' then these two films are most definitely fine examples of Shocking Cinema, and much more than that – radical, powerful films that dare to be different to the Hollywood norm.

Wayne O'Brien is Director of Learning for Media & Film Studies at Smestow School, Wolverhampton. He is co-author of *Studying Videogames* (Auteur, 2008) and an experienced teacher and examiner of Film and Media Studies.

score!

football on film

Football – national obsession, beautiful game, opium of the people – Media Studies text …?
Mark Ramey argues that sport in general, and football in particular, has long been undervalued in academic Media Studies analysis – and explains how a football movie can illuminate debates and issues about representation, ideology and national identity.

Images courtesy of image.net and BFI Archive

Pre-match warm up

Sport is a universal, globally-mediated activity – as demonstrated by the coverage of the 2008 Olympics in China; and yet it is remarkable that so little academic time is spent **theorising sport and its relationship with the mass media**. Many AS and A2 Media and Film Studies text books, for example, betray their own ideological constructions all too easily with their well-trodden examinations of such genres as film noir and soaps; but rarely do they delve into the world of sport, which is too often relegated to the metaphorical and literal back pages. This article therefore intends to challenge the notion that sport belongs on the periphery of most Media and Film courses. My argument is that football films are as worthy of study as the latest police drama or Levi's ad campaign.

First half

Why is sport, and in particular football, so derided by the academic community? I believe it is in part because the educated, aspirational classes tend to look down on the pursuit of sport as something merely recreational. Ironically, this is a species of the same prejudice that has persistently plagued the study of the media and film – the distinction between high and low culture. Sport on this continuum is either a leisurely hobby for the cultured, or a means of entertainment by which the working classes can literally or metaphorically escape the ghetto. Even the study of soaps, sitcoms and advertising yields greater intellectual insights given that they emerge from an aesthetic and creative source. Sport on the other hand is physical; it is of the body.

At this point it is worth remembering that **Roland Barthes**, founding father of the discipline of **semiotic analysis**, explored boxing and wrestling along with his better known analyses of advertising and clothing. ('The World of Wrestling', *Mythologies*, 1972)

There are however more potent reasons for academic indifference to sport, and in particular football: the existence of three theoretical strains in contemporary Media and Film Studies – **Marxism, feminism and postmodernism**.

Football and the -isms

For **Marxist** theorists football can be read as a new religion (a new opium for the people) in an otherwise secular age. **The corporate football industry is a perfect example of capitalism run amok.** Football normalises the idea of economic competition and diverts the attention of the workers from their struggle with the bourgeoisie – who of course run the clubs and administer the game. A football fan is living in a 'false state of consciousness' – unaware of her historical purpose to turn off the capitalist machine.

A **feminist** may argue that **football reinforces male values at the expense of female identity and female access to the sport.** Football's yob culture is an example of unreconstructed men fearfully turning their back on the New Man. Football in this reading is the last resting place of outmoded sexism. Even the representations of female sports stars are sexualised, thus emphasising traditional, male-approved stereotypes of what women should be.

Finally there are the **postmodernists** who **mock**

flag-waving and badge-wearing fans as relics of the nationalistic past. The whole mediated enterprise of football coverage is handicapped by outmoded notions of results and league tables. Football – and indeed sport in general – is just too earnest and too old-fashioned for most postmodernists. Where is the irony?

These **caricatures of theories** are of course absurdly broad, but I have heard them all. My point is that football is, as the above theories suggest, **a complex repository of numerous ideological points of view**. Theory can offer us fascinating insights into the construction and popularity of cultural products and football is no less deserving of that insight. Football's critical place in contemporary UK and global culture needs addressing. Our newspapers are replete with football stories from match reports to celebrity kiss-and-tells; from fixations with the national team's fortunes to the worship of iconic figures like David Beckham. There are football TV shows, dedicated live match channels, radio stations, magazines, computer games, web-based news sites and adverts. **Football has a huge presence in our media industries** and it is with this in mind that I now focus on one of the most interesting football films of recent years.

Second half

Mike Bassett: England Manager (UK 2001 Steve Barron)

Mike Bassett: England Manager, concerns the rise, fall and rise again of the eponymous Mike Bassett. Mike is an 'old school' manager who has little tactical sense and each week writes his team out on the back of a cigarette packet. This particular foible leads to the hilarious accidental selection of two overweight and untalented players from the lower divisions, 'Benson' and 'Hedges'!

Mike is selected for the post of England manager by the Football Association because no other suitable candidate is available; the FA is here ruthlessly parodied as an out-of-touch, waspish clique from a patrician era. Mike is a forthright, passionate man, from working-class stock and although clearly out of his depth he is determined to do his best. Needless to say, he selects a team of staff and players consisting of has-beens, yes-men, psychopaths, egotists and party animals to represent the nation (or are they representative of a nation?) in a series of crunch matches which sees England progress to the World Cup Finals in Brazil. In Brazil the team performs disastrously and when Mike is photographed drunk and semi-naked dancing in a hotel bar, outraged journalists demand his resignation. Unrepentant, Mike goes on to win a famous victory over the old enemy Argentina, involving a scene which parodies Maradona's infamous 'hand of God' goal in the 1986 World Cup finals. This victory leads to a semi-final clash with the host nation Brazil, which Brazil win. However, national pride is restored and Mike and the team return to England heroes.

The film is a **postmodern comedy** ironically adopting the form of a **mockumentary**, and anchoring its **sense of realism** through the casting of some real media and football celebrities. There is even a short role for the world's greatest ever player, Pelé!

Mike's character is a homage to the old football world of fags, booze and oranges at half time. He is an incongruous figure of fun, hapless but good natured. He signifies the contemporary neo-middle-class Englishman, inadequately battling with his unreconstructed male demons and the rapidly changing world around him. Bassett is the stereotypical Englishman of old: bumbling, self-deprecating, loyal, honest, a pragmatist wary of new ideas, a fighter. He is clearly a conventional representation: a nostalgic figure of fun for a postmodern age where such identities are to be gently mocked.

One scene defines this shift towards a postmodern sensibility. In a fit of despair as his team, his career and his marriage nears collapse, Mike is persuaded by a player to have a drink to cheer himself up. The next scene shows Mike and the entire squad roaring drunk. Here is the drinking culture that in some sense characterizes one aspect of our own national identity. As Mike strips and dances on top of the bar we cut to the real Pelé approaching the bar. Pelé is urbane and charming and pulls up short when he sees the scene before him. 'Oh no, it's the English,' he says, in escaping to a barrage of abuse from Bassett, who has recognised him. Here we have represented a delight in our own infantilism and a lamentable sense of superiority over our more sophisticated foreign peers. As John Williams notes:

The pitfalls facing each new England manager and his hapless squad seem to have been read by the press as a tale of nothing less than the failing state of the English nation itself. Not far below the surface in these media accounts is often an implicit racism or imperialism …

English racial superiority is lampooned in this film for although we enjoy Bassett's ludicrous behaviour we recognise that Pelé holds the moral high ground. In laughing at ourselves, we sugar the pill of change. Mike Bassett is a cultural dinosaur, a remnant of the industrial age, trying to come to terms with a world of cappuccinos and computers.

One final aspect of the film that is of note is the **very un-Hollywood approach to the narrative**. The English team do not win the World Cup, and apart from the fluked win against Argentina and a face saving exit to Brazil, they are woeful. What does this tell us about the English nation? It shows that we are able to produce relatively mainstream products that are imbued with an **ironic awareness of social change**. We know that we no longer rule the world; we know that foreign footballers tend to be more cultured and more likely to win the World Cup. And yet we seem to **rejoice** in our status as **underdog**.

Football films are therefore a genre of texts which can reveal deep issues and debates. They are also useful, as I have tried to suggest, in revealing the fissures and assumptions inherent in the conceptual foundations of both Film and Media Studies.

Mark Ramey teaches Media Studies at Collyer's College, Horsham, West Sussex.

Follow it up

Six great football film texts

Goal (Danny Canon, UK, 2005) and *Goal 2* (Jaume Collet-Serra, UK, 2007): Rags-to-riches tale of a poor Mexican player becoming a star firstly at Newcastle United and then for the sequel at Real Madrid.

Zidane (Douglas Gordon & Philip Parreno, UK, 2006)
A real time documentation using multiple cameras of one game in Zinedine Zidane's glittering career.

Bend it Like Beckham (Gurinder Chadha, UK, 2002)
A British born Indian girl battles the prejudices and expectations of her family and her male friends to secure a playing contract in the USA.

Shaolin Soccer (Stephen Chow, HK, 2004)
A kung-fu hybrid.

Football Factory (Nick Love, UK 2004)
Danny Dyer and his life as a Chelsea hooligan.

Green Street (Lexi Alexander, UK, 2005)
An American student visits London based relatives and gets sucked into the addictive tribalism and violence of West Ham hooligans.

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THE SECOND COMING OF

MONTY PYTHON'S

LIFE OF BRIAN

MONTY PYTHON'S 'LIFE OF BRIAN'

Written by & Starring GRAHAM CHAPMAN   JOHN CLEESE   TERRY GILLIAM   ERIC IDLE   TERRY JONES   MICHAEL PALIN

Executive GEORGE HARRISON · DENIS O'BRIEN   Produced by JOHN GOLDSTONE   Designed by TERRY GILLIAM   Directed by TERRY JONES

THE GOSPELS ACCORDING TO MEL, TREVOR, BRUCE AND BILBO

representations of Christianity in film

Since its birth, cinema has plundered literature for its narratives, and no book has proved more inspiring than the Good Book itself – the Bible. **Tom Brownlee** explores the features, appeals and history of films about aspects of Christianity, from Old Testament epics to a more recent representation of Christian values, *Pay it Forward*.

What do you associate with Christians and Christianity? Kindness? Devotion? Prayer? Stuffy churches? Christmas presents? Long sermons? Christ on the cross? The likelihood is that much of your view of Christianity is likely to be influenced by **media representations** in the press, film and the broadcast media rather than Sunday school. Like most of their audience, characters in British soaps visit church solely for weddings or funerals – either their own or someone else's. The few souls who worship more often are routinely stereotyped as elderly spinsters or widows: unfashionable, out of touch and rather sanctimonious – witness the aptly named *Coronation Street* stalwart, Emily Bishop, or her *Emmerdale* and *EastEnders* equivalents, Edna Birch and Dot Cotton. However, it could be argued that these dramas are a throwback to medieval Christian theatre in that they perform the function of **modern day morality** tales in which **the sins of arrogance, lust or infidelity result in exposure and punishment**. One of the narrative pleasures for audiences from this and similar genres is the sure knowledge that **criminals and adulterers will eventually get**
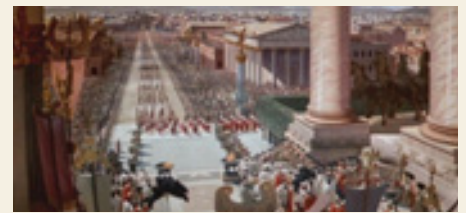
their comeuppance. Beyond that, however, Christians appear to have been marginalised, their faith appearing as something comic, pathetic or possibly even sinister. While it is a fact that congregations have been shrinking and the church plays a reduced role in many areas of public life, it is curious that the beliefs and values of many millions of people today are represented in such limited ways on British TV. Once a bulwark of cultural and social life, Christian worship on the box, for example, seems to have been reduced to little more than half an hour of hymn singing on a Sunday tea time.

In film, however, we see a far greater and more interesting engagement with Christianity, with writers and directors drawing upon the rich heritage and symbolism of the world's largest faith. Christian, or at least religious, themes have been integral to the success of the *Potter* franchise, the *Rings* trilogy and *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, while the comedies *Bruce Almighty* and its follow up, *Evan Almighty*, have worked with ideas drawn from the Bible.

By applying the five typical elements of genre analysis – **Narrative, Iconography, Character, Settings and Themes (NICST)**, one can see that the stories in the Good Book continue to pay dividends for producers and directors.

The five 'typicals' of the religious genre

Narratives: Jesus was a storyteller who imparted his teachings through the **parables – stories which have a religious or moral message attached to them**. The best-known examples include the parables of both the Good Samaritan and of the Prodigal Son. Another famous narrative is that of **the Exodus** or the mass migration of the Hebrew slaves, led by Moses, as they escaped from their slavery under

the Pharaohs, eventually to reach the 'promised land'.

Iconography: The term itself derives from the depiction of key figures in Christianity such as the Virgin Mary and the saints in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions, and has since been used to describe **visual and sound motifs or signifiers** in film and television. The story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden in the Book of Genesis, for example, is rich with imagery, including the apple from the Tree of Knowledge and the serpent who tempted Eve into eating from the forbidden fruit. Holy Week, which includes the Last Supper (bread and wine) through to Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection, also supplies us with a repertoire of powerful images and rituals.

Character and character types: God versus the devil, angels, Jesus ('Christ-like'), Judas (the ultimate betrayer), disciples and the prophets all appear in historical and contemporary cinema.

Arguably, the Bible is the source of an **enduring and limiting representation of women**: the virgin/whore dichotomy or ideology, with the two Marys, Jesus's mother and Mary Magdalene, occupying either of the binary oppositions. In *Halloween* (1978) the 'good girl', Laurie Strode, played by Jamie Lee Curtis, survives, while the girls who sin by having sex are murdered – punished – by Mike Myers. This morality tale has resurfaced more recently in the surveillance horror, *My Little Eye* (2002).

Settings: including Heaven and Hell, which feature throughout the first two *Lord of the Rings* stories, the desert, churches and shrines. Interestingly, for example, the collapse of the British establishment in the dystopian sci-fi horror, *28 Days Later* (2004) is symbolised by the revelation that the church offers no sanctuary from marauding rage-filled zombies. In the past, the mere brandishing of a crucifix in a Hammer

Horror was enough to destroy Dracula.

Themes: temptation and corruption (the Garden of Eden story); the punishment of sinners; forgiveness and reconciliation; sacrifice; doing good to your fellow man (the parable of the Good Samaritan), are just a few of the central themes from the Bible which continue to inform recent movies such as *Pay it Forward* (2002).

Biblical epics: the greatest stories ever told

The biblical epics of the 1950s and 60s represent the high water mark of the genre with classics such as *Samson and Delilah* (1949), *The Robe* (1953), *The Ten Commandments* (1956), *Ben Hur* (1959), and *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1964) being some of the best known examples. Filmed using a mixture of Hollywood studio backlots and cheaper, slightly more realistic overseas locations in Spain and France, these two- and three-hour movies came into being due to a variety of interconnected factors.

The arrival of mass TV ownership by the mid-1950s threatened to end the 'Golden Age' of Hollywood cinema. In response, the studios and exhibitors (the cinema chains, which were often owned by the former in a form of vertical integration) developed **Technicolour, Vistavision, Widescreen and Surroundsound** to enhance and emphasise the superiority of the cinematic experience over the small box in the corner of the living room, with its poor sound, monochromatic pictures and absence of 'stars'. **Spectacle** was in, and biblical stories had plenty of larger than life characters, set pieces and themes to satisfy the need. The framing devices, use of long shots, heavenly choirs and mise-en-
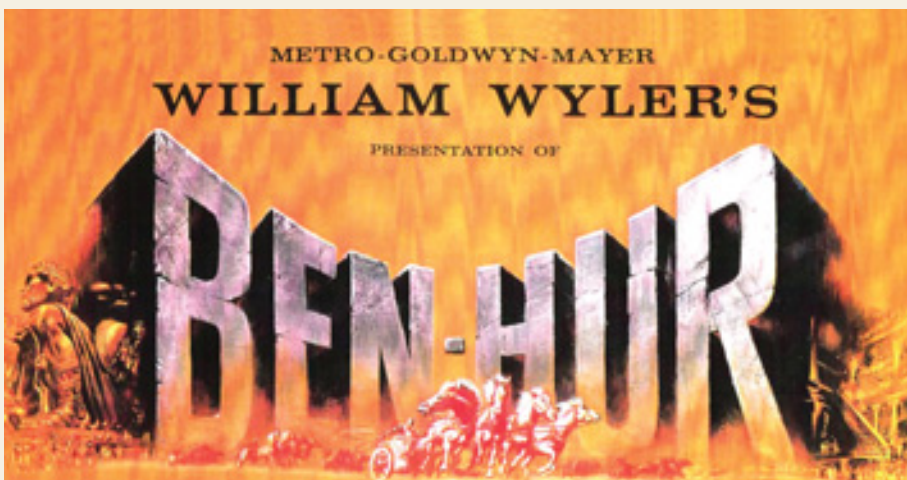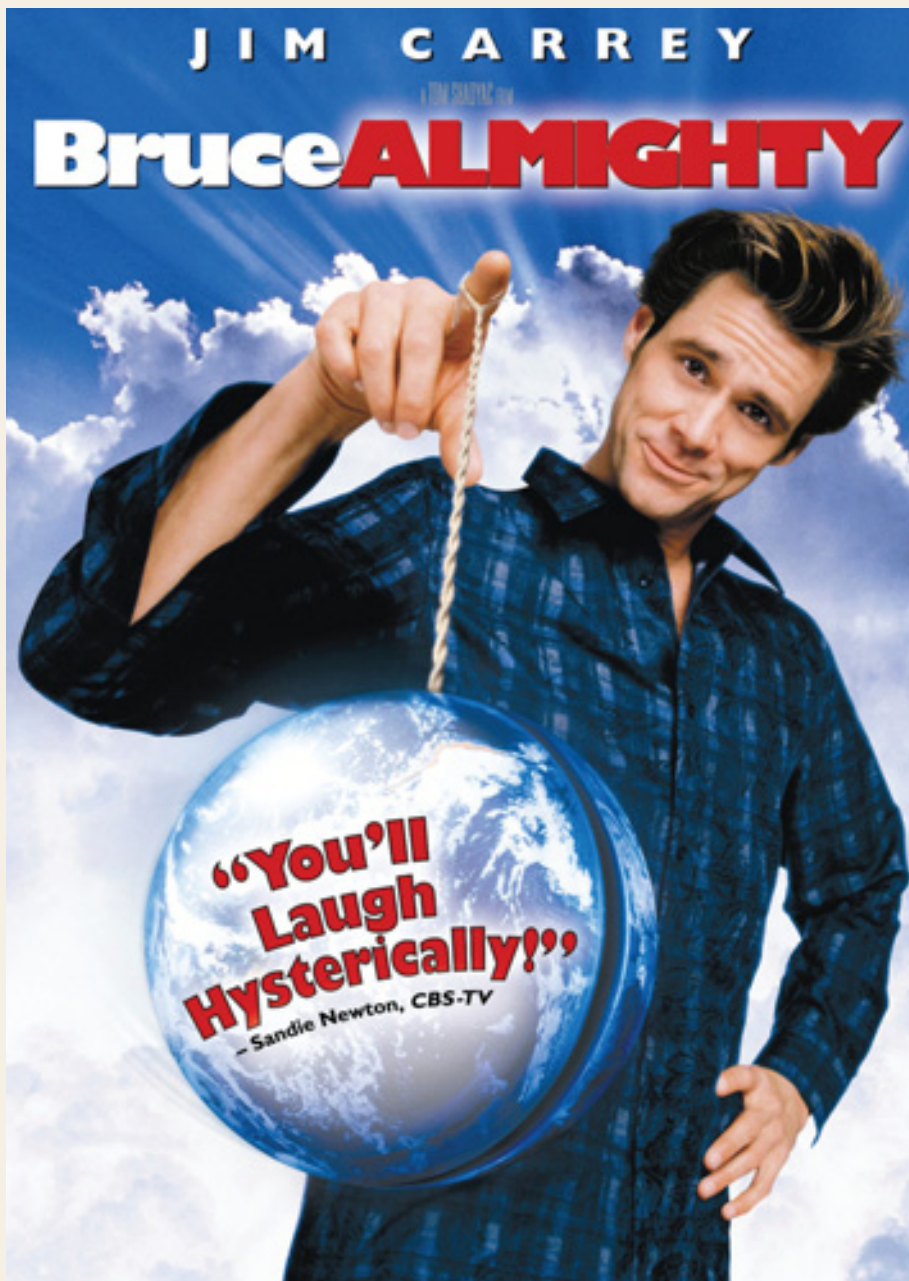
Biblical cowboys and action heroes

The stories and locations lent themselves to a broad canvas – offering similar reasons to the appeal of the Western. In many ways the myth of Exodus might be compared with the American national mythology of pioneering wagon-training families opening up and 'civilising' the American West. After all, **the 1950s also represented the high point of the Western film genre**, which often celebrated the struggles of pioneers heading across the desert to claim their own 'promised land'. Indeed, Americans were brought up to believe that it was their 'manifest destiny' to make the continent their own.

Masculinity and the star system: Hollywood hunks such as **Charlton Heston** (who played Moses, as above, and Ben Hur) and **Victor Mature** (who played Samson), were two standard-bearers representing a typical all-American hero. They offered an officially-approved version of post-war masculinity which male audiences in particular responded to. Old Testament heroes were represented primarily as men of action – Moses, after all, kills an Egyptian slave owner before leading his people in rebellion and freedom. In Heston's portrayal, he is a virile, powerful general in the mould of a Patton or a President Eisenhower. **Richard Dyer's** book *Heavenly Bodies* on the Hollywood stars of this era, such as John Wayne and Judy Garland, coupled with his later studies of the male gaze, are particularly relevant to the study of these movies.

The business of Hollywood is business. Religious epics built on or, rather, exploited proven past success. Since producers then, as today, wanted to minimise risk and maximise

scène of these ancient costume dramas speak majesty and aura.

The studio system was capable of meeting the production and marketing costs of productions on this scale, though it was the huge cost overruns of *Cleopatra* (1960) which spelt the demise of the first generation of cinema epics. Disasters, special effects (parting Red Seas!), casts of thousands, large scale battles, and other elements of the biblical stories could be underwritten by the Hollywood producers and their financiers. Again, like Peter Jackson's adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, they believed they had the financial muscle and technical wherewithal to film the previously 'unfilmable' stories of the miraculous.

Many film bosses controlling the studios, such as **Zukor** and **the Warner brothers**, came from an East European Jewish background. Since Jews and Christians substantially share the stories of Genesis, Abraham and Moses in their sacred scriptures, it is highly likely that they would be particularly favourably disposed to the depiction of Old Testament stories and characters.

Cold War context

The wider context of the Cold War (paralleling the so-called War on Terror today) played a significant part in the rise of this genre. In the United States the Cold War was often presented as **a battle of ideologies between atheistic communism and the Christian West**. Average church attendance was (and still is) much higher in the US than in western Europe and the UK. Interestingly, in these films there is **a concentration on the 'hawks' of the Old Testament rather than the 'doves' of the New**. This again chimed with Cold War attitudes and a newly interventionist US foreign policy, which saw it fighting wars against communism in Korea and later in Vietnam. *The Ten Commandments* (1956, DeMille), starring **Charlton Heston**, biblical epic stalwart and future president of the National Rifle Association, as Moses and the East European-born actor **Yul Bryner** as the cruel and despotic Pharaoh, Rameses, offers a direct Cold War analogy.

profit, they tended to recycle popular genres, attempt sequels and create franchises or series until that seam of success was played out. The established popularity of previous biblical epics coupled with the importance of the Bible in the West (even now the world's greatest selling publication) encouraged the making of more films of this type. In this respect, the Bible, like the *Potter* series, indicated a pre-sold audience who would have had an appetite to see a screen version of their favourite book.

Changing values

However, by the mid-1960s, the audience's (and hence the producers') appetites for the Western and the religious epic went into abeyance. Since then, films referring to or exploring Christianity have tended to be either less overtly religious or often allegorical (the *Rings* trilogy and *Chronicles of Narnia*, for example); comic or satirical, for example *The Life of Brian* or *Bruce Almighty*; or, in the case of Zefferelli (*Jesus of Nazareth*), Scorsese (*The*

Last Temptation of Christ), Arcand (*Jesus of Montreal*) and Gibson (*The Passion of the Christ*), a personal vision, the work of an auteur. So while we appear to becoming more secular, a religious sensibility can provide for a fruitful approach to film and media analysis.

A new take on an old theme: *Pay it Forward*

Adapted from a bestselling novel by Catherine Ryan Hyde, *Pay it Forward* (directed by **Mimi Leder**, 2002) is essentially a retelling of the parable of the Good Samaritan in which characters offer random acts of kindness to strangers without the expectation of anything in return. Echoing what Jesus called the 'greatest commandment', 'love your neighbour', the title also scans with the sloganistic 'do the right thing'.

Student Trevor is charged by his new social studies teacher, Mr Simonet (**Kevin Spacey**) to **'Think of an idea to change the world – and put it into action'**. In Proppian terms Simonet is playing the role of Despatcher here by sending

the youngster on his quest. Trevor (**Haley Joel Osment**, better known for his role as a medium in *The Sixth Sense*: 'I see dead people') comes up with an altruistic pyramid scheme in which you do a good deed to three people who each in turn do the same for three others. Thus the kindness virus will spread worldwide.

At first, Trevor's efforts are stymied by the inability of adults to benefit from his efforts: his first victim/recipient, Jerry (Jim Calziel, who went on to play Jesus in *The Passion of the Christ*), backslides into drug abuse. Trevor's alcoholic mum (Helen Hunt) also struggles to cope with her hang-ups. The setting, Las Vegas, is a sort of Sodom and Gomorrah perched on the edge of a desert.

While the first and second acts of the film are concerned with **ethical behaviour** – an extended parable – the fourth and fifth elements of Todorov's narrative structure offer a quasi-**religious resolution**. In their struggle to repair the damage to the equilibrium, the reluctant adults begin to 'pay it forward'. Jerry, the

Ben Hur, The Passion of the Christ, The Ten Commandments, The Life of Brian, Bruce Almighty, including images courtesy of image.net

Kevin Spacey and Haley Joel Osment in Pay It Forward, d. M Leder, 2000 Credit: Bel-Air/Wb/The Kobal Collection/James Dittl

unreformed junkie, seizes the opportunity for redemption when he talks a would-be suicide down from a bridge by telling her that she can 'save' him if she spares herself. Trevor's mum finds it in herself to forgive her estranged and alcoholic mother, a crucial first step in her own salvation from alcoholism. In the climactic scene, which is highly reminiscent of the story of the Good Samaritan, Trevor dives in to protect a younger boy from being bullied by two older gang members. A knife is drawn and Trevor is stabbed: he falls on his knees and then to the ground in a gesture of self sacrifice. He dies of his wound in hospital. It is the ultimate act of paying it forward. To quote from the Bible: 'greater love has no-one one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends' (John 15:12).

Sadly, the message of racial tolerance and equality is somewhat undermined by the filmmaker's depiction of Mexicans as the muggers, a negative stereotype of Hispanics as gang members and criminals. Curiously, until the final shots, these two boys are the only non-whites in a film set in a racially diverse city.

The final scenes see the film move into spiritual overdrive. Back at his mum's house we see Trevor expounding his philosophy in a pre-recorded TV documentary – a sort of posthumous tele-evangelical broadcast. A sound outside prompts Mr Simonet and Trevor's grieving mother to open their front door. There they find hundreds of candle-holding devotees/disciples outside in a silent vigil, thus turning Trevor's house into a shrine. The crowd is suddenly diverse – all ages and races are now evident. In the final shot the camera pulls back into a high angle extreme long shot to reveal the extent of 'the movement's' scale. An ethereal light in the distance hints at

God's presence. The soundtrack reinforces the message provided by the iconography with **Jane Siberry** singing 'Calling All Angels'. Note: all angels, not just Trevor. We are witnesses to the birth of something momentous which we are invited to join.

Pay it Forward had a mixed reception on its release. Dismissed by a number of critics as 'syrupy' and 'sub-Spielbergian' (ouch!), the film has nevertheless engendered a powerful response from its fans. While it doesn't have the cult status of, say, *The Wicker Man* or *A Clockwork Orange,* it has nevertheless spawned **fan activity** beyond that of the average Hollywood release. Spearheaded by the **Pay it Forward Movement/ Foundation**, which was set up by Hyde in 2000, many thousands of people worldwide have engaged in good works under its banner. Google the title and you will find about 9,160,000 results, including examples of organised school projects, **Pay it Forward** assemblies and myriad small acts of kindness to others. Needless to say, the vast majority have taken place in the US, since it is an American movement and connects with the rather more active Christian congregation in that country.

Taking it forward

The ideas in this article maybe be helpful in various aspects of your A Level course. You could investigate one or more of these texts as part of the **WJEC ME1 module**. For **AQA's MEST3**: representations of Christianity, spirituality or Islam in the media could be a discrete topic of study, while the same topic might also offer case studies for **OCR's A2 Critical Perspectives** topic on Media and Collective Identity. Finally, for Film students, comparative critical analyses

of scenes, say, from *The Greatest Story Ever Told* and *The Passion of the Christ* would act as sound preparation for either **FS1 Understanding Film Form**, or **FS2, US Film Comparative Study**.

Tom Brownlee is Head of Media and Religious Education at Richard Hale School, Hertford.

Filmography

The Passion of the Christ (2004)
An addition to Gibson's bloody oeuvre, Jesus's final 12 hours.

The Lord of the Rings Trilogy (2003-2005)
Old Testament prophets battle the devil.

Bruce Almighty and Evan Almighty (2003 and 2007)
'Groundhog Day' meets 'It's a Wonderful Life'.

Chronicles of Narnia: the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (2005)
Christian allegories abound.

The Golden Compass (2007)
Every human character is blessed with a daemon: a talking animal that serves as a voice of reason, a guardian angel, and arguably a soul.

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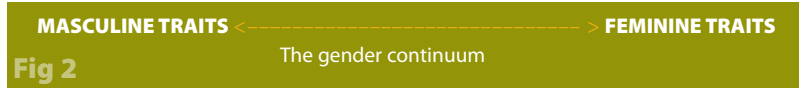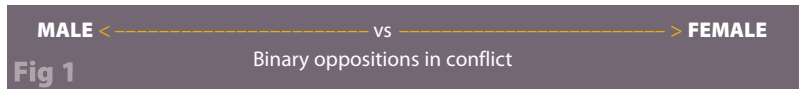
post-feminism in contemporary film

Post-feminism is a term that is often misunderstood and therefore misused. Like feminism, it is hard to define – the theories and ideas that come from this perspective are varied and, at times, contradictory. Here, senior examiner **Steph Hendry** offers you a beginners' guide and applies it to four decades of Bond girls.

Many of you will focus on **representations of gender**, either as part of your media concepts study at AS or as a more detailed and complex case study for A2. This article will offer a basic beginners' guide to this controversial and difficult area. It aims to enable you to understand and apply ideas from feminist and post-feminist theory to the texts you will be studying.

As the term suggests, **post-feminism** focuses on gender issues, specifically in the cultural context since feminism. Feminism brought about many social and political changes. Post-feminism does not assume that this means gender issues are no longer valid. On the contrary, it acknowledges that there are still many areas of interest and concern within gender politics; but it recognises that these issues are very different from the ones faced by gender theorists in the mid-20th century.

MALE < ――――――――――――――――――― vs ――――――――――――――――――― > FEMALE
Fig 1 Binary oppositions in conflict

MASCULINE TRAITS < ――――――――――――――――――― > FEMININE TRAITS
Fig 2 The gender continuum

Gender relationships: the feminist model

Gender is fixed and relates directly to an individual's biological sex. (See Fig. 1)

Even though it sought to change the way people thought about women's position in society, **feminism was based on the idea of binary opposition between the two genders**. As Levi-Strauss tells us in narrative theory, binary oppositions create **conflict**. Feminism can be seen to be a range of ideas that arose from this perceived conflict, focussed on the idea of a **power struggle in society between two opposing groups: masculine and feminine**. As with any power struggle, as one side gains power, the other side must lose it.

Gender relationships: the post-feminist model

Gender is a fluid variable of behaviours which can be performed regardless of the individual's biological sex. (See Fig 2)

Post-feminism sees gender as a set of socially constructed behaviours, attitudes and expectations which have no essential relationship to a person's biological sex – an individual may at any time be more or less masculine or more or less feminine regardless of whether they are male or female. For example, a man crying is no less a man, or an aggressive woman no less a woman. The behaviours are culturally associated with a specific sex; but people are not that simple. Individuals may even choose to 'perform' gender depending on the circumstances they find themselves in.

Some features of post-feminism

- **It does not** assume there are no more gender-based issues or problems to consider.
- **It does not** always agree with feminist arguments, but it does not dismiss feminism as being a 'stupid idea', outmoded, or irrelevant.
- **It does** focus on gender issues in the post-industrial economic age, and is just as likely to consider issues around masculinity as femininity as it sees both sexes being impacted on by gender politics.

There are a number of theorists in this field. In order to help explain some of the key ideas a case study will be used to provide textual analyses using a few of the ideas that come largely from the theorist **Judith Butler.**

An important note about terms
– A person's **sex** relates to being male or female – the biologically assigned category.
– A person's **gender** relates to behaviours which are socially defined as being masculine or feminine.

A (Very) Brief History of Feminist Movements

First Wave Feminism	Late 19th and early 20th century		Reaction to the historical context where women had few legal rights, including the suffragette movement that fought for women's rights to vote. This 'wave' came from a highly patriarchal culture and focussed on legal and political issues for women.
Second Wave Feminism	Mid to late 20th century		Response to a culture where women had incrementally gained more legal and political rights than before, but where attitudes to women and their place in society were still patriarchal. This wave focussed on social and professional issues for women. Second wave feminism took many forms, from those who considered the way women were represented in the mass media (e.g. Mulvey) to more radical feminism where the 'battle of the sexes' was seen to be an ongoing struggle for power in the social, domestic and professional spheres: the 'glass ceiling'.
Third Wave or Post-Feminism	Late 20th and early 21st century		Reaction to a culture which had been changed by feminism, and a broadened approach to consider both genders rather than just one. Economic and social changes in working practices and social organisation are taken into account, and the two genders are seen as being dependent on one another rather than binary oppositions in a state of conflict.
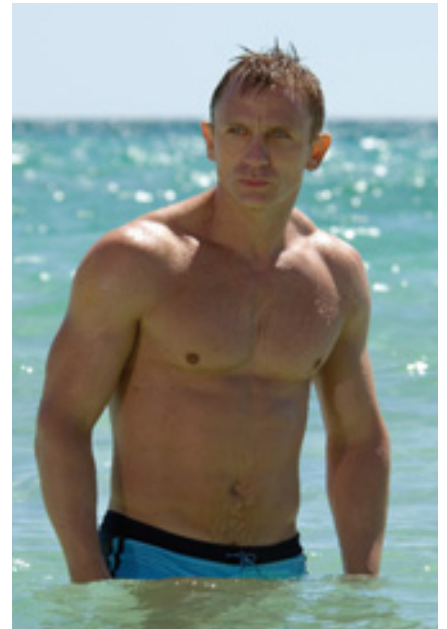
The case of Bond ... James Bond

A commonly learnt feminist theory is **Mulvey's 1970's analysis of the male gaze** (see pp 20-24). Mulvey argues that in film women are objects to be gazed on as **the camera acts as the masculine eye from a male viewpoint** – looking at women in a way that reflects **masculine desires**. Nowhere has this been more apparent than in **the James Bond series**.

The character of Bond represents a number of masculine aspirational fantasies, while the early 'Bond girls' were little more than eye candy for the male viewer. The early Bond women were represented as sex objects and even given names which indicated their limited 'use' within the narrative: Pussy Galore (*Goldfinger*, 1964) and Honey Rider (*Dr No*, 1962) are perhaps the most memorable. In these earlier films, this representation of women reflected the female's place within society at the time. Until the 1970s they were largely excluded from the professional 'masculine' world, there primarily to please the males as decoration or as sexual playthings – their place was in the 'feminine' domestic world.

As the Bond series progressed through the 80s and the 90s, this limited and simplistic representation began to adapt to reflect the **changing roles and status of women in society** resulting from **equal opportunities legislation and the influence of feminism**. A woman was given the role of M in 1995 (*Goldeneye*) and the Bond girls increasingly played more active roles. However, the 'love interest' characters were always disposable, and even the scientist Christmas Jones in 1999's *The World is Not Enough* was clearly there for decoration (and to give James a name to pun on about Christmas coming once a year!).

Meet the new post-feminist Bond

Recently Bond has been 'reset'; and in *Casino Royale* (2006) gender representations construct a more post-feminist take on gender roles and relationships. Vesper Lynd is the female romance interest; like other Bond girls, she is beautiful. However, she has a professional role within the film and plays a part in moving the narrative forward. She is not a disposable plaything: Bond falls in love with her and is even prepared to give up his professional identity to be with her. The film itself shifts away from the 'male gaze' and offers some alternatives to the usual **objectification** of the female.

Bond himself is objectified as a body to be gazed on. Early in the film he emerges from the sea in a swimsuit that references the bikinis worn by Ursula Andress in *Dr No* and Halle Berry in *Die Another Day* (2002). The camera shows Bond being 'checked out' by a woman on the beach and the audience are encouraged to gaze upon Bond as a sexualised object in the way we have previously looked at the women.

In terms of sexuality, **female desire is celebrated**. Later, when Bond first meets Lynd, they have a conversation where they both show how they have, through observations, sized one another up. The conversation ends with Lynd commenting on how she will keep an eye on Bond's 'perfectly formed arse'. Rather than being annoyed or belittled at being the object of her gaze, Bond seems pleased to be looked at in this way.

Gender politics are challenged: a conventional, almost clichéd, scene is presented as the pair prepare to go the casino. Bond brings Lynd a cocktail dress to wear, and explains she is to act as an object for the male gaze – it is her job to look beautiful and distract the other poker players. She **subverts** this show of masculine power by doing the same for him. She has bought him a dinner jacket and insists he wears her choice of clothing. He is irritated at first but shows a level of vanity, looking at himself approvingly in the mirror whilst being closely watched by Lynd herself.

This **subversion of conventional gendered representation** can be read as a reflection of the post-feminist era. In *Casino Royale* both characters have elements of power within the relationship – and neither representation is conventional when it comes to gender. **Lynd 'performs' masculinity**, for example, when she takes control of the finances, and **femininity** when she is distraught after watching Bond kill. She adopts behaviours which suit the situation she is in rather than ones based on the expectations of her biological sex. Bond also shows **gender fluidity**. He is cold and emotionless at the start, has a muscular physique and **'performs' masculinity** when seducing a married woman to get information from her. However, he shows an **emotional and sensitive**

Bond '64: She naked and gilded; he pyjama-clad and modest

Bond 2006: she covered modestly; he naked – and the bed itself is gilded

side when comforting Lynd; and his emotional response to her death and what he sees as her betrayal of him are a far cry from the impersonal, cold, macho Bond of the earlier films. When captured by the villain, Le Chiffre, he is represented as having his masculinity attacked in the torture scene, where he is threatened with literal castration. Despite these feminised aspects of Bond's character he does not lose his masculinity. Similarly Lynd remains female although she displays masculine traits.

In *Casino Royale* the characters retain personal power by using **aspects of both masculine and feminine behaviour**. This reflects a culture where being traditionally feminine and/or masculine has little bearing given contemporary work practices and domestic arrangements. Since the changes that have occurred as a result of second wave feminism, social, domestic and professional roles have changed for both sexes. The lead characters in *Casino Royale* exist on a **changeable gender continuum** rather than in binary opposition to one another. They adapt and change depending on the circumstances, showing a more contemporary

flexible and fluid idea of gender. In a conventional representation, any man who adopted feminine traits would be seen as 'less of a man' but *Casino Royale's* Bond represents a man who is able to integrate feminine traits into his behaviours without becoming weakened, creating **a positive representation of both masculinity and femininity without the conventional conflict**. Neither gender has more value than the other – they have different strengths which are required in different circumstances.

But it isn't all over – yet ...

This representation is, alas, not necessarily typical of contemporary attitudes to gender. For example, *Die Hard 4* (2007) attempts to redefine masculinity in a traditional and conventional way despite social changes. A binary opposition remains in place in this film between a traditional male in Willis's character John McClane and a modern, more feminised male represented by the 'computer geek'

McClane has to protect. The older man needs to teach the younger the benefits of behaving in a traditionally fixed masculine way, because conventional masculinity is valued within this particular text. The dominant cultural view of gender is often still very traditional and based on males behaving in a masculine way and females being 'feminine'. **Post-feminism offers an alternative way of thinking**, which seeks to **remove the conflict** created by the more customary approaches. This is potentially liberating for both genders as it removes the constant 'tug of war' created by conventional ideas of gender.

Steph Hendry is a lecturer in Media Studies at Runshaw College in Manchester. She is a senior examiner, freelance writer and trainer.

Follow it up

Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, Routledge (2004)

MOORE AND THE MOVIES

when adaptations don't work

Alan Moore has been hailed as one of the greatest pioneers of the graphic novel – yet, unlike the hugely successful *Batman*, *Spiderman* and *Hellboy* franchises, the film adaptations of his work have not always lived up to his own unique imagination. **Neil Daniels** outlines the uneasy relationship between Hollywood and Moore's masterpieces

Alan Moore, courtesy of image.net

In recent years there has been a spate of well crafted and intelligent cinematic versions of great comic book characters. Of the better adaptations I'd recommend the first two *X-Men* films (directed by Bryan Singer,) the *Spiderman* trilogy (directed by Sam Rami,) the dual *Hellboy* films (directed by Guillermo del Toro) and of course, *Batman Begins* and *Batman: The Dark Knight*; both of which were directed with incredible flair by the British filmmaker **Christopher Nolan**.

But what makes a 'good' comic book adaptation? In a nutshell, surely the simple tale of good versus evil is the primary ingredient; together with memorable characters, a realistic setting, a plausible story and some distinctive dialogue. Nolan has stated Michael Mann's contemporary classic crime caper *Heat* (1995) as his main inspiration for *The Dark Knight*.

Suddenly, highbrow critics are keen to see more comic book adaptations and Hollywood producers are snapping up the rights to comic

books left, right and centre. And there is one particular writer – a towering eccentric figure who looks as if he plays bass in ZZ Top, sounds like a member of Black Sabbath and still lives in his home city of Northampton – with whom Hollywood has a particular fascination. A comic book writer and magician from Northampton, his name is **Alan Moore**. Has he cast a spell over Hollywood? Probably not. The fact is, he knows how to tell a good story and that's what matters. But the translation of his work from page to screen has not always run so smoothly, and Moore's relationship with Hollywood has at times been troubled.

Swamp Thing (1982)

Swamp Thing is not an Alan Moore creation, but he was amongst a selection of noted comic book writers hired by **DC Comics** to work on the series throughout the Eighties. Following **Wes Craven's** film version of the comic book, released in 1982 to little interest, the title was on

the verge of cancellation, due to low sales and a general lack of interest from comic enthusiasts; Moore was asked by DC to bring it back into people's consciousness. In *Swamp Thing #37* he introduced a rogue magician from Liverpool named John Constantine – and a piece of pop culture history was made, which would later figure large in his oeuvre.

From Hell

It is well-known that Alan Moore detests the film version of his famous 572-page graphic novel *From Hell*, serialised between 1991 and 1996.

The movie *From Hell* is set in 1888 and follows the intelligent, yet flawed, Inspector Apperline (**Johnny Depp**) on the trail of the elusive Jack the Ripper in the Whitechapel area of East London. **Heather Graham** plays Mary Kelly, reportedly the Ripper's fifth and final victim. *From Hell* also stars Ian Holm, Ian Richardson and Robbie Coltrane.

The film, directed by **the Hughes Brothers**, was loathed by the critics, and had poor success at the box office. Its basic 'who-done-it' premise was exactly what Moore (and **artist Eddie Campbell**) had hoped to avoid in their multi-layered and richly detailed tome; the film is little more than a bog-standard Hollywood funded mystery.

There are significant differences between film and book, both superficial and structural. Apart from cosmetically enhancing Moore's female characters for the movie, the question of **'star status'** is raised: Apperline (played by Depp) is only a supporting character in the book, yet in the film he becomes not only the lead character, but also a psychic. While the novel focuses in depth with pages and pages of detailed footnotes on subjects such as the supernatural and the occult, the film mostly avoids these issues. The book is often named as one of the comic book industry's greatest works; the film has largely been forgotten.

The League Of Extraordinary Gentleman (2003)

Moore was even more annoyed with movie producers after the release in 2003 of the adaptation of his comic book series *The League of Extraordinary Gentleman*, which also involved a lawsuit. **With artist Kevin O'Neill**, Moore's

V for Vendetta courtesy of image.net

novel chronicles the adventures of a group of famous literary characters (such as **Allan Quatermain** and **Captain Nemo**); and like the majority of his graphic novels it is highly revered for its imaginative premise. Indeed, Volume 1 won the coveted '2000 Bram Stoker Award For Best Illustrated Narrative **(http://en.wikipedia. org/wiki/Bram_Stoker_Award_for_Best_ Illustrated_Narrative).**

20th Century Fox, the company which distributed the film, was sued by filmmakers **Larry Cohen and Martin Poll**, who claimed that the film had plagiarised their script *Cast of Characters*. It was alleged that Fox had only bought the rights to the comic series to prevent them from being sued by the creators of *Cast of Characters* who had allegedly pitched their ideas to Fox several times in the mid-Nineties.

As with *From Hell*, there are many differences between the book (Volume 1 of 3) and the film – often the case between the two art forms, and usually the reason why authors either stay away from Hollywood or write the script themselves. One major difference between the film and its source material is the inclusion of two new characters: the American **Tom Sawyer** (played by Shane West) and **Dorian Gray** (played by Stuart Townsend.)

The film version was directed by **Stephen Norrington**, and stars **Sean Connery** as Quatermain; it received a critical mauling (poor dialogue, superficial characterisation, weak acting and a general lack of emotion), although it was a modest success at the box-office and eventually recouped its budget. Moore was justifiably irritated with the producers (especially

after having being cited in a law suit concerning plagiarism) and the way they handled his book. He has since decided to have nothing to do with the film industry and even refused to take the cheques, a principle he has chosen to stick with.

Constantine (2005)

Here again, yet another great comic book character is mishandled by Hollywood producers. John Constantine is a likable (although he shouldn't be considering he is a cocky freelance magician dabbling in the Black Arts/Occult) London-based Liverpudlian who originally appeared in the aforementioned *Swamp Thing #37*. The actual series of comics featuring Constantine was originally called *Hellblazer* and is distributed through DC's 'adult' imprint Vertigo. The character's look was famously modelled after Sting in **David Lynch's** adaptation of Frank Herbert's classic science-fantasy novel *Dune*.

The film version (directed by **Francis Lawrence**) depicts Constantine as an American (played unconvincingly by a rather wooden **Keanu Reeves**) and is set in LA, thus losing the British connection. With some great visuals and a story that leans towards the famous *Hellblazer* episode 'Dangerous Habits', it was a box-office hit making a reported $230 million in global ticket sales. The poor choice of casting and a convoluted plot meant the critics were less keen – and the comic book fans were not too happy either. Moore refused to have anything to do with the film and asked for his name to be excluded from the credits.

V For Vendetta (2006)

Produced by Hollywood heavyweight **Joel Silver, directed by James McTeigue, and written by The Wachowski Brothers** (famous for *The Matrix* trilogy – see **http://en.wikipedia. org/wiki/Wachowski_Brothers**), *V For Vendetta* is an enjoyable and visually arresting movie although there are, predictably, many differences between the film version and Alan Moore's actual graphic novel, which has stunning **artwork by David Lloyd**. Those differences between film and book mostly relate to political themes; and the film does not reference drug use or anarchism nearly as much as its source material does.

Written during the era of Thatcher's Tory government, the Orwellian-inspired graphic novel tackles such hefty themes as **anarchy, a totalitarian state, terrorism, drugs, sex, race and questions of personal identity**. Essentially the story follows an enigmatic character named V (he dresses in black and wears a Guy Fawkes mask) who wants social and political change in

Constantine courtesy of image.net

Spiderman, courtesy of image.net

Swamp Thing courtesy of image.net

England, and chooses to fight the government's Big Brother regime. There is no specific date – the story is set in the near future – but of course Moore was actually writing about Eighties Britain and used the future as a smokescreen for his political beliefs, as other science-fiction and fantasy writers such as Robert Heinlein and Kurt Vonnegut have done.

Joel Silver adapted Moore's Eighties narrative to meet the needs of a 2006 US audience; the film was certainly the most critically well received of all Moore adaptations, and was also a box-office hit. However, Moore was unimpressed with the changes in emphasis, and again refused to participate in the filmmaking process. In an interview with MTV entitled 'Alan Moore: The Last Angry Man,' he said of the film:

> It's a thwarted and frustrated and largely impotent American liberal fantasy … which is not what the comic V For Vendetta was about. It was about fascism, it was about anarchy, it was about England.
> See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comics

Watchmen (2009)

Joel Silver allegedly bought the rights to Alan Moore's mammoth graphic novel *Watchmen* (with artwork by Dave Gibbons) at the same time as he bought the rights to *V For Vendetta*. *Watchmen's* status is unparalleled; it has been dubbed the '*War and Peace* of graphic novels' and 'the *Citizen Kane* of the comic book industry' The hugely talented ex-Python animator and director **Terry Gilliam** flirted with the idea of making a film version, but decided against such an ambitious and bold project. After consideration, he apparently also refused any notions of a TV series based on *Watchmen*.

Published via **DC Comics** in monthly instalments in 1986 and 1987, *Watchmen* confidently deconstructs the superhero genre. It was quickly hailed as a masterpiece and in 2005 it entered *Time Magazine's* 'best 100 novels.'

Watchmen is the only graphic novel to have won the prestigious Hugo Award, which is the equivalent of the Oscars for writers of science-fiction and fantasy.

It's been suggested that the story is so complex, the dialogue so intelligent, the use of symbolism so inventive and the look of the characters so unique that *Watchmen* is, in sum, **'uncinematic'.** So much of the narrative would have to be condensed and simplified for a screen adaptation that its thematic complexity could potentially be lost in translation. Most directors stayed away … even noted comic book fan, film-maker and screenwriter **Kevin Smith** (*Clerks* and *Dogma*).

Watchmen's 12 episodes were published in one special hardback version in 1987. Together with Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* which was released the same year, it pretty much invented the term **'graphic novel'**. From that point on, comic books were taken far more seriously by arts critics.

Zack Snyder made a name for himself in the film industry as the director of the well-received remake of the Zombie classic *Dawn of the Dead* (2004) and the violent Spartan movie *300* (2006 – see *MediaMag* 21), based on Frank Miller's graphic novel. It was announced in 2006 that Snyder would make the film version of *Watchmen*. Such a project would always be controversial and a film version could only go one of two ways – in other words, it would either be good or bad. The debate began.

Fast forward: the trailer for *Watchmen* has spread around the Internet in mid-2008 like a viral disease. It looks stunning. Suddenly, purist fans of the novel are less dubious and actually more eager to see the movie. The film is set to be released in the summer of 2009. One thing is for sure: Alan Moore won't be attending the London premiere.

What's next for Hollywood from Alan Moore?

It seems unlikely that Hollywood producers will adapt the sequel to *The League Of Extraordinary Gentlemen*: the first film was hardly the critical or commercial success they had hoped for. What about *Top 10*, a terrific series like *NYPD Blue* but with superheroes? Or **Promethea**, a mythical goddess with the sex appeal of Wonder Woman? Or even the science hero **Tom Strong**? There is plenty of material from Moore's bibliography to play with.

The titles above (including *The League Of Extraordinary Gentlemen*) were published by **America's Best Comics, an imprint of WildStorm** – which was founded in 1999 primarily to give Moore the opportunity to create his own comic books series after refusing to work with Marvel and DC again. Although WildStorm was later sold to DC, Moore continued to write for them because he had promised work for his artist friends/colleagues, formerly of the defunct Awesome Comics. Who owns the rights to those comics now? And which adaptation will be next in line?

Regardless of what Moore thinks about the film versions, the fact is they have inevitably broadened his appeal and have no doubt added numbers to his growing readership. He has become an unlikely pop culture icon. Come on, he's even played himself in *The Simpsons*. That says it all…

Neil Daniels is a freelance writer specialising in popular culture. His website is www.neildaniels.com

ashes to ashes shot-by-shot

Q: what can you learn from five minutes of Episode One of a TV drama? A: Plenty! Media teacher **Bethan Hacking** takes you on a shot-by-shot journey through the opening of *Ashes to Ashes* – brilliant practice for the OCR AS Textual Analysis paper, AQA's MEST1, or WJEC's ME1. It could be a great starting point for the study of gender representation, postmodernism, or a Film and Broadcast Fiction cross-platform case study, and more … Read on, and see what else you could add to the analysis!

Ashes to Ashes is the BBC's follow up to the hugely popular series *Life on Mars*, in which DCI Sam Tyler finds himself transported from 2006 to 1973 following an accident. The extract for this essay is from the first episode of *Ashes to Ashes*, which features DI Alex Drake, in a similar time warp, being shot in 2008 and transported back to 1981. Having studied Sam Tyler's case, she is aware both of the 'fantasy world' which he inhabited, and of Hunt, the 'old-school', sexist policeman who Sam worked alongside. Starting eight minutes in to the episode, we see Alex's reaction to the shot and her waking up to find herself in the 1980s and face to face with Gene Hunt. The extract runs for approximately five minutes.

The clip opens with an **extreme close-up** of an eye, which slowly comes into focus. As the image sharpens we can assume it is a female eye from the shaped eyebrows, and can see this character is probably in her thirties. A young girl's voice is heard saying 'mummy' which suggests to us this woman is a mother and her child is trying to get her attention.

Cut to an **extreme close-up** of a bullet, flying through the air away from the camera – as if it were going back into

the gun from which it came. The style of this shot is reminiscent of *The Matrix*, and through this association the audience may conclude that time is being manipulated in some way. Audience members familiar with *Life on Mars* will understand that this is the point of transition to the past. The man holding the gun is out of focus but seems to be dressed in black and wearing sunglasses. We could assume this character to be a stereotypical, male villain.

The **next sequence of images** cuts from one to the next with a noise reminiscent of a VHS recorder on fast forward or rewind. The images connect with the sound by occasional camera movement back and forth, to re-create the experience of watching a family home movie. It features a mother and father figure apparently removing shopping from a car on a sunny day, and a young blonde girl, suggesting a happy, nuclear family unit and 'normality'. The adult characters are

clearly wearing 1980s clothing and are shot from low angles, implying the audience are seeing the adults from the young girl's point of view.

However, **the distorted noises and rather sinister background sound-effects**, along with the red colour-coding of the girl's hat, coat and balloon, suggest an element of **danger**, confirmed in a close-up of an adult's hand taking hold of the child's, forcing her to let go of the balloon, which is shown flying into the air. This suggests that the child is now vulnerable, as carers would not normally force the child to lose a toy in such a way.

The balloon rises quickly into the sky from a low angle, suggesting the child has watched it disappear. The image then quickly **dissolves into a fast zoom to mid-shot** of a sad, old fashioned clown or mime artist dressed conventionally in white with red lips and a red tear drop. Rather than seeming reassuring, this clown, shown against a black background, under a spotlight and shrouded by dry ice, seems threatening and incongruous with the other images.

The image cuts away and back in a split second to a darker close up of the clown who is saying 'Alex',

with echo on the sound.

We cut quickly to a similar VHS fast-forward image of a male wearing black and dark sunglasses, shot from a point of view inside the car walking alongside it, looking in. This suggests he is a 'stalker' of some kind, and the audience get the sense once more there is someone in danger and that these may be **flashbacks** to disturbing memories of a crime.

Cut to the extreme close-up of the eye from the beginning of the sequence, then to the man holding the gun, in sharper focus this time, the reflected image of the white clown superimposed on his sunglasses. This sequence concludes with an extreme close-up of a bullet hurtling towards the camera, again overlaid with the shouting white clown; the implication is that there is immediate danger in the 'dream sequence', or in the 'real world' at that point.

Cut again to the extreme close-up of the eye, except this time the image is full colour, and the eye is wearing much more make up. This suggests that our female character (Alex) will be presented in a much more attractive, sexual way than previously indicated through the maternal association. As the eye opens we **cut to a**
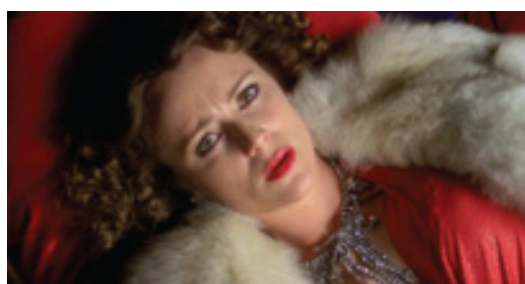
medium close-up of Alex lying on something red, wearing a red dress and lipstick, continuing the **colour motif** from the 'VHS' montage. Here the colour coding suggests both **sexual appeal and the implication that she may be in danger**.

As she wakes, confused, we hear music and party noises in the background, building in volume. **Cut to hand-held camera and Alex's point of view**, using disorientating movement to suggest she is either drunk or drugged. As she turns a corner we see Alex is on a boat, accompanied by stylish fur-clad women and suited men, all drinking cocktails or champagne, suggesting a decadent environment of prostitutes and city boys. The **mise-en-scène establishes we are now in the 1980s**: pastel suits, oversize glasses, permed hairstyles and a boat named 'The Lady Di'. Once again, the **colour red is a recurrent motif**, suffusing the boat in a red light through a red canopy and red feather boas scattered around, symbolic
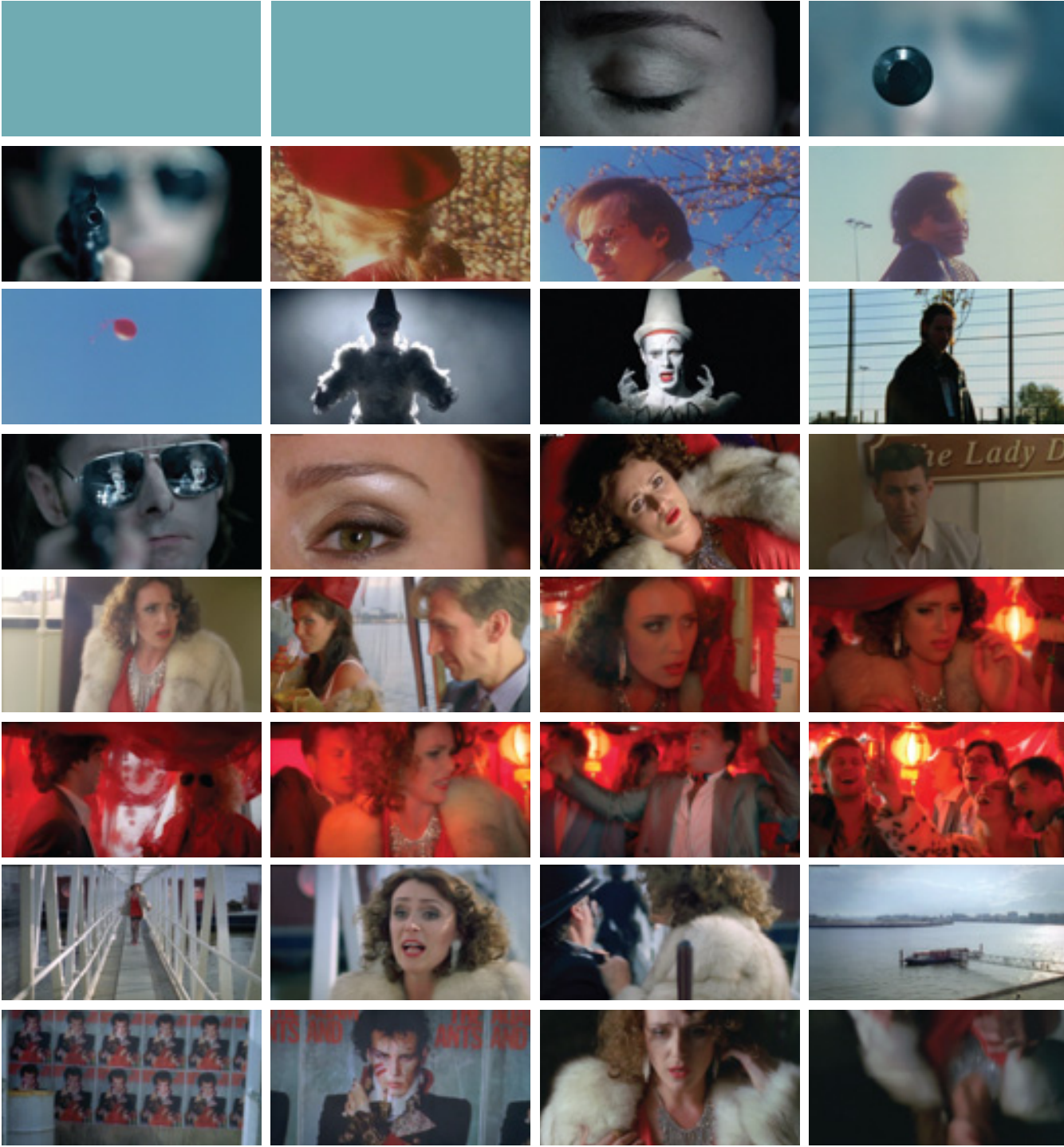
of boudoirs and red light districts. The camera focuses on a young man laughing manically in the hellish light, making him seem evil and threatening.

As Alex moves around, it becomes apparent that there are more men than women, and that they are trying to touch her and becoming increasingly lairy and aggressive. She shouts at them to stay away, but her protests seem weak and pitiful as the **music gains volume** and becomes overpowering. **The repeated lyric**: 'This

means nothing to me'. (from the classic 80's song 'Vienna' by Ultravox) further emphasises her disorientation and vulnerability when outnumbered by so many men.

Alex runs from the boat, into the sobering daylight; two male police officers roughly push past her as she screams for help. They are followed by two women police officers, who also push past with a cursory 'Not now miss'. Dressed as a prostitute, she is not treated respectfully

by these officers, but the women seem a little more sensitive – confirming our stereotypical expectations of women as more sympathetic and caring.

As she stumbles up to shore the camera zooms in on a wall of **'Adam Ant – Prince Charming'** posters with dramatic music in the background, a simple but effective way of signifying the early 1980s era. For viewers in their thirties or older, the recognition of **1980s iconography** will help them understand and enjoy these references

and therefore enjoy the programme.

The music reaches a crescendo as the camera cuts to a puddle of oil reflecting Alex's appearance. As the camera tilts up her whole body, Alex is clearly represented as a sex object epitomised by her long, slim legs, black stockings, short red PVC dress, heavy furs and garish jewellery. All these costume choices are clear symbols of a 'scarlet woman' but her confusion rather than confidence in wearing them suggests these are

not her normal clothes. **The slow tilt** from her high heels to her face is **the classic objectified shot of an attractive woman**. In this context it seems a bit clichéd, but it serves as useful cinematic shorthand, allowing the audience to look at and appreciate the full extent of the character's allure – **following the male gaze**.

The shot is interrupted by an aggressive shout of 'Come here!' as the 'evil' man from the boat violently grabs her and calls her a 'slut', 'tart' and a 'bitch',

reinforcing the stereotypical sexuality of the clothes, and their associations with degradation and exploitation. The isolated, industrial docklands mise-en-scène makes rescue seem unlikely. However, a screech of tyres and **non-diegetic loud rock music** hails the arrival of a red Audi Quattro. The approaching car is shot using **quick pans** and it moves out of shot, which emphasises the speed of this iconic 1980's car. The audience can tell someone powerful, ostentatious and important has arrived and will affect the narrative.

Cut to a classic close-up shot of a man's snake-skin shoes emerging from the car in a reference to 1980's fashion many audience members will recognise, signalling the end of the music, to signify the impact and significance of the new character's arrival.

Cut to a low angle shot through Alex's legs, which frame the man we later know to be Gene Hunt. This highly sexualised image both reminds the audience of her long, attractive legs, and undermines it; because her feet are slightly turned in she seems vulnerable and weak, like 'Bambi' on ice.

Gene Hunt's first words confirm his power and impact, with an opening quip aimed at the violent young man, while he brazenly places his gun on his shoulder. In a **two-shot** we see a second policemen appear with a gun saying 'Guv, he could have a gun', placing him as Gene's subordinate. The camera pans across as a third man appears from the car who also yields a gun, suggesting that, as

the third to arrive, he is also third in the 'pecking order' among these new arrivals. The sunglasses, bomber jackets and gun-wielding of these men suggest they are deliberately trying to look cool, modelled on Hollywood representations of tough policemen. However, their northern accents, use of slang and less-than-typically-handsome features suggest a hint of irony from the directors.

Alex meanwhile has been grabbed threateningly by her stalker. She now tries to extricate herself, using sophisticated psychological vocabulary which seems incongruous with the character we have seen; suddenly the 'prostitute' seems to be a well-spoken, educated, professional woman, immediately changing our perception of her.

Cut to a two shot reminiscent of 70s cop dramas such as *The Sweeney* or *The Professionals*, of the two 'subordinate' policemen looking at each other in disbelief, implying comically that they are probably not educated enough to understand what she is saying.

Her captor immediately understands her point, despite its specialised terminology, suggesting he too is educated, a perception reinforced by his southern, 'posh' accent. He steps forward, in patronising, faux-submission to 'Mr Hunt', and is met by a punch in the stomach despite being innocent. Hunt is now established as a violent, tough policeman unafraid to break the rules – a clear signal to viewers of *Life*

on Mars that this much-loved protagonist has not changed.

Alex is shown with a shocked facial expression, showing she has recognized the name from Sam Tyler's files.

Cut to a medium close-up of Gene Hunt, commenting on the length of Alex's skirt, indicating that despite a possible hostage situation, this man has evaluated her sexy outfit and is not afraid to make a sexist comment, despite his professionalism. Physically, his rough skin, broad shoulders and masculine looks ensure we are in no doubt this is a heterosexual, aggressive, male.

One by one, Alex says the policemen's names and they are shown from a **low angle pan across the group** interspersed with shots of her confused face. The second policeman is hitting the young man's head against the car, potentially comic but also a reminder that violence is just routine to these policemen. Finally, the **lowest angle and crescendo of the music** is offered to Gene Hunt himself, who stands with

head held high, a shot typical of a Hollywood hero and exaggerated in terms of its epic style and sound. The use of this clichéd shot along with others suggest a tongue in cheek approach was adopted by the directors, as they chose references particularly familiar and enjoyable to older audience members, as opposed to teenagers who are probably not the main target audience for this 'period' drama.

As the sequence concludes, Alex slumps in a faint, and Gene's self-aggrandisement is shown by his words: 'My reputation precedes me'.

The **final shot is a wide shot** of the group of four, suggesting their new unity, with Alex's lifeless, vulnerable body centrally foregrounded, showing she is now the centre of attention – both theirs and ours.
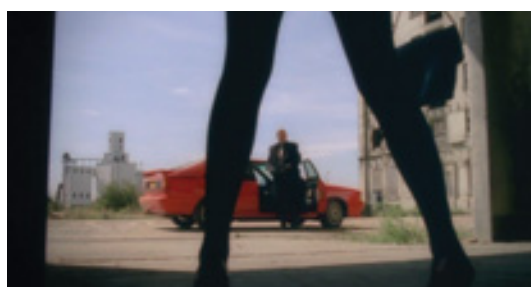

Bethan Hacking teaches Media Studies at La Retraite RC School, Lambeth, London.

Follow it up

The OCR AS G322 textual analysis paper will ask you to:
Discuss the ways in which the extract constructs representation using the following:
– Camera shots, angles, movement and composition
– Editing
– Sound
– Mise-en-scène

STEALING SOMEONE'S BIOGRAPHY?

another look at the lives of others

Many realist film or broadcast drama and documentary fictions claim to 'tell it like it is'. But what happens when it a film's view of the world conflicts with lived experience and viewers' own conflicting readings? **Martin Sohn-Rethel** explores difficult issues of realism and truth in *The Lives of Others*.

It's been a long accepted principle of critical Media and Film Studies that different readers can read different meanings into a text.

How can that translate into identifying deeply conflicting truths and realisms in what we watch? Sometimes conflicting readings of texts such as the 2007 Oscar-winning *The Lives of Others* can penetrate to the deepest roots of lived historical experience, and can even 'steal someone's biography'.

Analysing how we read **realism** in moving-image fiction is a very muddy field of enquiry. There are so many different and conflicting ways of understanding realism or truth in the films and TV that demand our attention, and so many of these offerings claim to deliver realism and truth on extremely slender grounds. What about the hollow mockery of the generic title 'reality TV'?

I would argue that how we understand realism needs to be sifted out by means of a recognisable set of codes. How about these, for example:

- **surface accuracy**
- **social or documentary realism**
- **genre realism**
- **narrative realism**
- **psychological realism**
- **ideological truth, where a filmmaker persuades his or her audience of the truth of their social and political message.**

Then, riding the opposing anti-realist current, as it were, there are the **constraints acting on producers and institutions** to get bums on seats.

What I'm concerned with here is the second of these codes: **social or documentary realism**. This is the realism of films and TV dramas just on the 'fiction' side of documentary, films that 'tell it like it really is', that challenge their audiences with an uncompromising picture of social reality. **Ken Loach's** films fit this category as do films such as *Scum* (1979) as well as *Nil By Mouth* (**Gary Oldman**, 1997), both by his guru **Alan Clarke**. But again, 'telling it like it is' can be just a label that looks good on a DVD cover. Does it really deliver? And to whom?

Those who are most closely affected by a filmed representation because they live there are most likely to cry foul over its claim to be the 'truth'. I was hit hard to discover that *La Haine* (Mathieu Kassowitz, 1995), a film I have long admired, departs crucially from the ethnic 'lived reality' of the deprived banlieues (housing estates) of France when it makes a Jew best buddies with an Arab and a black African. Anti-Semitism, writes Andrew Hussey, is one of the driving forces behind the anti-establishment struggle of the banlieues.

The Lives of Others/Das Leben der Anderen (Florian Henckel von Donnersmark, Germany, 2006) is a near-universally acclaimed film which claims to lift the lid on the murky dealings of **the East German Stasi or secret police and its thick blanket of informers before the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall**. However, in doing so it tells the redemptive tale of a Stasi agent, Captain Gerd Wiesler, who 'turns', sees the truth and works against the corrupt ideology that employs him. What is the status of the 'truth' of this film and how do audience members read it?

Representing reality to the outside world

The cinema of social realism needs to build a very convincing picture of its chosen historical environment. *The Lives of Others* does this to the satisfaction of an overwhelming proportion of its audience. Here surely is the grey oppressive reality of the East German state captured on screen unadorned – unlike another hit of recent German cinema, *Goodbye Lenin* (Wolfgang Becker, 2003) which adopts a very different comic fantasy tone, and quite unlike *Sonnenallee* (Leander Haussmann, 1999) – tagline: **Party in WILD WILD East**!

This view is borne out by user comments on the Internet Movie Data Base (IMDB):

Flicks like *Sonnenallee* or *Good bye Lenin* definitely were great and funny, but unconsciously left myself (a West German) with the impression that the GDR has been a sort of 'Mickey Mouse State' full of stupid but charming characters, not really to be taken seriously. After seeing *Das Leben der Anderen* this impression shifted quite a bit: there actually was suffering, killing, desperation

and a terribly claustrophobic atmosphere behind that wall. This might well be the most realistic depiction of the dark side of the former East Germany.

And, particularly telling for my argument here: This film utterly blew me away. Full disclosure: I'm a Munich born German-American who left Germany in 1986, before the wall came down … This film healed a wound that may have been left by the nightmare years of 1938-1945, my own great uncle being a Nazi war criminal, convicted in Nuremberg in 1946. Yes, we are mensch too. We have the potential for greatness (of character) in spite of our history. Thank you Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, for giving me back half of my lost soul in this single 'es ist für mich' [it's for me]. I am reminded again that the difference between ourselves and beasts is that we have a choice.

Such comments all seem to come geographically from outside of the GDR and historically after the fall of the Berlin Wall; and they all in different ways praise the realism of the film's depiction of the GDR.

The view from the inside

But from an actual East German citizen comes a very different take on the film's realism and truth:

[The film] may not be historically accurate. I am from East Germany but I am too young to know. Yet, most people say the GDR as portrayed in the film was not the GDR of the 1980s but rather the (Stalinist) GDR of the 1950s. In the 1980s, most actors, singers, the famous people were able to extort the GDR government as they could just go West and embarrass the officials. If the writer/actress couple were really as famous as the film suggests, in 1984, the GDR officials would have given them anything they wanted.

In that respect, I understand Hübchen's [an East German actor's] criticism. He said he lived in the period and doesn't agree with the way it was portrayed. He fears that the film will now stand testimony to the era and people may well think that this is the way it was. His grandson asked him why he didn't do anything about it, how he

could live in a system like this etc. I suppose he is afraid Donnersmarck steals his biography, in a way.

I have a feeling it may get more appreciation abroad than in Germany. It was obviously produced with the foreign (esp American) audiences in mind. And I think it may translate pretty well into foreign territories as it gets enthusiastic notices from critics abroad.

So here is an emphasis on 'the way it was portrayed', even that it 'may not be historically accurate' (the writer confesses he is too young to know). But the inference goes further – to **the fear that the film will now misrepresent the reality of the era**. The director Donnersmarck has 'stolen Hübchen's biography.' The writer is mild and considered in his wording, but here is an unmistakable accusation that *The Lives of Others* does not 'tell the truth' about the GDR regime. This is hardly a trivial accusation to make of a film about a regime that denied and falsified the truth to its own citizens.

A personal anecdote

I am now going to be unashamedly anecdotal and autobiographical:

My oldest friend is Thomas Jakob, an East German who worked as a director in East German TV from the early 1970s, who I recently met again in Berlin. Unsurprisingly I was keen to learn his reaction to *The Lives of Others*. He took me aback with his outright rejection – veering between ridicule and disgust. He told me he could not take the scene where Stasi spy Wiesler listens in on his headphones to Dreyman in his bugged apartment playing the sonata of 'The Good Man' given to him by Jerska, an outspoken enemy of the regime before he commits suicide. Dreyman had wanted to stay onside with the regime but now he sees his tragic mistake, and his heartfelt piano playing brings tears to Wiesler's eyes as we see him 'turning', becoming a good man … a mensch. Thomas said he could only laugh!

I winced to hear this put-down of a film that had impressed me enormously and of a scene that strongly resists mawkishness. But Thomas told me categorically that this situation would have been quite impossible under the GDR

Image of courtesy of image.net

regime. Agents themselves were always under surveillance, and would never have enjoyed this degree of undisturbed freedom to act and react. Doing so was punishable by death.

But does this matter? One or two negative readings against a mass of positive ones?

Moreover, can one deny the strength of the psychological code of realism to make a spectator see the scene as starkly truthful?

Above all, I think, it is our desire to see the good in people – even (and especially) in a collaborator with an evil system (and here we can't help harking back to the preceding evil in German history: the Nazi era and the Holocaust) – that pushes us to concur with the film's 'preferred reading' and see Wiesler as a hero because he 'turned' and became a mensch.

The film is docu-drama, not drama-documentary. Its story is not historical fact – so can't we accord it some license to tell a redemptive tale?

Re-writing history?

Anna Funder, the author of *Stasiland: Stories from Behind the Berlin Wall*, Granta Books, 2003, thinks not:

… real life has not delivered real justice – compensation, honour and recognition – to the victims of the Stasi … In the film's final scene set in the 1990s, Wiesler opens up Dreyman's new novel Sonata for a Good Man. Dreyman has dedicated it to the former Stasi man 'in gratitude'. 'That,' as Günter Bormann

of the Stasi File Authority said to me 'is hard to bear.'

Funder reports how Dr Hubertus Knabe, director of the old Stasi prison at Berlin Hohenschönhausen, now a museum and memorial, refused the filmmaker's permission to film there.

Knabe says: 'You can't use a place where people suffered as a backdrop for a film so remiss in its dealings with the past.'

She argues that the representation of Wiesler in *The Lives of Others* implies a fundamental misunderstanding of the way that totalitarian regimes inculcate total obedience in their subjects. 'They're just doing their jobs' or 'they were just obeying orders'.

Well OK, but isn't all that now in the past? Why get so worked up about it?

But it isn't just in the past. History doesn't just get switched off when a new social order takes over. In the new united Germany, hard-as-nails ex-Stasi agents have tended to rise higher in the social pecking order than their victims, and leap at any chance offered them to prove that they were just doing their jobs … that they are still human beings, still 'mensch'.

The Lives of Others, with its redemptive ending and its overwhelming audience acclaim, offers them precisely such a chance. Funder recounts how ex-Stasi agents even infiltrate visitor groups touring the Hohenschönhausen prison museum and heckle the ex-prisoners' accounts of their degrading treatment and

imprisonment: 'Rubbish! Lies! You were an ordinary criminal!' On my own visit to the prison in March 2008 I heard the same account. The film's license with the historical truth has a disturbing consequence for the direct victims of GDR persecution and for all those who suffered less directly under its lies and corruption: it robs them of their own testimony, their own biography. And that is very crucial indeed for their future and their children's future.

Of course, I'm not arguing for some crazy policing of the ways we read films. That would be to out-stasi the Stasi! My unease over the film's 'truth' doesn't stop me enjoying and admiring it. But when we affirm the notion of multiple readings, we must be prepared to explore potentially deep and damaging consequences, and recognise that these can go far beyond the realm of filmed fiction right into the heart of actual contemporary lived experience.
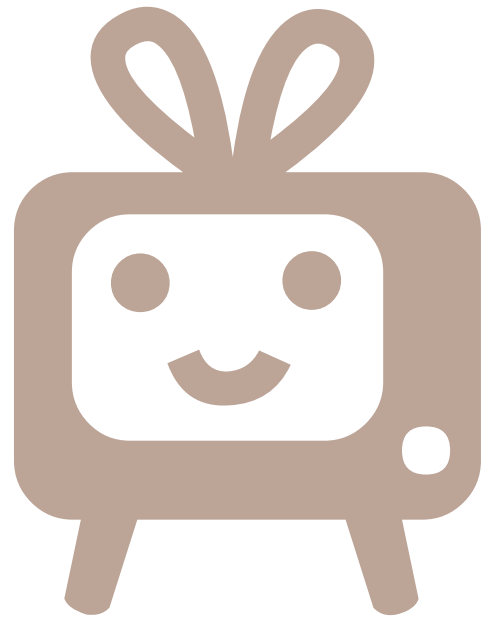
Martin Sohn-Rethel is Head of Media at Varndean Sixth Form College, Brighton.

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So you think you wanna work in tv?

With the huge increases in numbers of students taking Media, Film and TV and Cultural Studies courses over the last few years does this mean that competition to get into the media is even more cut-throat than ever? Our intrepid reporter **Chris Bruce** interviews one such graduate and spills the beans!

Come in number 1. What's your name, where do you come from and what are you doing here?

My name is Ian Bignell and I come originally from Essex but I now live in London. Erm … you asked me here, for an interview, right? I work for Optomen Television. They are an independent company who, amongst other things, produce factual and documentary programmes for C4 and the BBC. I am currently a researcher but I started as a runner when I graduated from university.

So tell us about your qualifications and how you got the job.

Wow, this feels like a real interview! Well, I did my A Levels and decided to apply to London Metropolitan University to do a course in Film Studies. I was accepted on to the Film degree with traditional A Levels. You have to show the interviewer that you have a genuine interest in film and moving image and I did have that so it seemed a fairly straightforward interview to me. I really enjoyed this and thought strongly about going into TV first. The film industry is exceptionally hard to get into and I thought that I would try my luck as I was based in the capital. So I gave it a go…

And the million dollar question … how did you actually get the job?

I literally had to search for names of all the small television production companies that I thought sounded interesting, and then I sent letters to all of them. It often helps if you know someone or somebody can introduce you to a prospective media employer. Companies get hundreds of letters a year and even more enquiries; so it really is about **making your 'presence' known and getting a bit of a personality** when you're scouting about in the job market.

What do you think is the biggest skill that you can offer a prospective media employer? What is the most important advice that you can give to newbies?

Undoubtedly it is **the absolute willingness to do anything at any time of the day or night**. You get paid a salary but you must understand that you can be asked to drop everything at a moment's notice. Suddenly, we'll be called to Scotland and have to get the train that evening, so you really have to be flexible. You're chasing a story, a person, a group of people, and you have to be able to get to film them doing what they do! Sometimes that means that you are away for a few days on a remote island. It's fun and it's what makes the job so brilliant, but you can't always make plans for the evening – sometimes the glamour disappears.

What would be your top tips for current students who might be thinking about the route that you have taken?

First of all, **apply to as many companies as you can**. At first you shouldn't necessarily worry about the kind of programmes/products that the company makes, but you should be aware of what they do.

You absolutely must keep your cool and think 'what do I want out of this?' **You need to do your research about the company that you might be working with**. This shows that you aren't just freeloading and that you really have an interest. Don't turn up without any prior knowledge of the stuff that they have been making in the recent past, or that they are in production with at the moment. I would say that **there are at least a dozen or so applicants for each job** and so, ultimately, that means that a lot of people are disappointed. Some don't have a degree and whilst I am not using the specific 'film skills' that I encountered in my degree, the qualification gives you other skills such as organisational abilities and working in a creative environment which is not always glamorous. Having the degree definitely gave me an advantage over some applicants.

What happens if you are 'not successful on this occasion'?

Try, try and try again. If you stand out but companies can't give you a job there and then, they will create a list and if something comes up they may be able to hire you on a freelance basis. If you are good then they may extend the contract. It's precarious but it's the only way to do it these days.

OK, so you're in. How do you stay there?

Undoubtedly, the best thing I would say is **'do anything to impress'.** If you have been working twenty hours that day and they need you to do something else … then do it, without question! I love what I do but there are times when it really tests you. But any job is like that so I accept that there are some down times too. The up time is when you see your name in the credits and think 'yeah, I was part of that and I'm really proud to be associated with it'. Oh, and my mum gets excited when she sees my name too! (She's a Media Studies teacher at a school in Clacton, Essex.)

The best advice to give about your 'apprenticeship'?

If you can survive the first six to twelve months then you've done your time. After just six months I was very lucky and I was asked to move up to researcher; and that meant that I was able to use even more of the skills that I had learnt during the first few weeks with the company.

So what do 'runners' actually do. Must they own a pair of trainers?

Not really, though you have to move fast and being young and fit is a bonus! A runner is a kind of general assistant to the company, director or production unit. One of the things that you might be asked to do is to look after people – including celebrities, on location, making sure that they are fed and kept warm.

Had any really awful moments?

Nothing that would make the front page of a tabloid! I think that production companies are looking for runners to have a great bank of all-round skills; post a letter, organise a courier, get some refreshments organised, etc., but also reassuring people on location, soothing impatient or busy participants and being more than just a little diplomatic at times.

Optomen have been great to me and recognised that I was doing menial things that they knew I was 'over-qualified' to do but I was grateful for the experience. After a few months, and as people in the company move on, I was promoted to researcher. **I think that you have to realise that you may have lots of A Levels and a degree but you are right at the bottom, and that's how most people in the business start.** There is a myth that everyone wipes their shoes on you but, actually, lots of people are really pleasant as often they were doing your job or something similar years ago. At the end of the day I am happy that the company gave me the chance to prove myself. It's a great job!

Long hours? Bags of bucks?

Long hours, yeah. Not a huge salary but then you wouldn't expect it. You are an apprentice and you have to understand that the industry is always trying to be as economically competitive as possible. It's better to think of it as being paid for doing something you really enjoy!

So how would our readers know Optomen then? What's your portfolio?

Well, you may have heard of them because they made The *F-Word* for Channel 4 and also a show called *Naked Chef* [featuring the young Jamie Oliver] which was very successful. They make lifestyle programmes about cookery/eating that tap into what the average person would like to aspire to. I think that they do it very well too!

Right, make me envious. What have you been up to lately?

Optomen have just been making a series for BBC2 called *What to Eat Now* and it has a brand new 'star' that they have found called Valentine Warner. He is a really fresh face and Optomen is really excited about the programme. Valentine has a very different approach to the way that he talks about food. He is really passionate about food that's produced locally and grown by small farmers who care about taste. He's not like Gordon Ramsay at all but he definitely has a fabulous personality and viewers will love him. He's a former art student, in his thirties, who is extremely passionate about food and he is so fresh-faced that Optomen couldn't resist and he has been superb to work with. It definitely comes across on screen. With this kind of programme once you've found a mesmerising presenter, it's great to see the series unfold as you're making it.

He was first screen tested for Optomen about seven years ago and last year they developed an idea for him. From that, it was about two months from pitch to commission. The idea seemed very strong and Valentine was this very vibrant personality who just stood out.

And where have you been on these adventures…?

Erm, well … [*looks a little embarrassed*] … I've been deer-stalking in Jura in Scotland, mussel-picking in Lindisfarne and, well, so many other places besides. Oh yeah, we were in Cornwall a few days ago. The travelling is good fun and sometimes you don't know where exactly you'll end up!

Right, take us through a typical day …

Well, hmm, that's a tough one. Well, today I have been researching beetroot [*stifled laughter from interviewer*]. Honest! My job was to find an angle about this vegetable and find a story. This involved me starting from a 'cold' position and doing a Google search and making lots of phone calls. Again, finding characters is the key to success here. Once you find a person who sounds interesting, you arrange a recce, take a small camera and do some initial shots and an interview. All this can take days and most of the time it means you find yourself in a dead end.

So as a researcher, you get to make decisions independently?

Well, not quite, but I went to Enfield in north London to see an amazing, interesting guy who grew sweetcorn. He was a real character and his 'back-story' seemed appealing. We did some recce shots and a small interview. I usually edit about 3-5 minutes of the feature together for it to be considered. When the executives and the producer and his team looked at the footage they decided that there wasn't enough of a unique storyline so it was spiked. It happens all the time. And then on one occasion, you'll find a real gem and the production executives will deploy the film unit to go and get the footage for real this time.

Where do you go from here?

I'm really lucky. Other companies aren't all as generous as Optomen have been to me. I was sent on a training course on how to use an industry camera so the company have invested in me and want to develop my skills. They knew that it would produce better results and it has helped. **Once you have gained enough experience as a researcher, the next step is to become an Assistant Producer.** Some organisations are larger than others, but I like working in a smaller company because it's more people-centred. I enjoy working with a small team and it's something that graduates should consider when they are choosing the right company for them.

And the final word…?

Never give up! It's tough out there but if you show them that you are really keen and want to contribute something to their organisation then they will spot it immediately. Oh, and also **flag up your skills and the things that you have learnt along the way.** They are *not* looking for a director, they are looking for someone without an ego and who is prepared to sweep up and make the tea. The rewards then come later!

Chris Bruce is a qualified Advanced Skills Teacher, Chair of AIDEM Media, AQA Senior Examiner and Head of Media Studies at Ashmole School in Barnet.

If you want any further information then you may contact Ian at: Id_bignell@hotmail.com

Image of courtesy of C4's extranet.