

# Roderick Heath Film Writing

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*featuring writing for*

*film freedonia  
this island rod  
wonders in the dark*

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## Dirty Harry (1971)



**Director:** Don Siegel

**Screenwriters:** Harry Julian Fink, Rita M. Fink, Dean Riesner, Terrence Malick (uncredited), John Milius (uncredited)

Fifty years since the film's release, the opening moments of *Dirty Harry* still pack a wallop, a potent aesthetic unit promising cruel and jagged thrills. Director Don Siegel surveys the names of policemen killed in the line of duty carved on a memorial are scanned as church bells chime on the soundtrack with an insistently ethereal overtone, before fading to a shot of a rifle in a man's grasp, barrel and silencer looming huge and deadly, death from above rendered intimate and literal. A lovely young woman (Diana Davidson) is glimpsed diving into a swimming pool on the roof of a San Francisco skyscraper to swim a few laps. The man with the gun is watching the girl, his telescopic sight zeroing in whilst the camera shot zooms back to confirm the woman's oblivious link to the man's bleak intent, space, distance, and height gripped and distorted by the camera lens and the homicidal purpose of the assassin. Composer Lalo Schifrin's music, an unsettling blend of skittish, pulsing drum riffs, spacy drones and creepy female vocalisations, weave a paranoid and threatening mood.



The pull towards godlike judgement is irresistible, predestined: the killer pulls the trigger in obedience, his existence only gaining meaning through the erasure of what he's looking at, the despoiling of what seems to live in the world's heart. The vantage suddenly becomes more dreadfully intimate, bullet hole exploding in the girl's back, her hollow, water-sucking breaths heard as she sinks into the brine and black blood spasms in blue water. The thrill of power worked at deistic remove crashes headlong into the immediacy of hideous brutality worked upon a hapless body, death rendered a palpable and awful thing to a degree even Siegel's former protégé Sam Peckinpah had not yet quite countenanced in his spectacles of bloodshed.



The anointed agent of retribution is swift to appear: Siegel cuts immediately to the entrance of his hero, such as he is, Inspector Harry Callahan (Clint Eastwood), called onto the rooftops to survey the carnage of this new foe. Clad in grey suit and sunglasses that look like they might deflect such high-velocity bullets, Harry has the quality of a specially bred tracking animal released from his cage the moment his particular talents are required. Schifrin's jazz-funk theme tags Harry with a jittery but propulsive metre as he ascends into the neighbouring building and collects his foe's spoor-like leavings: a discarded cartridge, a pinned note, items left behind specifically by the killer to announce his coming to the

powers that he and tease his inevitable pursuer. Siegel's long-evinced obsession with landscapes of soaring heights and sprawling flats and their connection to the straits of his characters is immediately in play here. The great sprawl of San Francisco is laid out below as the stadium for the oncoming *corrida* between cop and killer, the gaze of the camera conjoined with the will to countenance such extremes of moral drama.



The killer calls himself Scorpio, and his letter draws a single, totemic groan of “Jesus” as he reads it pinned to an aerial and comprehends that he’s not dealing with just any old nut. Cut to the city mayor (John Vernon) reading out the letter in his office, unable to read out the racial slur Scorpio uses in the letter as he declares “my next pleasure will be to kill a Catholic Priest or a nigger” if he’s not paid a \$100,000 ransom. Scorpio’s declared motive is money but he is also, in modern parlance, a troll, one who delights in assaulting social norms and provoking consensus with acts of calculated despoiling, an iconoclast who seems to care less about being caught than about getting to play his game out to the end. Harry, called into a meeting with the Mayor, the Chief of Police (John Larch), and his superintendent Al Bressler (Harry Guardino), senses such motives instinctively and declares a conviction that playing along with Scorpio is asking for trouble. But the Mayor wants him mollified long enough to set up a surveillance net over the city and get the operation to catch him up and running. Harry’s suggestion, that he find a way to meet him, is dismissed out of hand, and his listless attempts to explain basic police work are cut off by Bressler, more experienced in this sort of thing in offering quick, clipped, impressive-sounding measures to mollify the sternly questioning Mayor.



On his way out the door, the Mayor tells Harry that he doesn't want any more bad headline-making actions "like we had last year in the Fillmore district", leading to Harry's serious if wryly pitched retort that "when a naked man is chasing a woman through an alley with a butcher knife and a hard-on, I figure he isn't out collecting for the Red Cross." A promissory note for Harry's way of dealing with clear and present danger. And yet in the next scene, when Harry sits down for a lunchtime hotdog at a downtown diner even as he's noticed the distinct probability a bank robbery is being committed across the street, his first response is to get the cook to call in other cops and "wait for the cavalry to arrive." The peal of alarms finally compels him to go to work. He strides out into the street and barks at one of the emerging robbers to halt through a mouth full of chewed hotdog. Rather than desist of course the robber fires at Harry, who brings his signature weapon, a massive Smith & Wesson .44 Magnum, to bear and takes out the thieves with a precision that isn't quite surgical, given their getaway car crashes into fire hydrant and topples a florist stand. Only after the battle is over does Harry glance down and notice the shotgun pellet wounds riddling his leg. Seeing one robber (Albert Popwell) is only wounded and seems to be contemplating grabbing his gun, Harry advances on him and gives a well-polished speech of challenge just about every movie lover know by rote.



Harry Callahan is immediately inscribed as a near-mythical figure, armoured knight or western gunslinger transposed into the contemporary scene, his Magnum his Excalibur capable of extraordinary feats. Or is it less Excalibur and more Michael Moorcock's Stormbringer, the cursed sword of the equally antiheroic Elric, feeding on souls and entrapping its wielder ever more deeply the more he uses it for however righteous ends? What's particularly interesting about this scene, aside from how it gives the audience true introduction to Harry's prowess under fire and his ritualistic dominance of his felled opponents, is the way he's also characterised as a working stiff, trying to avoid being pulled into a gunfight during his lunch, lacking any gung-ho drive to put himself in harm's way but committing fully once obliged. Treated by a police surgeon Steve (Marc Hertsens) who sets about plucking the shot from his leg, Harry insists on removing his pricey trousers rather than let the doctor cut them off: "For \$29.50, let it hurt." This touch serves a nimble game in the way Harry is characterised, allowing him to be a reasonably well-dressed hero but also one for whom it comes with a hole in his bank balance. There's also the first hint dropped regarding Harry's loss of his wife, as Steve unthinkingly tells Harry to get his wife to check his wounds, before remembering and apologising.



Whilst taking over a mythic role in his social function and a movie part designed to transpose the cinematic persona he was carrying over from his roles for Sergio Leone, Eastwood-as-Harry himself stands at a remove from the stony titans of the wastes he played in those films, forced to operate in the real world. Harry soon finds himself presented with an encumbrance to his usual preferred way of working, when he's assigned a newly promoted Latino partner, Chico Gonzalez (Reni Santoni). *Dirty Harry* has long been a loaded film to contemplate despite being a popular classic and a foundational work of modern Hollywood film style. The film didn't invent the figure of the cop driven by his own peculiar motives to play a rough game by his own rules, which had precursors in movies like *Beast of the City* (1932) and *The Big Heat* (1953), and some of Siegel's own earlier works, whilst of course also anatomising a couple of millennia's worth of duellist dramas going back *The Iliad*. But *Dirty Harry* certainly drew up a fresh blueprint for use in infinite variations over the next few decades in movies and TV shows.



Siegel's film can count movies as disparate as *Death Wish* (1974), *Assault on Precinct 13*, *Taxi Driver* (both 1976), *Lethal Weapon*, *Robocop* (both 1987), *Die Hard* (1988), *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), and *Se7en* (1996) amongst its errant and quarrelsome children. Michael Mann's films owe a vast amount to Siegel's imprint. Even the concept of Batman and The Joker offered in *Batman* (1989) and doubled-down on in *The Dark Knight* (2008) as glowering vigilante versus mocking anarchist owe everything to Harry and Scorpio: Andy Robinson's clownish leer and crazed laugh already trend very Joker-like. Siegel expected a lashing from liberal critics and viewers and got it at a moment in a time when, amidst the wane of the Counterculture moment which he and Eastwood had parodied on their earlier collaboration *Coogan's Bluff* (1968), a reactionary spasm was manifesting. Concerns over street crime and social breakdown and the possible necessity, even desirability of vigilante action were on the boil and questions about police ethics and limitations were being vigorously debated from all corners just as they are today. *Dirty Harry* is still often caricatured as a fascist-vigilante mission statement. Still, moviegoers embraced the film to such a degree Eastwood was finally, firmly established as a major Hollywood star, and he returned to the title role four times.





Whilst both films owed much to the success of *Bullitt* (1968), a movie that did for the modern detective what James Bond did for spies in crystallising the idea of a cool cop, *Dirty Harry* and its slightly more reputable and thus Oscar-garlanded companion *The French Connection* gave the cop drama a hard, grim, violent gloss and reinstalled it as a vehicle of gritty entertainment in pop culture. The film had immediate real-life roots in the mythos of the conspicuously uncaught Zodiac Killer's reign of terror over San Francisco in the late 1960s (and like *Bullitt* drew on real-life detective Dave Toschi as a model), although analogue Scorpio has a rather different modus operandi, and a few other murder cases were drawn on too. The film's complex development saw the script, initially penned by husband-and-wife screenwriting team Harold and Rita Fink and then given rewrites by a credited Dean Riesner, a very experienced writer for TV westerns (and former child actor), and uncredited young talents Terrence Malick and John Milius. Milius, as well as introducing the totemic sense of gun lore, took Akira Kurosawa's crime movies like *Stray Dog* (1949) as a model in defining Harry as an isolated man and doppelganger to the killer he's chasing, whilst Malick's take was used as the basis for the first sequel, *Magnum Force* (1973). A battery of major stars turned down the role, and in the end it was Eastwood who took on the project with his own fledgling production company Malpaso.



Eastwood had since *The Good The Bad and The Ugly* (1966) been looking for the right vehicle to cement the stardom he gained in Spaghetti Westerns as legitimate in the Hollywood sense, and after a couple of straight Westerns including Siegel's turn to the Italianate with *Two Mules For Sister Sara* (1970) and the ill-advised turn to musical comedy in *Paint Your Wagon* (1969). *Dirty Harry* finally presented him the ideal chance to graft his squinty, taciturn gunslinger act onto a contemporary scene, and the much-mimicked familiarity of the character's various catchphrases – “You've got to ask yourself one question – ‘Do I feel lucky?’ Well do ya punk?”, later giving way to the pithier “Go ahead, make my day,” from *Sudden Impact* (1983) – depend on the near-symbiotic perception of Eastwood's presence in the role and the role itself. And yet there's an offbeat quality to Eastwood performance despite its seeming familiarity. Eastwood never plays Harry as particularly physically dominant or cocksure, often seeming a beat or two out of alignment with the world around him, as if tired and wired all at once. His clenched, oddly undulating drawl conveys hints of ennui and contempt as well as the struggle he has day in and day out keeping his behaviour and reactions on an even keel.



More crucially, Siegel, who began his career as a studio artisan prized for his montage work and had to fight to be given a shot at directing, Siegel, whose feature directing career had nearly ground to a halt in the mid-1960s like many other Old Hollywood talents, confirmed his comeback after auteurist-minded critics had kept candles burning for him with a movie that looked and sounded almost super-modern. Siegel had been wrestling with his ambivalent feelings about justice and policing since his debut feature *The Verdict* (1946). That film set in play many ideas and images repeated in *Dirty Harry*, from the opening bell chimes to the soaring vantages and the central figure of a policeman who commits to his own ideal of justice. Siegel returned to the theme later of a cop battling political pressure as well as some of the same imagery in *Edge of Eternity* (1959). Siegel's temperamental drift towards film noir and thrillers saw him often offering criminals and ne'er-do-wells as protagonists as often as cops and traditional hero figures.



Siegel's natural sympathy for outsiders fighting for their lives and identities could be applied to victimised innocents like the luckless humans of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), the Native American founding-turned-avenger of *Flaming Star* (1960), and the doomed proto-beatnik soldier of *Hell Is For Heroes* (1962), through to brutal and destructive and but existentially beleaguered

criminals as in films like *Riot in Cell Block 11* (1954), *Private Hell 36* (1954), *Baby Face Nelson* (1957), *The Lineup* (1958), and *The Killers* (1964). Siegel's immediate acolytes included Eastwood, Peckinpah, and Ida Lupino who co-wrote and starred in *Private Hell 36*, and just about everyone to take on a modern cop and urban action movie lies under his influence. *Dirty Harry* allowed Siegel to set up these two essential types of character in direct warfare and played at extremes, Scorpio's truly anarchic spirit and Harry's increasingly maniacal response operating as schismatic halves of the same personality, Siegel's own. Siegel had displayed with *Two Mules For Sister Sara* readiness to draw on the Italian Western template, and *Dirty Harry*, like the same year's *Klute*, suggests the influence of Italian giallo film also creeping into Hollywood, Dario Argento's *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* (1970) in particular, what with Siegel's emphasis on voyeuristic points of view matched to Schiffrin's score which betrays evident similarities to Ennio Morricone's for Argento with the eerie female vocals and outbreaks of dissonant jazz.



At the same time, Siegel's own stylistics were cutting-edge for the time, working with his great cinematographer Bruce Surtees in utilising inventive and sweeping use of wide-angle lenses to distort space and invert relationships, particularly evident in the opening shots of *Scorpio* and his vantage, the use of much handheld camerawork, and allowing the usually hard-edged texture of Hollywood cinematography to dissolve into semi-abstraction in the use of ambient light and long zoom and telephoto lens shots. As he had already done in *The Lineup*, Siegel uses the very geography of San Francisco and its spaghetti sprawl of new highway passes and ramps to present the idea of landscape as a trap as well as a mimeograph for the psychic and moral exigencies of the battle. This is particularly crucial in the climax, where Harry exploits certain knowledge about how to ambush Scorpio, but also propels much of the narrative, including the long central sequence where Scorpio forces Harry to run all over town in his attempt to pay the ransom, in order to make sure he's not being followed – not counting on Harry and Chico being cleverer in arranging for a radio link – and informs the more sociological dimension of the story. Harry and Chico's nocturnal excursions become epic journeys through the intestines of a modern American city, encountering lovers, hookers, muggers, gays, and would-be suicides, small fry at swim amidst neon blooming like ocean coral all looking for their own personal oblivion, behaving in ways that would have been kept hidden away just a decade before. Only cops like Harry and Chico have to engage with such a world in a spirit of obligation.



The Mayor's hope of buying "breathing space" by answering his demand for money with a personal column missive pleading "be patient" proves exactly the wrong move as the smirking Scorpio is seen properly for the first time, tearing up the newspaper page and unpacking his rifle for another killing, this time taking aim at a gay couple having a date in a park. Luckily one of the patrolling helicopters spots him before he can shoot, forcing him to flee. Harry and Chico, patrolling in their car, cruise the district as the sun goes down and Chico spots a man carrying a suitcase the same colour as what Scorpio was carrying: investigating Harry finds it's not their man and gets beaten up by some neighbourhood brawlers who take him for a peeping tom: Chico intervenes but Harry insists on letting them go, taking it as an occupational hazard. Called in to intervene as a man (Bill Couch) threatens to leap from his death from a rooftop, Harry lifted on a fire hoist and instead of playing placatory with the man provoking him into lashing out so Harry can knock him and bring him back to the ground.



These vignettes flesh out both Harry's approach to policing and the society around him, trying to portray policing as an unceasing stream of crises unnoticed when they're resolved but all too loudly wailed about when they don't, in a world filled with people caught in their own little algorithms of perverse behaviour. Harry's bemused response to them. "These loonies, they oughta throw a net over

the whole bunch of ‘em,” he quips to Chico. But he knows he’s just another one: being attacked as a peeping tom prefigures the later stakeout scene, where Harry finds himself fascinated by the human scenes, *Rear Window*-like (1954), he spies through windows. Scenes glimpsed include a wife chewing out her husband and a hooker stripping down to her birthday suit and meeting a swinger couple, obliging Harry to comment, “You owe it to yourself to live a little, Harry.” Harry’s isolation, signalled early on in his conversation with Steve, stems from the death of his wife in an accident caused by a drunk driver, a tragic turn Harry later explains with a note of intense world-weariness to Chico’s wife Norma (Lynn Edgington). Earlier in the film, Harry and his long-time colleague and pal Frank De Georgio (John Mitchum), as De Georgio responds to Chico’s question on why they call him ‘Dirty’ Harry by noting that Harry “hates everybody”, listing ethnic epithets for everyone, with Harry rounding out the rollcall with “especially spicks.”



Eastwood might well have been remembering this scene for his own *Gran Torino* (2008) decades later, with its meditations on how working class culture revolves around the giving and taking of insults as a sort of totem of authenticity and ironic fellowship. In context it serves more as a sort of sarcastic piece of trolling in its own right, mocking expectations of Harry’s (and by implications cops in general) as racist and reactionary assholes, whilst also sketching Harry’s outsider quality: his misanthropy is shtick but his real attitude to society is nebulous even to himself. The guy who “hates everybody” is also the guy who defends everybody on the social ramparts, and the mediating figure who ushers people representing outsider groups – Chico in this film, a female partner in *The Enforcer* (1976) – into his zone and ethos, and the ultimate fates of such figures underline Harry’s sense of his fate to remain alone. Harry’s relations with the Chief and Brenner, played by the marvellously hangdog Guardino, have their own conversant climate, neither man forced to play the hard-ass boss cliché with him, but rather portrayed as men who have experienced the same moral and psychic exhaustion as Harry but retained something he doesn’t have, for better and worse. “It’s disgusting that a police officer should know how yo use a weapon like that,” Brenner notes queasily as he watches Harry scotch tape a switchblade knife to his leg in case of a close encounter, but it’s a disgusting world.



In the morning after their night-time patrol Harry and Chico are called to the sight of what quickly proves to be another successful Scorpio killing, leaving a black teenager gruesomely killed. On the theory that Scorpio will return to the same building he was spotted on earlier, Harry and Chico set up an armed stakeout to ambush him, resulting in a shootout: Scorpio again manages to flee and kills a cop dashing to intervene. Siegel's carbohic sense of humour manifests as the two men set up their station under a huge rotating sign spelling out "Jesus Saves" in big neon letters, whilst Scorpio himself is offered a juicy target in the form of a Catholic priest who, as Harry tells Chico, volunteered to be bait. The eruption of violence here, as Scorpio proves armed not with his precise and artful rifle but a machine gun, turns the gunfight into an episode of urban warfare. Scorpio's next ploy is to kidnap a teenage girl, Ann Mary Deacon, and double his ransom demand for her life, claiming to have buried her alive with a depleting oxygen supply. He rings Harry from public payphones and forces him to crisscross the city becomes an agonising comedy of encounters that underline his journey through the city as an exploration of the night.



Harry is forced to fend off some muggers who attack him a dark tunnel by brandishing his ferocious firearm, is momentarily plunged into despair after some random old codger answers one of Scorpio's

calls before he can get to the phone and Scorpio hangs up, and contends with a young gay man (David Gilliam) he encounters in Mount Davidson Park who mistakenly thinks he's cruising, a vignette that highlights Harry's barbed sensibility as essentially acquiescent to such wings of human peculiarity ("If you're Vice, I'll kill myself." "Well, do it at home."). The park has a colossal, looming crucifix as a monument at its heart, where Harry is ordered to meet Scorpio at last: Scorpio has an appropriately vivid sense of moral irony in forcing Harry to seek out such a symbol as the moral crux of the world only to turn it into an arena of cruelty as Scorpio makes Harry toss aside his gun ("My," Scorpio draws, instantly making Freudian links, "That's a big one.") before beating him to a pulp whilst announcing he's going to let the kidnapped girl die, and is only kept from executing Harry by Chico's timely arrival. Chico is shot in the ensuing battle but Harry manages to stab Scorpio with the secreted switchblade, sending the killer scurrying off with a severe injury and without his ransom money.



The ferocity of this movement strays close to the surreal, with Siegel building to matching low and high angles, from high above on the cross as Scorpio closes in on Harry from behind, and a point-of-view shot from Harry himself looking up the cross's height; all lit with an edge of garish brightness that transforms a public monument into a manifestation of mockingly unattainable divine grace. The steady whisper-scream build of tension reaching its peak as Siegel briefly cuts away to the near-forgotten Chico dashing to the rescue and the jagged, pain-inducing cut from Harry plunging the knife into Scorpio to the killer's shrieking mouth yawning in the circle of his balaclava's mouth hole. Despite the seemingly vast disparity in setting and story, there's certainly anticipation in all this of Siegel's deeper drop into the dreamlike and the fetidly neurotic in his previous film and perverse companion piece, *The Beguiled*. The visual intensity and edge of the surreal returns when Harry, now working with De Georgio, tracks Scorpio to Kezar Stadium because a clinic doctor who stitched up his leg recognised him: as Harry chases the assassin De Georgio turns on the lights that arrest Scorpio mid-field, brilliant lights freezing the fugitive mid-field and reversing his and Harry's role as Harry guns him down and starts jamming his shoe into his wound to extract the location of the kidnapped girl.



This scene is of course endlessly disturbing and frightening but also perhaps the height of Siegel's career, the queasy close-ups of Harry's obsessive fury and Scorpio's pathetic attempts to ward him off, all the more enraging to the cop as the killer keeps on trying to maintain the game of obfuscation and deflection in demanding a lawyer and declaring his rights, giving way to an awesome aerial shot as Siegel's camera, as if retreating in horror and also with a certain discretion, flies back and up into the night, leaving cop and killer stranded in hell on earth in a moment of gruelling squalor and pain whilst the arena of light about them dissolves into darkness. The raw sturm-und-drang of this vision gives way to its sorry immediate aftermath. Having extracted the girl's location, Harry watches as her naked, bedraggled corpse is dragged out of a pit in a park overlooking Golden Gate Bridge, Harry silhouetted against the sickly dawn light and looking across the bridge in utter solitude, failed in his mission and debased as a man even if he still thinks he's done the right thing. It's one of the saddest and most poetic shots in cinema, with Schifrin's eerie scoring fitting the imagery perfectly.



Harry's mission to catch Scorpio is defined by the desperate attempt to define that sliver of difference between him and the killer: he might do terrible things but at least has a force majeure motive to claim. Harry works for a society and a motive he believes in but feels increasingly frustrated by its niceties;



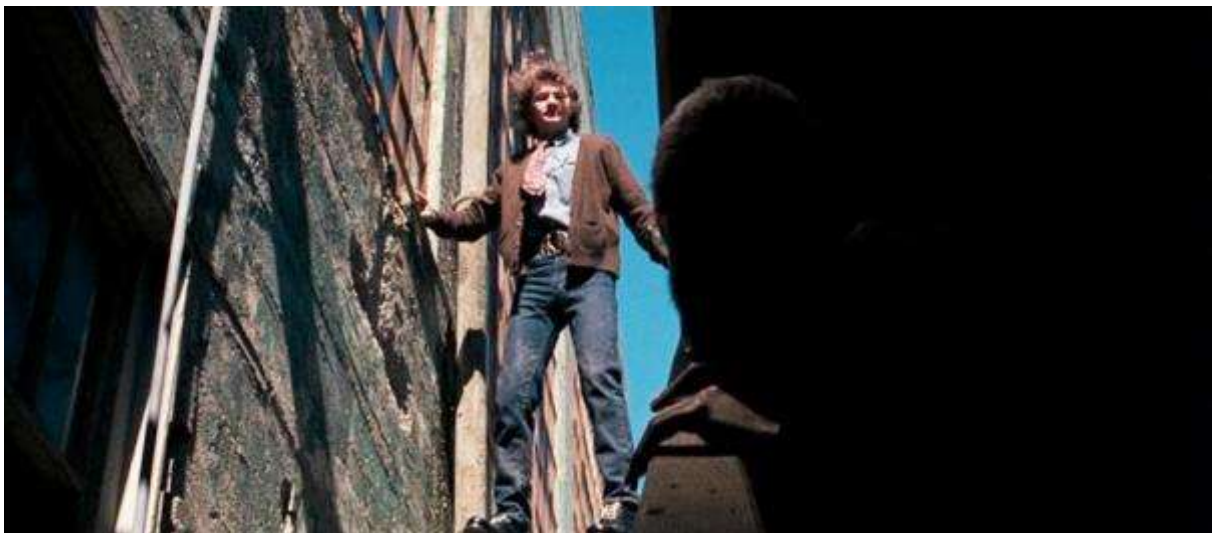
Scorpio wages war on the same society and uses those niceties against it with calculated will. The film's sequels set out to shade and moderate some of Harry's characteristics and build on his more positive and complex ones. *Magnum Force* set Harry in deadly conflict with a gang of genuine, organised vigilante cops. *The Enforcer* had him forging respect and amity with his new female partner and finding unusual common ground with a black revolutionary. *Sudden Impact* saw him romancing a woman engaged in a vendetta wiping out the men who raped her. *The Dead Pool* (1987), a goofy and very '80s retread, sported a vignette where he tried to find a non-violent and non-indulgent solution to a hooligan trying to play to television cameras. Such variations on a theme were worked whilst maintaining Harry's badass quotient, and they helped make the *Dirty Harry* series oddly engaging on a human level although they never risked going as far as *French Connection II* (1974) in deconstructing their prickly cop lead, and the price paid for such shading was Harry changed from a proper antihero into something more safe and familiar. *Unforgiven*, the film often interpreted as Eastwood's mea culpa for his violent movie past, really actually exists on a continuum of provocation and questioning in his career leading back to *Dirty Harry*.



Harry's subsequent, bruising encounters with legal authority, represented by District Attorney Rothko (Josef Sommer), sees the detective gobsmacked by the DA's harsh upbraiding and refusal to prosecute the case against Scorpio because Harry's actions have tainted the evidence. This scene is the crux of the film in one regard as an angry portrait of legal bullshit getting in the road of putting away an obvious malefactor, and its most facetious, for a cop of Harry's experience would certainly not be so surprised at Rothko's points. That said, it's not so bluntly one-eyed as it's often painted, as both sides are at least allowed to sound with duelling notes of righteous anger: "What about Ann Mary Deacon, what about her?" Harry questions at maximum growl-slur, "Who speaks for her?" "The District Attorney's office, if you'll let us," Rothko retorts. Of course, the film weights the apparent morality in its hero's favour because the audience understands what a monster Scorpio is and is obliged to agree with Harry's verdicts. But this identification is double-edged, as Harry does some despicable and dangerous things that go far beyond the pale but also implicate the viewer: if you were in the same situation and felt the same level of personal and professional responsibility, Siegel ultimately states, you'd act the same way.



Perhaps, for Siegel, it's a quality lying at the innermost core of being human, the eternal tension between animalistic will and evolved conscience, and beneath the deep underlying root where the two fuse into a base instinct for violence that can provoke and be provoked, a problem the very concept of justice attempts to reconcile. Scorpio uses crime to make himself godlike, and forces Harry in turn to embrace the brutish. Harry's battles with authority are his inner battles with his own superego, the side of him that knows well what's right and proper but can't avoid playing the game by Scorpio's rules, even as the gamester villain changes the rules when it suits him. Meanwhile Harry, happy to have Chico carry on as his partner once he recovers from his wounds, instead has to deal with Chico's admission that he intends to leave the force, a decision Harry tells Norma is the right one for them as the two have a moment of quiet reflection on their mutual torments, Harry telling the story of his wife's death and Norma meditating bitterly on the stream of abuse turned on her husband for being a cop, and asking Harry why he puts up with it, his only comment is "I don't know. I really don't."



The portion of *Dirty Harry* after Scorpio's release relieves much of the film's fixated tension and narrative flow, with Harry reduced to following Scorpio around town, even as the tension resets on a slow burn and the air of malignancy gains new substance. Scorpio thinks up a ploy to fend him off, and

plan he takes to the extreme of hiring a Black tough guy (Raymond Johnson) to beat him to a bloody pulp so he can then claim Harry did it and make appeal to the protest crowd. Scorpio provokes the heavy with a racial insult to ensure the beating is particularly convincing, and gets more than he asked for, in a scene laced with grotesque undercurrents, including what seems Scorpio's perverse delight in ugly provocations and suffering. Scorpio is a peculiar villain in his lack of any specific identity, presented as a Charles Manson-esque figure in seeming like a renegade from the eternal underclass of human flotsam who has evolved his own crazed philosophy that seems to fit the cynical times. Like Manson, despite his hippie-ish affectations, he's actually a virulent reactionary, racist, homophobic, and greedy, trying constantly to convert his willingness to give and receive violence into multiple forms of profit, with humiliating policemen like Harry ("Don't you pass out of me yet, you rotten oinker!") just as much money in the bank as any ransom cash.



The beating at least gets the result he was hoping for: after telling journalists Harry assaulted him, the cop is forcibly ordered by the Chief to stay well away from Scorpio although there isn't enough evidence to discipline him, which Harry warns him is exactly what Scorpio wants. Harry is of course right, as Scorpio cleverly attains a gun by assaulting a liquor store owner known for defending his store with his pistol, and uses this to hijack a school bus full of kids on their way home along with their terrified driver (Ruth Kobart), and renews his ransom demand. The film's maniacal edge resurges as Scorpio forces the trapped children to sing schoolyard songs with increasingly crazed and abusive fervour. Meanwhile Harry finally refuses to be involved in yet another attempt to buy the killer off when the Mayor offers him the task. This time instead, knowing Scorpio is heading for the airport, Harry waits on a railway bridge over the road and leaps upon the roof of the bus as it passes underneath.



Siegel builds to Scorpio's first glimpse of Harry on the bridge, coming right after Scorpio has freaked out all the kids as the embodiment of a childhood nightmare, as an iconic moment of imminent comeuppance to be delivered by a resurgent and purposeful hero, echoing back to the first sighting of John Wayne in *Stagecoach*: however tarnished, Harry is finally restored as the heir to the gunslinger tradition, and a few shots later Siegel has Harry walk out of a cloud of swirling dust in reference this time to Eastwood's famous appearance at the final duel in *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964). Siegel is giving a miniature genre film lesson here as well drawing parallels. The subsequent battle is very restrained by modern action movie standards, as Harry tries to keep his purchase despite speed and Scorpio's bullets, before he is hurled from the bus roof as the vehicle swerves and crashes to a halt before a rock quarry. Scorpio and Harry have a running gunfight around the quarry, a setting that again underlines the neo-Western feel whilst also encompassing Siegel's penchant for industrial settings a la *Edge of Eternity*, before Scorpio snatches up a young boy fishing to use as a human shield.



This time, of course, Harry isn't to be turned, knowing his foe's tricks too well, seeming to drop his weapon only to lift it again and knock Scorpio on his ass with a well-aimed shot to the shoulder. That still isn't the end, as Harry delivers the same challenge to test luck to Scorpio – "Did he fire six shots or

only five?" – and Scorpio, being who he is, takes his chance. Which proves his last mistake. Harry's concluding act of throwing away his Inspector's star badge is still an ambiguous gesture, one probably inspired by Gary Cooper's Will Kane doing the same at the end of *High Noon* (1952). Eastwood was afraid doing it here meant the audience would think Harry was quitting the police force, whilst Siegel argued it was simply a gesture meaning he was throwing away bureaucratic limitations, and Pauline Kael took that further to mean he was becoming a vigilante. Personally, I've always found it rhymes with the gesture in *High Noon*, where Kane, whilst still a dedicated believer in justice, signalled nonetheless in the brusque manner possible he would no longer be the patsy of a community that did not support him. Harry's gesture similarly signals the same meaning, only aimed at his superiors.



What is certain about this last shot, zooming out to an on-high remove again as the paltry plop of the star hitting the water is heard and Harry turns and heads back towards the bus with a stiff, grave march, with Schifrin's gently mournful music on sound, is that the victory brings no particularly great satisfaction because many have died, even if the necessary act of shooting the mad dog is done. The great and perpetual problem is that however much we fantasise at being the upright avenger, the hero on the range, the duellist in the dust, such a solution only ever comes too late, after the crime. And *Dirty Harry*, whilst delivering on that primal and eternal duel, is ultimately most memorable because it keeps that other, sorry truth in mind.

## Wonder Woman 1984 (2020)



Patty Jenkins' first *Wonder Woman* (2017) was a solid, well-made movie that nonetheless suffered from a very average script and some dubious casting and directing choices, as Jenkins felt her way around her first big-budget spectacle and tried to negotiate the house style. Nonetheless it came out at just the right moment, and so orgasmic was its reception a sequel became inevitable, notwithstanding *Justice League* (2017), a film that signalled along the way that not much had happened in Diana 'Wonder Woman' Prince's (Gal Gadot) life since World War I with the wound of losing her lover Steve Trevor (Chris Pine) still raw after a century. So Jenkins had to create a sequel that wouldn't mess with the established continuity but could deliver on the expected, unleashed heroic potential of the title character. *Wonder Woman 1984* splits the difference on several levels, commencing with a long flashback to Diana's youth on Themiskyra, with her younger self (Lilly Aspell) taking part in an epic Olympian sporting contest, which she takes an early lead in, only to be knocked off her horse and then chastised when she tries to cut corners. This sequence, as well as giving the special effects and stunt teams something to do, seems to have been created mostly to allow Robin Wright and Connie Nielsen to return briefly as Diana's mentor and aunt Antiope and Queen Hippolyta, who give her some more formative lessons.



In 1984 Diana is performing clandestine superhero work whilst generally living a self-effacing life as an expert in antiquities at the Smithsonian, still pining (ha) for Steve but striking up friendship with her dorky coworker Barbara Minerva (Kristen Wiig), who in turn painfully wishes to emulate Diana's charisma and poise. Not long after coming into possession of a seemingly worthless crystal recovered from a trove of South American artefacts being peddled by some thieves Diana took down, Barbara soon seems to be courted by Maxwell Lord (Pedro Pascal), an entrepreneur well-known from TV infomercials who offers easy investment in his oil drilling empire, who proposes investing in the museum. Except that Lord is scarcely more than a conman only just keeping the façade of his business afloat, and his real object of desire is the crystal, called the Dreamstone, a legendary talisman capable of realising a single wish for anyone holding it. Diana has already accidentally proven the crystal's power, having wished Steve back into existence whilst seeming to inhabit the life and body of a hapless yuppie. Diana and Steve quickly resume their passionate relationship and Steve is delighted to be introduced to the modern world, but they're soon faced with dark side of their shared miracle, as Maxwell captures the crystal and ingeniously wishes to take on the stone's properties himself, the first step towards achieving ultimate power over the world.



At first glance *Wonder Woman 1984* seems to have no particularly good reason to take place when it does beyond a broadly nostalgic vibe and keeping the drama at an appropriate remove in the series setting. Jenkins doesn't even lean on that many period pop songs apart from a little Frankie Goes to Hollywood and Gary Numan. There turns out to be a vaguely honourable motive in this, as Jenkins sets about paying tribute to the broad, more colourful and jaunty tone of '80s genre film, with nods to *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *The Philadelphia Experiment*, *Night of the Comet* (both 1984), *Top Gun* (1986), and the Christopher Reeve *Superman* films as well as *Supergirl* (1984). This isn't that new a spin for the Warner Bros.-DC franchise, as both *Aquaman* (2018) and *Shazam!* (2019) eagerly chased the same retro sensibility in spurning the gothic tone of Zack Snyder's precursors. But Jenkins goes further in recreating the vibe, getting Hans Zimmer to deliver a big, brash, chorus-inflected score, and staging an opening fight in a mall that's unabashed in recreating the goofy, family-fun tone of such models, having Diana swap winks with a small girl whilst easily tossing dimwit criminals around.



Much of the strength of *Wonder Woman 1984* and its problems both stem from its core story elements, which are remarkably true to the flavour of a one-shot silver age comic book or an episode of the Linda Carter show, or any number of other fantasy-adventure TV series. The Dreamstone is a McGuffin smartly used as both the fulcrum of the central plot and one that enables emotional arcs, most specifically by allowing the return of Steve, rather than going down the route of the TV series, which resituated from the World War II era to the present day and simply substituted Steve with his lookalike son. But it's also stretched out way too long, with about an hour's worth of plot asked to work for more than twice that length, whilst lacking a truly formidable opponent for Diana to go up against. Which is, to be fair, not necessarily an inappropriate gesture for a *Wonder Woman* story: the character was always supposed to represent a more positive-minded brand of heroism with a redemptive and nurturing dimension. In this spirit, Jenkins and her co-screenwriters Geoff Johns and Dave Callahan spend a deal of time developing Barbara and Maxwell as characters with an empathetic edge who nonetheless fall fatally under the spell of the temptation to reinvent themselves as winners, wielding all the cruel and maniacal impulses they associate with such people thanks to their life experience.





Barbara's wish to be like Diana results in her taking on Diana's powers as well as her allure, whilst Maxwell, understanding that the stone takes something for everything it grants, uses it to fulfil wishes whilst claiming his own portion, allowing him to amass colossal fortunes and influence, all for the sake of making himself into the figure he desperately wants to seem like for his son, Alistair (Lucian Perez). Soon he's suckering in people like an oil billionaire, Emir Said Bin Abydos (Amr Waked), who wants the ancient kingdom his family used to rule restored, only to find it sealed off by a colossal wall whilst Lord walks off with his private army. The effect of such unleashed power quickly becomes terribly clear as the colliding nature of wishes drives the world towards conflict and collapse, recreating a pattern Diana realises has befallen every civilisation to claim the artefact, the creation of some malevolent primeval god. Lord is of course one of a few Trumpian figures to crop up in recent blockbusters, and the film's rhetorical harking back to the Reaganite yuppie era ironically makes it a companion piece to Sean Durkin's *The Nest* (2020), which essentially plays out as the straight-faced and realistic version of the same period myth of big-talking, needy men throwing up a glitzy front. Jenkins' story evokes both the better aspects of *Superman II* (1980) and the lesser qualities of *Superman III* (1984) at points: like the former film it uses Diana's romantic quandary to become a rich subplot whilst also keeping her distracted long enough to let the main plot get moving, and like the latter it lacks a truly potent antagonist and so threatens to collapse into a mass of impulses.



Jenkins drops the pop feminist postures of the first film, allowing Diana to simply be a worthy and powerful figure, instead smartly starting to ask questions about her exceptionalism. She finds juice in the theme of jealousy and mimicry through Barbara, literally empowered through taking on Diana's talents and traits but lacking the long, hard disciplining process. Barbara is turned from a rather nice person who slips food to a homeless acquaintance to a bullying creep who relishes bashing the shit out of a harassing man, in a sequence reminiscent of the opening of the conceptually not-so-dissimilar *The Velvet Vampire* (1971). Jenkins plainly makes both Barbara and Lord avatars for her interest, first evinced in her take on Aileen Wuornos in *Monster* (2003), in characters who become monstrous in seeking liberation for the tyranny of being themselves in a cruel world. Meanwhile she lets Pine show his comic side off as Steve is handed the stereotypical superhero's girlfriend part, even letting him have a silly if fun sequence trying on 1980s fashion with a sense of discovery and delight, but without mocking his character, as his reacquainting with the world mirrors Diana's in the first film. Jenkins even gets around to describing the creation of Diana's canonical invisible plane as she uses her magic powers to cloak a jet she and Steve have purloined, with Steve somewhat improbably picking up how to fly it in a few minutes, but leading into a lovely moment where the two jet over Washington during a Fourth of July fireworks display, vibrant light and colour bursting through the cloud like their own personal dreamscape.



Jenkins introduces an edge of endangerment for Diana as she begins losing her physical strength as the price she pays for her wish, which means she gets bloodied in fights and swatted around by Barbara, who has her powers undimmed. This is another touch that suggests a *Superman II* influence, although it's never quite taken to any particularly extreme point: Barbara beats her up when she and Steve try to forestall Lord's attempts to suborn the President (Stuart Milligan). There are surprisingly few big action sequences in the film, anchored as it is mid-way by a road chase where Diana and Steve try to catch Lord's armoured motorcade. Jenkins tips her hat to Steven Spielberg here to a degree that suggests she'd be great tackling more gritty and earthbound action along the Indiana Jones lines, and the most likeable moment of heroic business comes from Steve as he gets in on the action too, a vignette that has a buzz specifically because he's just a man. Perhaps, however accidentally, Jenkins here has managed to define the eventual end-zone for the superhero genre, ceding ground back to heroes for whom adventuring is a risk and therefore are more truly thrilling. Big special effects business is limited too, which might be thankful given that a lot of the effects in view are rather weak. The major set-piece is Diana learning how to fly unassisted, with Jenkins wielding it for purely lyrical spectacle, swinging from lightning bolt to bolt with her golden lasso, Steve's meditations of how to fly helping her achieve the next stage of her evolution.



Jenkins builds to a climax where Diana has to counter Lord's embodiment of uncontrolled greed with appeal to the better self in everyone on the planet, complete with a delirious reveal in the climax where Lord's history as an abused child is suddenly deployed in spasmodic flashback. The outsized, swooning emotionalism reaches its operatic height before even that, as Steve begs Diana to let go of him and recant her wish, pausing for a list kiss of desperate passion before she dashes away through mounting chaos and says the words she know will erase him. Gadot's casting as Diana was cunning as she seemed someone who naturally embodied the character's endowments and so didn't need to be the greatest actress in the world, but whilst she's unlikely to be the next Meryl Streep, she's genuinely affecting in this scene, particularly as Diana's despair contrasts Steve's wide-eyed promise she can move on from him. Pascal is deft in balancing the disparate aspects of his character, part familiar power-mad comic book villain, part satirical take on a frantically smarmy shyster pretending to be a big shot, part damaged little boy. He provides what's most plainly different about *Wonder Woman 1984*. Wiig seems at the outset more awkwardly cast. She's obviously well-drilled in playing wallflowers seeking to bust loose; murderous glamazons not so much. But she handles Barbara's shifts well, her comic talent turned to inhabiting a woman with a new sense of what her body can do, matched to the nascent ferocity of her long-quelled anger with the world driving her to destructive extremes.



Barbara gets Lord to transform her into a literally leonine hybrid (okay, yeah, she's "Cheetah") in her desire to become something inhuman and extraordinary, a great concept that sadly isn't well-delivered, in terms of both screen time and special effects – she looks a little too much like one of the instant camp CGI creations from *Cats* (2019) – although there's a nice edge of feral mania in the climax where she and Diana battle, Barbara's claws ripping through the enchanted metal wings of the legendary suit of armour Diana dons. What Jenkins does here is most interesting in trying to make her heroes and villains stand for something substantial rather than simply operate as functions of the plot and service of the franchise, just as she insists that Diana's emotional journey is the real key to the movie, and that her powers are essentially a visually exciting expression of that journey. The parochially underlined morals and messages hold true, in their way, to the source material. The only major failing is being set in 1984 and yet neglecting to include the TV show theme, although it does manage to fit Carter in for a jolly cameo right at the end. Despite its flaws and miscalculations, there's something charmingly gauche and utterly fulsome about *Wonder Woman 1984*. It's a movie that doesn't have a mean-spirited bone in its celluloid body, a true-hearted and exceptionally crafted tribute to the comic book spirit and the Saturday morning kid's TV tradition.



## Starship Troopers (1997)

A black rectangular box containing the title "STARSHIP TROOPERS" in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters, centered horizontally and vertically.

# STARSHIP TROOPERS

**Director:** Paul Verhoeven

**Screenwriter:** Ed Neumeier

*Starship Troopers* suffered from a serious case of bad timing. *Starship Troopers* saw Paul Verhoeven and Ed Neumeier, the creative hands behind *RoboCop* (1987), one of the signal cult hits of the 1980s, reteaming for another trip to the same well of genre thrills blended with high concept satire. Verhoeven had followed *RoboCop*'s success with *Total Recall* (1990) and *Basic Instinct* (1992), two more big, disreputable hits, but hit a career reef with the failure of *Showgirls* (1995), an attempt to marry acidic camp satire and exploitation movie precepts. *Starship Troopers* was supposed to reverse Verhoeven's fortunes but finished up compounding his problems by also bombing at the box office, bewildering an audience expecting something more familiar and straightforwardly fun. *RoboCop* had nailed down the fetid mood of the late Reaganite era's strange blend of conservatism and hedonism, and its spiky humour added zest to a classical tale of the hero triumphing over the corrupt and profane. But the mood of the late 1990s was at odds with Verhoeven's new gambit in satirising war movies and militarism, a time of general peace and prosperity for much of the western world as well as eddying uncertainty, the paradigms that had shaped collective thinking for nearly a century suddenly irrelevant. Verhoeven's sardonic call-backs to the gung-ho stylistics of World War II propaganda films and posters, a very retro-style frame, blended with violent, flashy contemporaneous filmmaking offered a strange and unstable aesthetic clue. At the time the burgeoning internet was still seen as a great new portal with a generally progressive application, whereas Verhoeven presented it as a new mode for propaganda and curated worldview manipulation.



The film's chief relevance to its moment seemed to be in smartly identifying the general frustration for a lot of '90s youth that they'd never been given a great generation-defining task like war or, as for many of their parents, resistance to one, even whilst provoking with the warning to be careful what you wish for. It didn't take long however for *Starship Troopers* to reveal its wicked prognosticative edge as the War on Terror commenced, when the narcotic-like addiction to macho imagery applied to great patriotic use became an entire political paradigm, the slow and painful weaning from which we've seen acted out in gruesome detail these past few years. *Starship Troopers* also came out at a moment when the kinds of social and political assumptions contained in a lot of classic Science Fiction as a genre was being investigated and critiqued by critics and scholars. The film's approach to Robert A. Heinlein's Hugo Award-winning source novel, published in 1959 and intended as a blood-and-thunder yarn for younger readers, was entirely in synch with this movement, and counted in itself as a radical act of genre criticism. The film also recognised the subtext in popularity for movies like *Star Wars* (1977), *Aliens* (1986), and *Predator* (1986) in refashioning the narrative patterns of old war movies and westerns for a new age absent any obvious and immediate geopolitical enemies to render as villains, and made sport of it.



Heinlein was long a leading sci-fi writer and one who wielded some sway as a thinker, particularly thanks to his novel *Stranger In A Strange Land* which served as a strong influence on the counterculture movement of the 1960s with its theme of an alien-raised human who returns to Earth and sets about remaking its culture. Heinlein had started off as a liberal but became a staunch libertarian, and his writing was often preoccupied by exploring social ideas. But his writing also represented a mishmash of political repercussions through articulating a need, commonly worked through in sci-fi, to celebrate a kind of transformative individualism. *Starship Troopers* told the story of some young heroes in a futuristic Earth society that's become politically united but also reverted to a kind of Spartan state structure where citizenship is attendant on military participation, and prospective citizens are trained to the limit to become warriors resisting a war of species pitting humans against extra-terrestrial arachnids. In many ways Heinlein's novel simply did what sci-fi is supposed to do: create a coherent vision not simply of dramatic events and technological concepts but to think through ideas of what society looks like it does and what form it takes in other situations. Heinlein had the then still-recent experience of mass mobilisation and indoctrination of World War II to draw on. But his vision was troubling regardless, and the fascistic undercurrent to the vision he and some other early sci-fi heroes often wielded had been noted and artistically reacted to by a subsequent generation of genre writers.



One aspect of the novel Verhoeven and Neumeier didn't bother transferring, perhaps to avoid potential special effects difficulties or, more likely, so Verhoeven could sell his WW2 movie lampoon more easily, was abandoning his concept of mechanised armoured suits worn by his future soldiers, today a common trope and one Heinlein is generally seen as having popularised. Verhoeven rather makes the mismatch of the seemingly fearsome but actually insufficient machine guns his space warriors carry and their monster foes part of his own commentary on fascist precepts: a person in uniform with a mass-produced gun is at once the most cynically expendable and rhetorically exalted phenomenon in human society. That, or firing off "nukes" that provoke enormous and indiscriminate destruction. Verhoeven's take on Heinlein becomes something of a moveable feast encompassing a multiplicity of genre mockeries that relentlessly disassemble their nominal purpose. Early scenes evoke the glossy glory of movies mythologising a high school experience, presenting good-looking young folk who play American Football (albeit some kind of weird, future indoor variety) and go to proms, highlighting a not-so-secret motive behind this mythology that goes back to the unadorned ambitions behind the founding of the Olympic Games: training a warrior generation through sports and competition. Then the film into an extended, extremist riff on films like Allan Dwan's *The Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949) where some raw recruits are given harsh training and where eventually they emerge not only battle-readied, but intellectually persuaded of the rightness of their cause and duty, the once-dubious protagonist entirely indoctrinated into following in the footsteps of his hard mentor.





Where *RoboCop* had helped create context and weave in satire with the recurring motif of TV news reports, *Starship Troopers* commences and returns regularly to a kind of internet site on the “Federal Network” proffering clips of state-provided infomercials and news stories that give insight to both the political and social moment, and punctuated by the recurring phrase, “Do you want to know more?” by the announcer (John Cunningham), which, notably, the person nominally surfing the site never does. Some clips offer seemingly benign factoids whilst another reassures the viewer with the vignette of a murderer “caught this morning and tried this afternoon,” with his execution scheduled for live viewing. The tone of the clips often segues within a blink from the broad and shiny tone of community service advertising and unadorned bloodlust-stoking. The opening recruiting commercial for the Mobile Infantry features ranks of soldiers, modelled after shots in Leni Riefenstahl’s *The Triumph of the Will* (1935), broken up by the sight of a pint-sized moppet gaining laughs from the soldiers when he claims, “I’m doing my part too!” The dig here at a very recognisable kind of cutesey-poo from advertising and TV is withering. Later Verhoeven offers the sight of kids stamping on more familiar insects in a ritual of patriotic involvement and killing, the words “Do Your Part!” flashing on screen whilst a mother cheers the kids on in hysterical fashion, in one of the most subtly disturbing scenes in mainstream cinema.



These jolts of sleazy suggestion about the brutal and repressive underpinnings of the future society are given more dimension as the film's central figure Johnny Rico (Casper Van Dien) and his girlfriend Carmen Ibañez (Denise Richards) are properly introduced, in a high school class being lectured by their teacher Mr Rasczak (Michael Ironside) teaching civics. Rasczak proudly shows off the curtailed arm he received in military service and explains the basic philosophical presumptions of their world, including "Something given has no value" and "Naked force has resolved more issues throughout history than any other factor." As in the novel, the characters are from Buenos Aires, and yet their modes of speech and culture have been entirely subsumed into caricatured all-Americanness, whilst the one-world government, the United Citizen Federation, restricts citizenship to only those who have served in the military. Humans have colonised much of the galaxy but are coming up against a truly ferocious enemy in the form of a society formed by multiple species of giant arachnid, or bugs as they're usually called, whose apparent lack of higher intelligence doesn't prevent them pursuing the same intergalactic habits of colonisation and territorial expansion.



The film's opening proper after the first web break depicts an attempt by human soldiers to invade the bugs' home planet of Klendathu as seen through the lens of a new crew for the Federation web service, a blur of bloodshed and mayhem as the soldiers seem to be routed by the rampaging monsters. Johnny is glimpsed as one of the soldiers being terribly wounded by one, collapsing before the dropped camera of the dead photographer, screaming him pain. This scene seems to have had an immediate impact on the subsequent burgeoning of the found-footage movie style, containing all its essential motifs as well as style. The shift into flashback explains what brought Johnny to such a fate, as he resolves to join the Federation mobile infantry in part to please Carmen, who has her heart set on joining the Federation space fleet to gain citizenship, but he can't follow her there because his math skills are too lame. Nor can he kick along with his best friend Carl (Neil Patrick Harris), whose psychic talents lead him towards becoming a senior tactician.



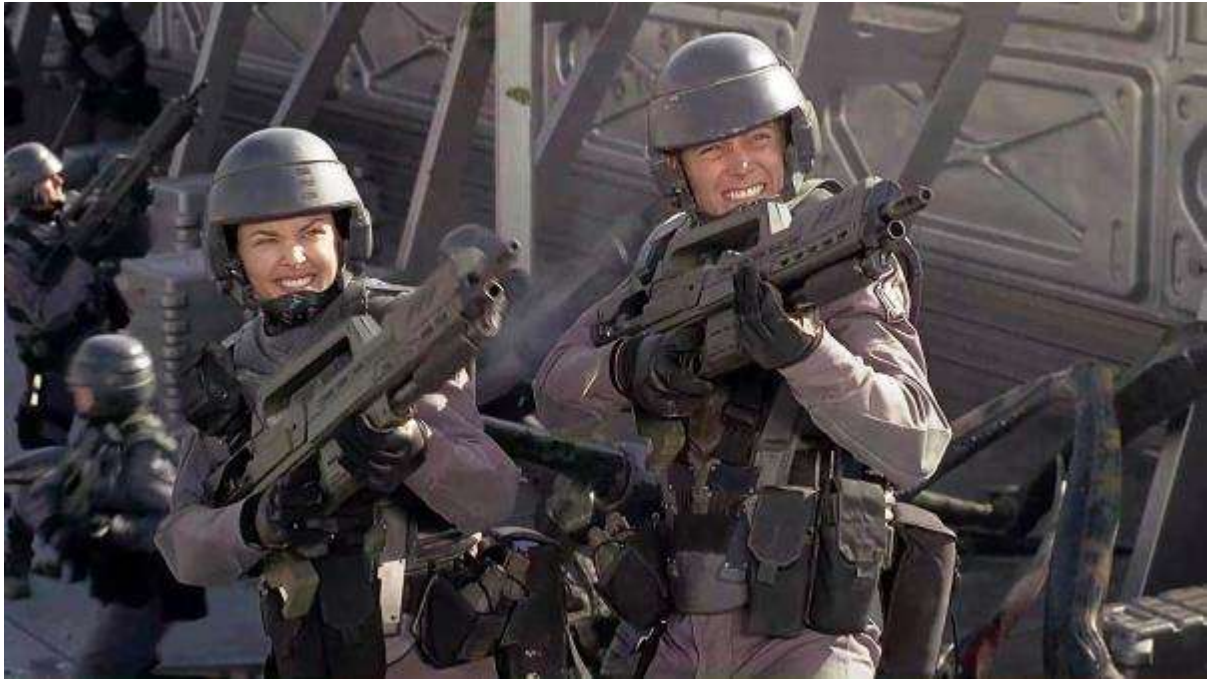
Johnny's decision to join the infantry stirs his parents' (Christopher Curry and Lenore Kasdorf) concerns and he finds himself in a struggle to assert his independence, going through with joining up despite being cut off by his angry father. In Mobile Infantry boot camp he gains friends and allies in his training squad, including the brash Ace Levy (Jake Busey), 'Kitten' Smith (Matt Levin), Breckinridge (Eric Bruskotter), Katrina (Blake Lindsley), and Shujimi (Anthony Ruivivar). His former quarterback from high school football, Isabelle 'Dizzy' Flores (Dina Meyer) also enters the squad, and Johnny thinks she's followed him into his training unit because of her long-unrequited crush. The squad must face the harsh, bordering on cruel, training methods utilised by Career Sergeant Zim (Clancy Brown), which include impaling Ace's hand with a knife and almost throttling Dizzy when she and he have a bout to test his recruits' hand-to-hand skills. Johnny is left depressed and unsure of what he's doing when he gets a video message from Carmen telling him she loves the space fleet life so much she's joining up for life. His physical prowess allows him, with some help from Dizzy, to shine during training. Johnny is made Squad Commander, but then a fatal accident during training gets one of his people killed and another drummed out. Johnny elects to take "administrative punishment" of ten public lashes, only to then decide to quit, but before he can go home Buenos Aires is destroyed by a meteorite propelled by the bugs, and the Mobile Infantry are mobilised for the Klendathu assault.



Verhoeven's fork-tongued wit applies itself as much through style as storytelling detail. Part of his peculiar cachet as a director, the source of both his moments of great success and his ultimate failure in Hollywood, stemmed from the gusto with which he set out to nominally give audiences what they seemingly want, but piled on with a reckless excess quickly annexing camp and subversion. I've often felt that aspect of Verhoeven's sensibility hampered the intelligent edge of *Total Recall* to a great extent, but it's perfectly deployed here. *Starship Troopers* comes on with violence, gore, action, sex, nudity, piled up to the point of obviously becoming camp, whilst still working on a basic genre film level. Early scenes with their bright, glossy cinematography applied to handsomely angular young stars ape the broad tone of TV teen soap operas. Jokes nod to standard TV broadness, like Carmen vomiting as she and Johnny do some dissection for biology class, except Verhoeven distorts through excess, as they're dissecting a bug carcass with Johnny enthusiastically dumping piles of innards into Carmen's hands. Casting Harris at that time was a particularly dry touch, as he was still chiefly known for his show *Doogie Howser M.D.*, and soon enough Verhoeven has him swanning about in a kind of generic brand SS uniform. Rue McClanahan, star of the jolly, saccharine sitcom *The Golden Girls*, appears as a weird and haughty biology teacher who saunters about like some ballet grande dame with sunglasses and walking stick whilst instructing her students on the superiority of the bugs as a species. Meanwhile Van Dien and Richards suck face they look like they're in danger of cutting each-other with their jutting facial features.



A football contest between Johnny and Dizzy's high school team and some visitor present Johnny with a rival in both sport and love in the form of Lt Zander Barcalow (Patrick Muldoon), who has chemistry with Carmen and soon turns out to be her flight supervisor when she's assigned as pilot to a space warship, the *Rodger Young*, commanded by Captain Deladier (Brenda Strong). When Johnny finally encounters them as a couple just before the assault on Klendathu, the two men have a brawl in a shipboard common room and are finally dragged apart by their respective service chums. The attack on Klendathu, seen again now from a familiar cinematic vantage, is revealed to be a total disaster where the humans are ambushed on the ground by hordes of the fearsome soldier arachnids and the fleet is badly damaged by the gigantic globules of superheated plasma huge bugs are able to fire into space: so effective is the bug response that people begin to theorise the arachnids have an intelligent caste of "brain bugs." Johnny's unit is wiped out save Ace and Dizzy, whilst Johnny takes a terrible wound that is repaired whilst he's immersed in a stasis pod, mechanical arms stitching him fibre by fibre. After his recovery, the three are reassigned to a new unit whose fearsome commander is infamous but also saved their lives on Klendathu. This proves to be none other than Raszak, who leads "Raszak's Roughnecks" with both a literal and metaphorical iron hand, and soon Johnny and his pals begin to find their feet as warriors, with Johnny promoted repeatedly by Raszak for his displays of prowess whilst the people he replaces die.



Verhoeven's formative experiences, as a child of World War II and someone who fell in love with movies in the 1950s, are apparent throughout *Starship Troopers*. The film contends with superficial jauntiness and a deeper level of queasiness with the matter of militarism, trying to understand the appeal of something that had laid waste to the world Verhoeven had grown up in. The movie influences are fonder, with many nods to the films of Byron Haskin, most obviously the infernal hues of *The War of the Worlds* (1953), and also his *The Naked Jungle* (1953) with its marauding insect hordes and *Conquest of Space* (1955), with a similar scene of the *Rodger Young* dodging a colossal meteor. Beyond those, a plethora of war and sci-fi movies. The hyperbolic recreation of a zillion movies about recruits being trained for combat pushes familiar motifs to ridiculous limits, climaxing in near-pornographic style with Johnny's lashing, beefcake body spreadeagled in a frame and bloody trails carved in his back. When Johnny is inducted, a veteran lacking both legs and an arm processes his request, commenting that "the Mobile Infantry made me the man I am today!", a scene close to one in *All Quiet On The Western Front* where the officer overseeing training is similarly war-mangled.



Such noble clichés as the chicken officer who freaks out, the commander who orders his subordinate to shoot him if he's badly wounded, the key lines of patented tough talk handed on from one generation to another, and the soldier who dies heroically blowing himself up in a rear-guard battle make the grade, are purveyed with such intensity they become new again. Verhoeven also keeps intact from more generic WWII flicks the motif of the motley, multiracial gang of recruits, with the added twist that the Mobile Infantry unblinkingly includes women, leading to such odd sights as a group shower where everyone's buck naked and chatting casually about their reasons for joining up. One quality that's particularly shrewd about *Starship Troopers* in this fashion is that where a tinnier satire might avoid complicating its portrait, this one presents its future fascist-tinted state as one that's also utopian in a lot of ways, lacking gender and racial prejudice, obliging a more ambivalent response that lies at the root of why the film made as many viewers uncomfortable as those who got the joke. Utopias are an old and ever-controversial subject of intellectual reverie and it's a particular provenance for sci-fi as its creators can dream them up and pull them apart at whim. What's particularly odd here is that in the 1990s and through today dystopias are, pop culture-wise, much more popular in sci-fi, dark portraits of glamorously decayed societies.





*Starship Troopers* actually tries to get at why such suspicion lingers, baiting the viewer with a shiny, inclusive, gutsy future world as if actively seeking to make people ache for such a world whilst constantly signalling its dark, cruel, iniquitous side: it offers a vision of such a society as that society would like to see itself, which is indeed what an awful lot of mainstream art provides. Of course, to be a human being in any society at any time means accepting as normal things that other humans in other times and societies might consider barbaric and evil. Whilst it's hardly a direct parody, *Starship Troopers* can be described as *Star Trek's* evil twin, with its vision of a future Federation conducting gunboat diplomacy in space, egalitarian in social make-up and yet conveniently unfolding in a setting still defined by militaristic hierarchy (although the Gene Roddenberry TV show might have been borrowing some ideas from Heinlein in the first place). In *Starship Troopers* a white Sky Marshall (Bruce Gray) takes the blame for the Klendathu disaster and resigns to be replaced by an African woman (Denise Dowse). The female characters in the film are strong and strident figures, particularly Dizzy, a top athlete and good soldier whose only foil is the torch she carries for Johnny. Meyer, who might rightly have expected a much better career after this, is terrific as Dizzy, able to be at once ferocious and smoulderingly sexual all at once in a manner few movie heroines have ever been allowed to be, as if Verhoeven was trying to conscientiously recreate the femme fatale figures Sharon Stone had played for him in *Total Recall* and *Basic Instinct* as a positive figure.



Nonetheless, perhaps with tongues in their cheek, Verhoeven and Neumeier said on their audio commentary for the film's DVD release that they ultimately had Carmen survive and Dizzy die, despite a general audience sentiment preferring her, to be "good feminists." The crucial difference between *RoboCop* and *Starship Troopers* lies ultimately in the attitude to the central characters and their relationship with their society. Whilst *RoboCop* presents the title character as a literal corporate construct and mercilessly teases its futuristic landscape, the storyline ultimately affirms Alex Murphy's regaining of self, in tension with the powers that create him, standing up for a set of values that exist distinct from an increasingly debased society. Whereas in *Starship Troopers* there's no such reassuring message cutting across the grain of the invented society's mores. Rather on the contrary, Johnny, Carmen, Carl and others all learn how to become better conformists as the story unfolds. They fully embody undoubtedly heroic traits of bravery, self-sacrifice, fervent camaraderie, and leadership, but these are ultimately streamlined to the Federation's needs, as they're served up as claw fodder. Carl berates Johnny and Carmen for being appalled at his cynicism when it's revealed he sent the Roughnecks into danger to lure out the brain bugs, countered with "You don't approve? Well too bad. We're in this for the species, girls and boys!"



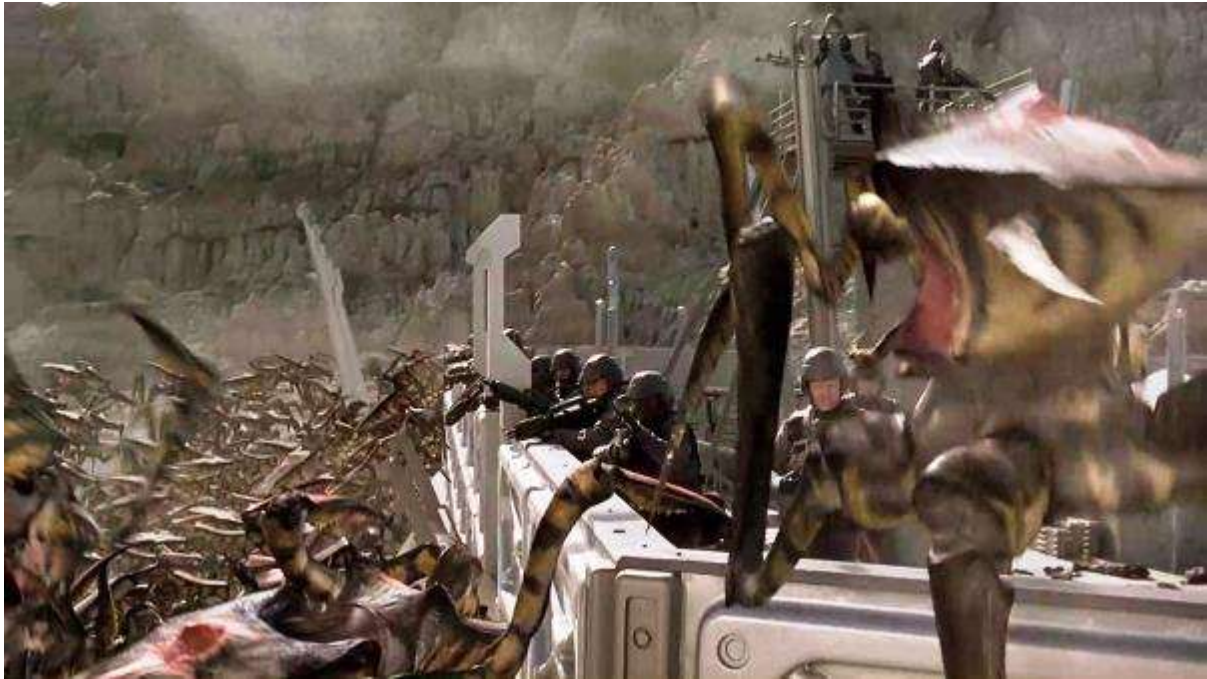
Meanwhile Ironside, who had done good villain work for Verhoeven in *Total Recall* after graduating from David Cronenberg's Canadian films, gives an inspired performance that works on a level not that dissimilar to all those old B-movie faces in *Airplane!* (1980), somehow managing to utter a line like "They sucked his brains out!" in all seriousness but with the finest thread of camp knowing attached. Rasczak amusingly transfers authority from the classroom into the real world, merely amplifying the mix of brutality and pedagogy he wielded in the former setting once unleashed as a commander in the field. The bloodcurdling tenor to the violence as Verhoeven presents humans ripped to shreds by arachnids and having the flesh burned off their bones by their plasma expulsions is alternatively amusingly gross and properly horrifying. What's notable here is Verhoeven takes advantage of the fantastical-absurd context to confront physical horror as often elided in war movies, as well as trying to animate the cringe-inducing possibilities of warfare with an inherently different survey of species. These range from the soldier arachnids with their huge, torso-bifurcating mandibles to flying bugs with lance-like limbs and the huge plasma-spraying tanker bugs, one of which Johnny manages to take out singlehandedly by leaping onto its back, penetrating its armour with his machine gun, and throwing a grenade into the wound that blows it to pieces. This act of warrior grit marks the beginning of Johnny's rehabilitation and ascent up the ranks.



Part of what makes *Starship Troopers* still work as entertainment despite its insidious subtexts and satirical nudges is the way Verhoeven invests even the most absurdly cliché character moments with a weird seriousness. Such moments range from Johnny's father betraying his ultimate pride in his son despite all his objections – just before being annihilated by the Buenos Aires meteor – by asking over a video link where his uniform is, to Johnny's register of offence when he sees Carmen and Zander as a couple, and Rasczak's earnest advice to Johnny never to pass up a good thing when he notices Dizzy's ongoing flirtation with him. The portrayal of the young soldiers as a community full of cheeky good-humour recalls the respect Verhoeven gave the police in *RoboCop* as the human edge of the corrupt wedge, as when they mercilessly tease Johnny as he records a video message to Carmen. The Roughnecks' celebration after a battle offers the oddly delightful sight of Rasczak handing out beer and sports equipment to his soldiers who immediately improvise a kegger-hoedown. Ace happily sawing away on an electric violin to regale his comrades, tipping a hat to the Western genre roots of so much space opera fare whilst giving it all a space-age sheen. The party sees Johnny and Dizzy finally hooking up in one of Verhoeven's patented sex scenes, notable for their being actually sexy, as here when the two kiss passionately with Dizzy's shirt pulled halfway up over her face. They're interrupted by Rasczak who tells them they have to mobilise again in ten minutes, only to extend it to twenty minutes to give them time to get down to it.



The subtler but pervasive aspect of this whole sequence is how smartly Verhoeven nails down the tenor of adolescent fantasy as most essentially one of belonging, Verhoeven's highly mobile camerawork and the careful weaving of the actors in choreography helping create the impression of group unity and high spirits as well as the kindling at last of good old-fashioned sexual energy. That appeal, to the need to belong, to be embraced by community, is key to both the consumption of much popular entertainment and also to political propaganda, and it's a correlation Verhoeven strikes insistently. Ultimately arriving too early to catch the wave of new affection for hunky leading men, Van Dien nonetheless expertly conveyed the right spirit Verhoeven required here, playing Johnny in an old-fashioned manner, never less than the perfect budding Aryan superman in looks but still struggling to overcome character flaws before finally arriving as a leader figure filled with sardonic stoicism. Busey's angular gregariousness as Ace, with his grin like the xenomorph queen in *Aliens*, provides a likeably eccentric counterpoint as Ace, ambitious at first but happy to simply serve after fouling up as squad leader on Klendathu.



When they're next deployed on Planet 'P' the Roughnecks investigate an outpost that sent out a distress signal and find their fortified position has been overrun and everyone slaughtered except for a General (Marshall Bell) who escaped by hiding in a freezer, and raves about the insects getting inside people's heads and forcing them to send the distress signal, a grotesque possibility that seems born out when the Roughnecks find corpses with punctured and emptied skulls. Rasczak realises they've been lured into a trap and the Roughnecks fight a desperate battle against an overwhelming arachnid attack. Both Rasczak and Dizzy are fatally wounded – Johnny has to shoot his commander and has a mangled and gore-sputting Dizzy die in his arms confessing her gratitude they were together at the end, leaving Johnny the Roughnecks' commander after he and the scant other survivors are rescued by Carmen and Zander. The Roughnecks' battle in the fort plainly references many a Western forebear as the bugs come swarming out and over the ramparts, unleashing a giddy massacre of severed heads, punctured bodies, roasted flesh, and blasted bug parts. After barely being rescued the team is then sent back to Planet P to locate the malignant intelligence that set up the ambush Carl believes is present there: a brain bug.

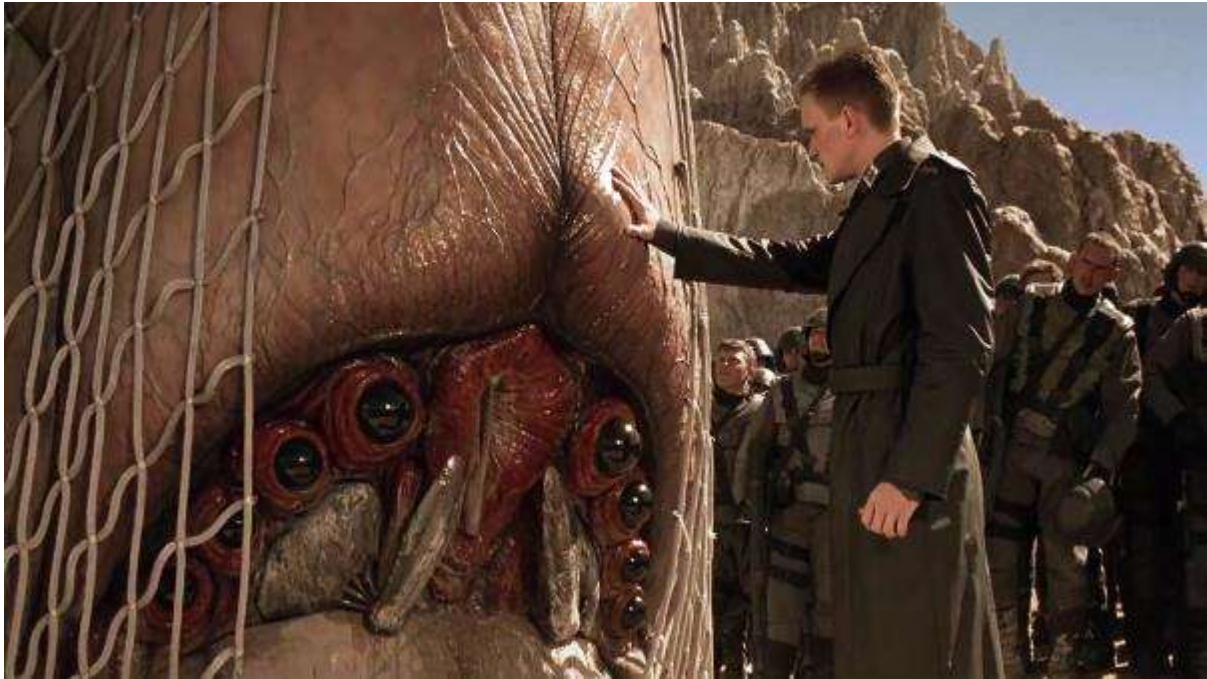


Not the least quality of *Starship Troopers* is the amazing special effects work, with input from Industrial Light and Magic and former stop motion animation wizard Phil Tippett, offering a then-cutting-edge fusion of model work, digital effects, and puppetry. Over twenty years later a lot of this still looks incredibly good, better indeed than most of the digital sludge in recent blockbusters, and working equally well in the contrasting visions of space fleets and rampaging animals, the latter reaching an apogee when the Roughnecks behold a seeming sea of rampaging bugs charging the fort. The quality of the effects matches Verhoeven's familiar shooting style with its bright palette and forcefully mobile camera, knitting a comic book-like graphic clarity throughout, at odds with the oncoming style of heavily edited action and visual gimmickry just coming into vogue thanks to directors like Michael Bay but certainly not antiquated-seeming. Verhoeven and his effects team offer startlingly great action scenes almost casually, like Johnny's Ahab-like ride on the tanker bug's back in trying to kill it, and the destruction of the *Rodger Young* amidst a fusillade of plasma spurts, slicing the great spaceship in half, a sequence that stands readily with anything seen in the *Star Wars* movies. The edge of blackly comic excess is never far away though, as Verhoeven has Deladier get crushed under a sliding bulkhead in another vignette of gory, heroic hyperbole, commander still bawling out orders in concern for her crew even as she's cut in two.



The climax sees Carmen and Zander managing to escape the *Rodger Young* only to crash-land on P and find themselves at the mercy of the monstrous, many-eyed, vaguely penile brain bug and its horde of helpers, whilst Johnny, unknowingly given psychic nudges where to find them by Carl, leads Ace and fellow Roughneck Sugar Watkins (Seth Gilliam) to track them down. Here *Starship Troopers* notably collapses any sense of ironic distance between the travails of the individual characters and their function as members of a militarised society, a final dissolution made explicit by Zander as, just before he has his brains gruesomely imbibed by the brain bug. He declares, "Someday someone like me is going to kill you and your whole fucking race," a line of bravado that signifies humans achieving the same negation of individual identity as the bugs. Carmen manages to hack off the brain bug's brain-sucking organ and Johnny arrives to fend it off by threatening to let off a nuke blast before Watkins, fatally wounded, lets off the nuke in his last stand. Finally, in a final nod to the material's B-movie roots, Zim is hailed as a hero having reduced himself to a Private's rank to get in on the fighting and finally captures the brain bug as it tries to escape.





For all the heroic sturm-und-drang of this battle for pure survival, Verhoeven returns to sounding queasy absurdism. Carl swans in with his increasingly Nazi-like uniform and uses his psychic powers to diagnose the captured brain bug as finally having learned fear of the humans, and exultantly announces it to the cheering assembly of troops, a moment of pure fascist sentiment. Carmen, despite having a colossal bug claw in her body a few minutes earlier, cheerily embraces Johnny and Carl. Despite making the brain bug utterly horrendous in appearance and behaviour, Verhoeven nonetheless obliges a level of sympathy for it in allowing the special effects artists to make it register as much or more emotion as the humans in its quivering vulnerability once stripped of its fellow arachnids, with final glimpses of the cringing creature being mercilessly tortured by human scientists under the guise of research. In a return to the propaganda reel style of the opening, our heroes are finally glimpsed riding out to battle again, with the last titles announcing confidently, "They'll Keep Fighting — And They'll Win!" It's certainly tempting to say that by this point *Starship Troopers* has become what it countenances. But that neglects what's ultimately most pertinent about its form and function, trying to articulate something a more earnest take would miss: indeed, would be obliged to miss. The sliver of black diamond deep in its cold, evil heart knows well the narcotic appeal of such things, and refuses to let us off the hook.

## San Francisco (1936)



The biggest box office hit of 1936, *San Francisco* remains one of the legendary movies of its time, and might even be said to represent a true curtain-raiser for classic Hollywood's second and longest imperial age. A splashy production for MGM, the film sported two of the moment's biggest stars, Clark Gable and Jeanette MacDonald, in roles carefully tailored to be iconic for their diverging screen personas, and helped another, Spencer Tracy, in his rise. The groundbreaking sequence depicting the infamous 1906 earthquake is still impressive and remained an endlessly anthologised yardstick in special effects technique for decades, confirming that problems the coming of sound had imposed on filmmakers were now entirely surmounted in displaying the technical muscle studio filmmaking could wield. It's jarring to think that *San Francisco* was released less than ten years into the talkie era considering its sophistication as a piece of technical and aesthetic assembly, confident and fluid in unfolding even as it stretches to contain multiple generic impulses as a combination of musical, urban melodrama, and disaster movie. It's also, most definitely, a work that announces new realities in the Hollywood of 1936, most particularly the new regime of the Production Code and the attendant impact on the way Hollywood saw itself and how it would sell product to viewers for the next three decades.



*San Francisco* also revises aspects of Gable and director W.S. Van Dyke's earlier hit *Manhattan Melodrama* (1934), where Gable had played a hardboiled gangster with a decent streak known as Blackie. *San Francisco* sees Gable's Blackie Norton as no longer a hood, but rather a successful nightclub owner, if still from a hardscrabble background and just as tough and canny, in old San Francisco's Barbary Coast. Blackie is drawn into a fateful battle with Nob Hill aristocrat and political powerbroker Jack Burley (Jack Holt), over issues both personal and civic, as Blackie is talked by fellow nightlife honchos into running for the city's Board of Supervisors to force through tougher fire laws, against the interests of Burley and other bigwigs. Blackie and Burley also battle over Mary Blake (MacDonald), an immensely talented singer from Colorado who gets her break with Blackie when he employs her as a songstress in his club, but quickly attracts the attention of renowned opera conductor Baldini (William Ricciardi) and his patron Burley. Mary soon becomes the toast of the swankier parts of town when she appears at the Tivoli Opera House, built by Burley as an emblem of the civilising project he's imposing on the wild burg. Mary falls in love with Blackie and initially accepts his marriage proposal, but abandons him to perform opera.



Van Dyke was just the sort of director to thrive in classic Hollywood, a powerhouse figure since working as an assistant director to D.W. Griffith in the mid-1910s who was dubbed “One-Shot Woody” for his extremely economical and unfussy shooting style that nonetheless retained a keen sense of performative energy from actors. Able to adapt to a house style and careen through many genres whilst rarely devolving into mere, bland craftsmanship, he turned out films as fabled and punchy as *Tarzan the Ape Man* (1932) and *The Thin Man* (1934) but also proved himself able to foster the squarer pleasures of MacDonald’s hit musicals with Nelson Eddy like *Rose Marie* (1936), and held a reputation as an effective star-maker. *San Francisco* offered Van Dyke a project with personal resonance. Van Dyke had been a child actor and had performed in the pre-quake San Francisco and so his intimate knowledge of the old, rowdy city and the energy required of performers in that age was also given a gloss of personal nostalgia. He was also a lifelong Christian Scientist, and surely understood the schismatic sense of the world encoded in the film’s plot, hinging on a clash between the sacrosanct and the base in several dimensions, enacted on spiritual, sociological, and artistic levels. The script was penned by *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* scribe Anita Loos, who probably had to stifle her own giggling whilst typing out some of the cheesier scenes, but also incorporates elements reminiscent of her most famous work, with MacDonald’s Mary as the quintessential small town girl come to the big city to make her fortune and who tells Baldini she once sat for three days in his waiting room.



Gable's Blackie is a quintessential type for the actor, a rough diamond admired by those who know him and share his immediate world with dimensions close to folk heroism, but possessed of a forthright and frank earthiness that limits him. Coming into conflict with Burley, whose roots as a blueblood scarcely reach much deeper but embodies how even a generation's advantage can imbue pretences, Blackie displays vigour and a certain perverse genius for political gestures, especially when he knocks out one of Burley's provocateurs at a rally, but eventually finds himself outmanoeuvred on several levels. Burley's reach with the infrastructure of the city, particularly the cops and the courts, can be turned to hurting Blackie financially, and romantically as Burley offers Mary prospects far beyond Blackie's mere interest in making her a top-billed chanteuse. Blackie has a tendency to love-'em-and-leave-'em affairs, coupled with a general cynicism towards spiritual values, both of which sets him sharply at odds with his childhood pal turned priest Father Tim Mullin (Tracy). Mullin objects strenuously when Blackie proposes to marry Mary and send her out to perform wearing black tights and little else from the hips down – gasp! Mullin's interference so offends Blackie his pal punches him in the face despite knowing well that Mullin is a far better fighter than him, but Mullin's forbearance helps convince Mary to leave Blackie and accept Burley's offer of marriage instead.



Van Dyke's personal investment in the film's nostalgic lustre is signalled in the way he paid homage to his own history as well as smartly employing neglected talent, hiring Griffith to help shoot crowd scenes along with the waned silent star Holt. Van Dyke was clearly taking some cues from Cecil B. DeMille in the basic story pattern of the rogue cynic male chasing the prim and religious female, a figuration easy and popular to put over because it seemed to summarise a basic social presumption. The not-so-subtle subtext of *San Francisco* is that not really about the title city, but about Hollywood itself, as it had just finished passing through the second of two great changes that forced the movie industry to reconsider how it operated, the Production Code only recently accepted, and the ructions of the coming of sound not that long before. Blackie readily represents the self-image of Hollywood as a dynamic, roguishly likeable if often hot-headed and ethically muddled impresario, one who has to learn to bow down before higher powers before it can get what it wants and needs: entrance into the pearly gates of respectability. MacDonald, with her patrician-pretty looks and airily orotund operatic singing style, embodied a tony ideal of vocal artistry deeply appealing to a middle class just beginning to resettle as the Depression loosened its grip, and Hollywood knew this well, with studio bosses craving such affinity.



*San Francisco* deftly makes this the crux of the narrative, offering Mary as the squeaky clean Midwestern minister's daughter born to bypass the adolescent phase of American pop culture and thrust all those high Cs into the rafters of gilded halls of art, rather than receiving Gable's manly thrusts down amongst the plebs. At the same time *San Francisco* keeps one foot in the alley, delighting in notions like the priest who can deck all comers in the gymnasium, in the madam, Della (Margaret Irving), with the heart of eighteen carats who chews out Burley and Mary for treating Blackie badly, and in Burley's elderly Irish mother (Jessie Ralph), who still remembers when San Francisco was a bunch of shacks and who knows well both her own and the town's prosperity had roots in the mud. There's some irony in the film utilising Holt, one of Gable's immediate precursors in stardom as a Western hero in the silent age, as the emblem of the gentrifying regime. Despite the schmaltz at the heart of the storyline, *San Francisco* is replete with the care in creation that made classic Hollywood so potent, the eye for staging and the deft use of extras to construct a teeming, Hogarthian sense of human action, in sequences like the memorable opening set on New Year's Eve where Blackie, wearing top hat and opera cape, eagerly bounds through a revelling crowd to spring aboard a fire truck and ride with the fire-fighters to check out a conflagration. The climax of the story proper, where Mary sings the title song to rousing effect, sees Van Dyke diving in for close-ups of audience members joyously bawling along, weaving a sense of communal meaning that's almost vanished from cinema.



The title song, penned for the film by Bronislau Kaper and Walter Jurman, is an evergreen tune and is smartly employed to evoke the sense of evolving collective meaning that's at the heart of both text and subtext, an artwork capable of joining schismatic cultures into a singular communal experience, ironically matched by the earthquake as a rather more vivid and frightening unifying and levelling device. *San Francisco's* success somewhat predicted *Gone With The Wind's* (1939) stature as the film of its epoch not just in sporting Gable in a rough-draft role but in describing the same sense of group experience in weathering calamity. The film made the diptych of Gable and Tracy cast as the weirdly innocent rascal and the knowing goody-two-shoes a hugely popular pairing, one carried over to several more films. Tracy does amazingly well to play such a trite role in a manner that feels believable, particularly as Mullin passes silent judgement on Blackie as he confronts him over his attempts to debase Mary with just the faintest flicker of macho contest as well as scrupulous fostering in Mullin's eye. The machinations of the plot build to a point where Mary feels an obligation to save Blackie's attempts to win an annual contest between the various nightclub runners to stage the best performance, after Burley contrives to have Blackie's club shuttered and his cast arrested, only for Blackie to furiously repudiate the gesture, just before the earthquake strikes.





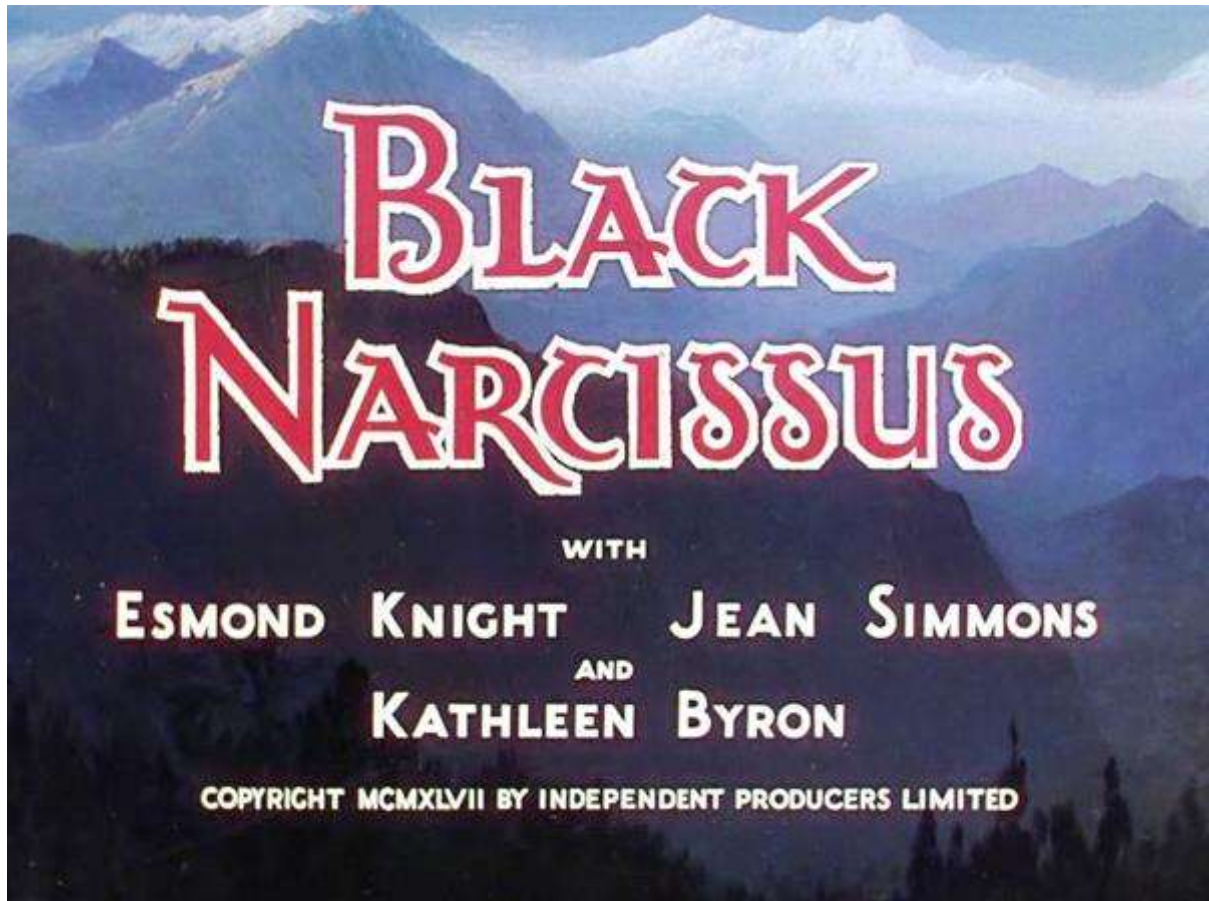
The trouble with *San Francisco* is it's hampered by all the hoops of piety and preciousness it has to jump through, the lack of chemistry between Gable and MacDonald, and the somewhat incessant breaks for MacDonald's stilted warbling, which help to drag out the film's familiar plot much longer than it needs to be. The degree to which the film stayed on-song for its mid-'30s audience is also the degree to which it sometimes tries patience for the modern viewer, and Van Dyke lacks DeMille's outsized ability to tap his sex-versus-soul conflicts for dramatic and erotic tension. The earthquake and its aftermath are however certainly worth holding the course for, with the quake sequence pieced together by montage expert John Hoffman. Hoffman's furious cuts blend the fastidious special effects work provided by a range of uncredited talents including Slavko Vorkopich, Max Fabian, and Russell A. Cully, and Cedric Gibbons' specially constructed sets, to present a convincing approximation of the calamity, as debris crashes down upon flailing citizens and a mother and baby plunge out of a fractured structure. The sequence captures an impression of verisimilitude through a willingness to stretch the limits of studio filmmaking convention and special effects technique with jagged, impressionistic editing and hose-piping lensing, and effects work blending models and live-action elements.



*San Francisco* takes a hard turn towards absolute cornball at the end as Blackie and Mary are reunited amongst a chorus of "Nearer My God To Thee," before marching with the mass heading out to rebuild to the "Battle Hymn of the Republic." But the scenes of Blackie roaming around the shattered and blazing city are excellent, as he tries to help people trapped by rubble only to lose them to aftershocks, finds Burley crushed under a pile of bricks, and encounters Mrs Burley taking stock as her mansion is about to be dynamited as a firebreak, noting that it's the house where her son was born, before quietly shuffling away, in a most excellent grace-note. The film originally ended with a montage of '30s San Francisco but a reissue replaced it with a more succinct fade from the image of the destroyed city to the renascent modern one, a touch given stirring homage by Martin Scorsese in *Gangs of New York* (2002). Van Dyke was nominated not just for an Oscar but also at the Venice Film Festival for Best Foreign Film, whilst *San Francisco's* success immediately inspired a number of similar blends of melodrama and *deus ex machina* disaster including John Ford's *The Hurricane* (1937), Henry King's *In Old Chicago* (1938), and Clarence Brown's *The Rains Came* (1939). The last act would be mimicked closely by *The War of the Worlds* (1953), whilst the pop-history aspect led on to films like *The Roaring Twenties* (1939), and James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997) gave the template a millennial-fresh gloss.



## Black Narcissus (1947)



**Directors / Screenwriters: Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger**

The incredible string of great films Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger produced in the 1940s was charged with a quality resembling proof of faith. Throughout the war the films the duo made, from the relatively straightforward rhetorical counterpoints of *The 49th Parallel* (1941) through to the epic historical and cultural surveys knitted into *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943), *A Canterbury Tale* (1944), *I Know Where I'm Going!* (1945), and *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946), they fought on just about every conceivable level to articulate what about their society was worthwhile and worth fighting for, counting small, individual experiences and epiphanies, even perversities, just as worthy expressions of that worthiness as ancient buildings and grand principles, in contrast to the pulverising fantasies of totalitarian projects. Powell and Pressburger, who had formed their legendary The Archers production outfit and begun officially collaborating as directing partners on *One of Our Aircraft Is Missing* (1942), got in trouble with Winston Churchill for portraying a decent German and also acknowledging the dark side of certain aspects of English history in *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*, as well as finding a shocking level of sympathy for their outmoded and old-fashioned hero. To them, Clive Wynne-Candy's ridiculous and antiquated streak was the essence of everything worth defending about their world.



Both the cost and necessities of fighting the war with Nazism, and the aesthetic dynamism and textured humanism The Archers packed into their movies in this face were created as and intended to serve as cultural arguments. After the war, Powell and Pressburger inevitably wrestled with the question of what all that grim and sadomasochistic commitment had cost, but through distorting lenses: *Black Narcissus* and *The Red Shoes* (1948) presented female protagonists who give themselves up to lives of extraordinary dedication only to run into problems of distracting passion on the way to facing a crack-up. Powell himself came close to identifying the peculiar motive inherent in the two films when he noted of *The Red Shoes'* success that after years of being told to go out and die for democracy, that film told people to go out and die for art: the only coherent answer to years of dedication to war was to dedicate equally to the passions of peace. *The Small Back Room* (1949) finally dealt more directly with the war experienced as existential exhaustion, a last way-station before the 1950s began and the Archers hit bumpy road in trying to understand a very different zeitgeist start with the vastly underrated *Gone To Earth* (1950).



*Black Narcissus* is far more than just a metaphor for post-war psychic and moral fatigue, of course. The basis was a book by Rumer Godden, a dance teacher and novelist born in Sussex but who had spent most of her life in India. Her books often contended with the uneasy meeting of east and west in the physical space of India, a space teeming with sensual potency. *Black Narcissus*, her first bestseller, handed Powell and Pressburger a lucid metaphor for the great moment of dismantling of Empire just beginning for Britain, and a mythopoeic account of a battle between the sacred and profaning urges, as well as simply purveying a vivid human drama. Most revealing: the essential humanity Powell and Pressburger celebrated in their wartime films here begins rebelling, not consciously or controllably but in process that begins as termiting and concludes with another matter of life and death. *Black Narcissus* commences with a scene that can be read as a lampoon of the kind of war movies where a team of talents is assembled for a dangerous mission in enemy territory: Powell and Pressburger even punctiliously note the location with an onscreen title as in many such movies, with the Reverend Mother Dorothea (Nancy Roberts) of the Convent of the Order of the Servants of Mary in Calcutta calling in Sister Clodagh (Deborah Kerr) to give her mission and assigning her a team comprised of different strengths to back her up.



Such assets are notably different to wartime heroes, of course: Dorothea surveys the nuns in the convent dining hall and apportions members of the team according to precepts including strength, in the hale and hearty Sister Briony (Judith Furse), popularity in the good-humoured Sister Blanche (Jenny Laird), called Sister Honey by her fellows, and a green thumb in Sister Philippa (Flora Robson), ingenious and stoic cultivator. The Reverend Mother also assigns to her retinue Sister Ruth (Kathleen Byron), absent from the dining table, to Clodagh's immediate protest that "she's ill," but the Reverend Mother wants Ruth included not to benefit the team but to be benefited from being on it, noting "She badly wants importance." The Reverend Mother readily tells Clodagh that she doesn't think she's ready for the job she's been given, seemingly by other powers in the Church, and advises her, "The superior of all is a servant of all." The seeds for the failure of the mission are sowed right at the outset. Clodagh senses being saddled with Ruth is a mistake and the Reverend Mother correctly senses Clodagh does not yet have the skills for nurturing required to head off such an end.



The actual assignment Clodagh must fulfil is to head to the principality of Mopu, situated at the edge of the Himalayas' highest regions, and set up a convent to be called St Faith's in a building donated by General Toda Rai (Carl Esmond), ruler of the locale. The building, the Palace of Mopu, was built specifically by the General's father as a home for his concubines, long since cleared out leaving the palace a draft-scored husk cared for by Angu Ayah (May Hallatt), a crone who longs for the return of the old, sensual thrills of the past, and is instead dismayed to be obliged to help the nuns set up their convent, which the General wants installed so the nuns can offer schooling and medicine to his citizens. Some monks, Clodagh learns quickly enough, previously tried the same thing and fled. The General, his English expatriate agent Mr Dean (David Farrar), and the bellyaching Ayah prepare for the nun's arrival, with the General announcing with businesslike simplicity when Ayah demands to know what to feed them as he points to some crates he's had brought in for the purpose: "Sausages...Europeans eat sausages wherever they go." The cultural joke here is also an ever so faintly phallic one, rhyming with all the ripe and pulchritudinous figures painted on the walls of the palace, decorating halls and corridors where the incessant wind, gusting from the vivid white shoulders of the great neighbouring mountain called The Bare Goddess, stirs the old curtains and the dust, and the air never settles in a semblance of tranquillity.





Powell and Pressburger's penchant for unusual rhythms of storytelling and discursive narrative gestures evinces itself early on as Clodagh's reading of Dean's explanatory letter to the Reverend Mother becomes narration and the hot, ordered confines of her office gives way to conjured visions of Mopu, its people, and the palace itself where Ayah stalks alone save for the many caged birds she keeps and mimics, a sort of devolved version of the harem she used to oversee. Clodagh's mission immediately feels haunted by the looming presence of the palace, its environs, and the people connected to it. The soaring ice-clad peak opposite and the deep green folds of the valley are glimpsed, the interior of the palace with its empty halls: place is imbued with the boding knowledge of a person. Dean himself is also characterised through the wording of his letter as well as the intonations of Farrar's voiceover: "It's not the first time he has had such ideas," he says of the General, hinting at his wry and cynical awareness, as well as a touch of poetic insight, saying of Ayah that "she lives there alone with the ghosts of bygone days." The ghosts are loaned voice by Ayah's caged birds chanting her name. Dean's sociology is minimal but contains hints of his worldly perspective and promise-shading-into-warning for the approaching do-gooders: "The men are men. The women are women. The children, children." Only after this conjured survey does the film return to the Reverend Mother and Clodagh as they begin selecting her team.



The nuns the Reverend Mother gives Clodagh form a collection of traits that could be said to symbolise the ideal balance of traits in her own personality, even Ruth with her need for importance, with the Reverend Mother advising Clodagh to “spare her some of your own.” It’s signalled here that Ruth is Clodagh’s dark side, her daemon, the side of herself still tormented by earthly needs. Into the high and rugged place the sisters of St Faith’s march with confidence: Clodagh with her clipboard instantly becomes the eminent cliché of a British tendency to take charge and put things in order regardless of whether they want to be. She immediately finds the landscape replete with perturbing phenomena. There’s Mr Dean himself, swanning about in shorts and often bared chest, refusing to bend at all to pious authority but rather making constant, barbed innuendos, as when he comments that “You’ll be doing me a very great favour, teaching the local girls English.” Dean soon brings a young woman named Kanchi (Jean Simmons), a penniless but pretty waif who’s been hanging around his house on the hunt for a husband, to be employed and hopefully segregated from other prospective males until proper match can be made.



There's also the old and wizened mystic encamped above the palace on a perpetual vigil on levels far beyond the apparent, bastion of an alternative kind of faith both in the scriptural sense as a Hindu and in a more immediate one, offsetting the sisters who belong to an "order of workers," the ancient schism inherent in religious tendency exposed on several strata. Despite his immobile and apparently disengaged state, the ancient mystic holds an authority over the local people the nuns find intimidating, even, as Dean puts it, worrying the General at all times of day with the feeling he should do the same. Indeed, the swami is his uncle, a former warrior and man of great education, but who has cast off all the affectations of the world and reduced himself to a nerve of metaphysical communion. The mystic continues his unwavering vigil, lending the night something like a benevolent but disinterested consciousness, from the mountain top even as the sudden cessation of the pulse-like drums in the valley indicates that the General's elder son and heir has died of the fever he's been suffering from.



This vignette shifts the cultural gravity of the locale, as the General's second son Dilip Rai (Sabu) now inherits the unofficial but consequential title of "Young General" and is called back from his Cambridge education. The Young General hopes to continue learning with the nuns, and despite her rules and misgivings Clodagh concedes to taking him in. Farrar's Dean is presented as the male equivalent of a femme fatale from the noir films of the same time, a physically, morally, and mentally provocative being. Dean teases the scruples of the nuns and ultimately provokes, however inadvertently, acts of madness and murder. Dean hasn't exactly gone native in the old parlance but he does seem to like his life far away from the mores and morals the sisters insistently embody, seemingly a natural and committed pagan if not entirely lacking nostalgic affection for the paraphernalia of Christianity. Immediate provoked by Clodagh's imperious piety and challenging glare, Dean plays soothsayer of failure ("I'll give you 'til the rains break.") but also starts lending a hand, called out by Philippa when she finds him trying to install plumbing for their much-needed convenience.



Dean's allure is concrete: he knows the lay of the land, is sufficient in forms of practical enterprise the nuns aren't, and he seems to feel drawn to help them out through some rarefied sympathy which could also be connected with the definite sparks he strikes with Clodagh from the first, attraction that must register as antipathy because of their polarised identities. "Are you sure there isn't anything you're dying to ask me?" Dean questions Clodagh with sly import when he brings Kanchi to her threshold. The arc manifests more agreeably in a flash of shared humour over Briony's professed but dubious coffee-making talents, lending an almost conspiratorial quality to the reluctant reliance Clodagh must seek from Dean. Later, when Dean is fetched back in a moment crisis despite being coldly chased away on his previous visit, he comes in this time shirtless as if in a deliberately provocative gesture, and Powell and Pressburger allow Ruth to slowly lean into the frame with him with woozily hungry glances at his torso, not that far from a Friz Freleng caricature of lust.



Dean's willingness to help the nuns and their increasing reliance on him comes to an ugly halt when he turns up to their Christmas mass, lending his hearty baritone to the carols and momentarily giving Clodagh the thrill of seemingly having brought him back into the fold, only for him to prove rather drunk and still full of sardonic comments. Clodagh's infuriated accosting has a charge of personal offence that seems sourced in her equally double-edged memory from a Christmas of yore, whilst Dean's affectation of blasé receipt masking a deftly expressed edge of offence and wounding that hint he's used to such accosting, says much of how Clodagh willingly incarnates despite herself everything he's fled in the lowlands. His provoking revenge is to start his way down the mountain warbling a bawdy ditty declaring, "No I cannot be a nun! For I am too fond of pleasure!" The setting of *Black Narcissus* is certainly a predominate character in the drama. Powell and Pressburger, their production designer Alfred Junge, and cinematographer expended all their ingenuity on realising the setting thousands of miles from the actual Himalayas.



Cardiff's brilliantly diffused lighting helps render the set looking completely real and exterior even as the lushly hued matte paintings create the landscape of Mopu with a flavour of the near-dreamlike, particularly the famously dizzying vantage of the palace campanile, perched right on the edge of a soaring precipice, fervent jungle and sheer rock below: the nuns using this bell as their signal and call to prayer must negotiate with the infinite, the fear and temptation, every time they ring it (honestly, folks, nail on a bloody rail). The cavernous, draft-ridden halls of the palace with the fading glories of royal décor and teasing, ghostly forms of semi-naked women festooning the halls, has a strong touch of the dream like to it, a feeling exacerbated when Powell and Pressburger shoot Simmons' Kanchi dancing through the halls in a rough draft for the fantasias of space and movement in *The Red Shoes*.



Powell's fascination with isolated communities and discreet local cultures predated his partnership with Pressburger, already apparent in some of his early B movies like *The Phantom Light* (1936) and *The Edge of the World* (1937), and burgeoned as the war wound down again with *I Know Where I'm Going!*, where the filmmakers noted that the corners of the British Isles themselves were as foreign and strange to Londoners as India. This was also a natural viewpoint for the transplanted Austrian Pressburger, whose simultaneous romanticisation and observant criticality of his adopted culture intensified Powell's. Acts of journeying correlate to changes within for characters, naturally. *A Canterbury Tale* rendered that idea in echoing the Chaucerian theme of pilgrimage ironically rearranged for an age at once more profane and more urgent in its need and seeking. *Black Narcissus* is in part a revision of *I Know Where I'm Going!* in again tracking a heroine dedicated to a project journeying to "the back of beyond," colliding with unexpected attraction, albeit with wry romantic comedy and gentle sublimation into a new way of life swapped out for seething neurosis and cross-cultural incoherence. The sisters of St Faith's bring in foreign religions, not only Christianity but also scientific, medical, and cultural, strange and exotic and incoherent in themselves without being aware of it.





But the great project of Empire and colonialism rather attempts to resist such correlation: instead it aims to act more like a great act of inoculation, inserting alien DNA into other cultures. The sisters are soon perturbed to learn the great turn-out for their infirmary and school is because the General is paying his citizens to attend, overcoming their disinterest. The General hopes, as Dean spells it out, to make it a ritual or custom for people whose lives tick by according to rhythms entirely imposed by nature in place where one must “either ignore it or give yourself up to it,” a line that doubles as a commentary on the Raj where the ruling English maintained themselves as a transported pocket, unable to countenance adjusting to other values and so expelling them altogether. Soon the sisters are lying awake at night as the cold wind wafts in through the palace windows and their skin breaks out in blotches denoting not disease but a startling and unfamiliar level of purity, as if civilisation is a disease they will expiate from their flesh whether they want to or not. Attempts at meditation and sublimation are soon enough recolonised by their suppressed worldly selves. Philippa shows off the callouses on her hands, worked raw in trying to escape her reveries even as if compelled she plants the palace terraces with riotous alternations of flowers rather than vegetables, a creative and decorative urge bursting out in ignorance of the practical.



Seeds of a poisonous breakdown are meanwhile sown when Ruth dashes into a meeting Clodagh is having with Dean and Briony, her white habit stained red with blood, excitedly reporting that she managed to stop an injured local from bleeding to death after much struggle. Rather than praising her and elevating her struggling sense of self-worth, as the Reverend Mother wanted Clodagh wanted her to, Clodagh angrily retorts that she should have called in the more medically experienced Briony. Clodagh isn't wrong, but her instinctive sense of what her authority is immediately proves the Reverend Mother's point about her own unreadiness, reacting more like a bossy, know-it-all older sister to Ruth's flailing need for validation and pride in achievement and unable to concede that sometimes risks need to be taken to help anyone mature. Dean instead casually spares Ruth a kind word in registering the moment of crucially dashed pride, a flash of recognition that gives Ruth's psyche something to cling to, if less like a flowering orchid than a parasitic vine. The attentiveness of the film's designers registers in the stiff, almost tentlike habits of the nuns, contrasted violently by the red of Dean's shirt and the mottled gore on Ruth's habit: the stain of blood is spreading, Dean and Ruth's moment of sympathy marked by fate.



Not that Clodagh is unwarranted in her testiness with Ruth, whose internal tension and need to feel superior sometimes makes her intolerant and mean-spirited, calling the locals stupid-looking and, after catching a whiff of the Young General's handkerchief doused with the eponymous scent of Black Narcissus, an exotic fragrance ironically bought from the Army and Navy Store in London, deciding the perfume's name is apt for the man too. Moments like Clodagh's connection with Dean over Briony's bad coffee similarly deny the popular cliché of the surprisingly good-humoured and earthy religious figure, the kind Bing Crosby had just won an Oscar playing in *Going My Way* (1944). Clodagh's lack of ease signalled by her incapacity to bend in that direction in any way. Clodagh's drifts into personal reverie during prayer present biography in fragments mixed with deeply sensual associations, the cold water of a lake she once fished in, the thrilling rush of riding a horse in a fox hunt, the chill of snow and the glow of lantern light on Christmas Eve in singing with carollers.



Clodagh's memories crowd into her head even as she leads her fellow nuns in prayer in the convent chapel, recollections of such thrills filling in for any hoped-for divine ecstasy. Such memories are connected with her long and finally ill-fated romance with a son of the same clique of landed gentry in Ireland, Con (Shaun Noble), who Dean plainly reminds her of as another lanky, tauntingly ambivalent rooster, a man who chafed at being expected to play prospective lord of the manor rather than make a career in America like his brother. Clodagh's lips twist up ever so slightly in sardonic awareness as she remembers protesting her desire to live just in the place she comes from forever, and yet here she is.



*Black Narcissus* nudges aspects of both the haunted house movie and the slasher flick even as it holds itself aloof from any sure genre identity: the film is also a comedy of manners, a romantic melodrama, character study, satire, and parable. I'm often struck by the similarities between *Black Narcissus* and the Mark Robson-directed, Val Lewton-produced horror film *Isle of the Dead* (1945). Both films are set in old, isolated buildings where psyches fray and conclude with a maddened woman falling to her death after a bout of homicidal intent, walk a fine line between psychological narrative and entering a more irrational and symbolic zone, and are replete with shared images, atmospherics, and an ingrained subtext contending with the moral fallout of war and awareness of mortality. Hard to know if Powell and Pressburger ever saw the other film, of course, but the similarities are pronounced enough to signal commonalities of thought. Powell had lampooned a certain kind of spooky tale early in his career with *The Phantom Light*, but also laid down precepts for this film, the fascination with the bastion of mystery and the mystified interloper.



*Black Narcissus* might also have had a notable influence on horror films that followed it, including the “nunsploration” subgenre and more deeply on the Hammer Horror aesthetic, and anticipates Powell’s shift in a horror direction for *Peeping Tom* (1960). Of course, its progeny rank far and wide, echoes in everything from Powell’s former mentor Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958) to his generational alumnus David Lean’s globetrotting dramas of searcher heroes flailing amidst social and historical fluxes, and eventual acolyte Martin Scorsese’s entire oeuvre. *Black Narcissus* initially charts seemingly basic binary entities – man/woman, east/west, sensualism/asceticism, religion/unbeliever, sex/chastity – and tests them until their common roots lie exposed, each reflex, instinct, custom, and construction sourced in twinned relation to its opposite. The ideal of pious, sexless world-love the nuns practice is purposely against nature, that being its very point, and can sour into a kind of narcissism, but obeying nature brings no-one great happiness either.



Cynical as the film trends in regards to virtuous ideals, the film never really stoops to any kind of Buñuel-esque anti-clericalism but regards the avatars of religion as merely, painfully human: “Yes, we’re all human aren’t we,” Clodagh comments sadly in response to Dean’s comment, meant as praise, that she’s become moreso since her arrival. Also avoids is any kind of ecumenical openness of religious experience, writing that off as a fantasy ignoring how much religious precepts are grown in native soil. The story ultimately states that no system of belief or practice can successfully deny nature without resulting in schizoid self-destruction, it also allows that it’s also a most human thing to resist descending to a level of insensate and primal appetite to fuck and kill. Such a fate ultimately consumes Ruth, just as she is the mere inversion of the old mystic, who has cleaved himself out of the physical world. Everyone else subsists on the scale on between. The abashed Young General, after his experience with Kanchi, abandons his desire to prove himself a fit citizen of a new era and decides to give himself up to the old order and expectations of his creed: it’s simpler and requires less personal moral and intellectual bravery. He’s not alone. Everyone in the film essentially finishes up foiled on some level, their attempts to transcend themselves failed, finding some comfort in their essential creeds.



The film's commentary on the clash between eastern and western sensibilities contrasts many such stories of its time in plying the contrast mostly for dry satire and gentle comedy that only slowly shades towards darker, more confronting episodes. Rather than climaxing with some sort of outbreak of war or violence, crisis on this level is precipitated when Briony disregards Dean's advice and treats a badly sick child who then dies, but despite Dean's warnings of potential violent consequences this doesn't result in riot or murder, simply the end of the locals' trust and interest in the interlopers, leaving them without clientele and students. By the tale's end it is rather the faultlines within the heads and hearts of the interlopers that results in tragedy. Until that point the film drolly charts incidents like Kanchi's and the Young General's initiation into the school, as well as the appointment of an official translator in the form of Joseph Anthony (Eddie Whaley Jr.), son of the General's cook and one of the few bilingual people about, a boy who estimates his age as between six and ten. Joseph Anthony's sly glances around at the vignettes unfolding about him even as he coaches his fellow local urchins in fastidious pronunciation of the names of weapons and flowers, as when he notices Ruth staring down at Dean speaking to Clodagh through a lattice from the schoolroom, anoint him as young but quick-study incarnation of artistic observation and subversive intent.





The film's anti-generic form contributes to what might be its only real fault, that it sometimes threatens to dissolve into a series of vignettes: it's chiefly Powell and Pressburger's overwhelming sense of style that gives it form until the key psychodrama finally erupts. *Black Narcissus* nods to familiar elements and clichés of the kinds of exotic melodrama popular back in the day, with visions of drum-beating Mopuris in the jungle night (The drums! Don't they ever stop?!). Even as it takes care to place such things in a steadily evolving sense of context – the drums have a specific cultural and religious function to the Mopuris – they take on a different, more fervent and obsessive meaning for the nuns. We have passed through a veil into a zone where the psyche expands to fill the universe and everything becomes a function of the overheated inner life. The teasing games of erotic sparking and quelling that play out between the nuns and Dean are given their contorted reflection in Kanchi's furtive attempts to catch the Young General's eye, whilst the Young General himself taunts Ruth's nose in the classroom with *Black Narcissus*.



Sabu's terrific semi-comic turn as the Young General presents a lad enthusiastic to learn about the world, trotting up to the school with a programme for his education that contains unwitting double entendre and prophecy: "One PM to three PM, French and Russian with the French and Russian sisters, if any; three PM to four PM, physics with the physical sister." Kanchi volunteers as the physical sister, looming sylph-like over lattices and under desks as the incarnation of enticing pulchritude, true to Dean's comment that she's surely heard the folk tale "The Prince and the Beggar Maid" and has the stuff to alchemise legend into reality. Eventually Kanchi and the Young General run away together, an incident which, along with the child's death and Ruth's decision to not retake her annual vows, seems to signal the complete collapse of the convent's efforts. As well as speaking of the breakdown of imperialist projects in the face of different cultural norms and general human nature, there are overtones of satire in the film that might be aimed closer to home: the Old General's determination to make his citizens care about things like ringworm can be read as a send-up of the post-war positivism and reformism being foisted in Britain and elsewhere, the challenge to old orders and the difficulty in shifting them noted.



Tempting to see autobiographical qualities encoded in the film, too, Powell and Pressburger's more sarcastic anticipation of Fellini's harem in *8½* (1963), the storage place of every real affair and masturbatory fantasy. Powell was making a film with his ex-wife Kerr, was married to Pamela Brown whom he had left her for, and commenced an affair with Byron during the shoot. The on-screen bevy are all save Kanchi nonetheless defined by their nominal untouchable status, the ever-teasing disparity in the idea of the sexy nun given a self-castigating gloss. Dean makes for an ironic projection for Powell's masculine self-image, less a playboy despite his affectations of wolfish assuredness and more a kind of unwitting fetish object. "I don't love anybody!" Dean finally bellows to Ruth when she tries to seduce him, a moment of denial that also feels like an unwitting self-exposure: Dean's self-sufficient aspect, his air of male independence to the nth degree, is also the ultimate incapacity to give himself to anyone or anything. His sexual detachment gives an ironic dimension to his impersonation of the detached Englishman, subsisting within another culture but never at one with it.



Ruth, who leaves the order and dons a red dress she's ordered by mail, recreates herself as the antithesis of what she was, playing Hyde to Clodagh's Jekyll, and conceives of them both engaged in a war, at first psychic but eventually quite mortal, to possess Dean. Ruth's rebellion against the army she belongs to and enterprise she represents results in ultimately self-defeating, but at least it most definitely is rebellion. *Black Narcissus* embraces its lexicon of religious images and concepts even as it tests them to the limit, eventually playing out as a no-holds-barred battle of the assailed sacred and the consuming profane. Much of *Black Narcissus*' still-potent appeal for film lovers lies as much or more in sheer, lustrous quality as a piece of visual filmmaking as well as its dramatic richness. Movies had made great and artistically worthy use of Technicolor before *Black Narcissus* of course, but Cardiff's work on the film might well have been the first work in the medium to prove a film shot in colour could be richly, subtly textured and flexible in expressive palette in the same way great black-and-white photography could.



Cardiff manages to create a style that matches Powell and Pressburger's unique ability to be realistic and stylised, palpable and fairy tale-like all at once. The shooting style bears the imprint of Expressionism, particularly in the film's last third as the visuals become increasingly shadow-riddled and split into multiple hues and shades of light and colour, the far mountains, sky and cloud in shades of blue and white, the crystalline amber hues of light from lamps and fires, and the slow spread of infernal reds, betrays an aesthetic sensibility created with unique care. One shot of the lantern-carrying nuns congregating in the forecourt of the convent after trying and failing to track down Ruth is particularly great, their lights jiggling and casting pale light of fire on the cobbles, recalls academic-mythological paintings of the Pleiades searching for their missing sister, whilst also evoking the metaphysical and psychological struggle before them, trying to keep the lamps of their faith alight in a vast and crushing night.



Dean singing his bawdy, calculatedly insulting song as he departs the Christmas mass is filmed sarcastically as a most perfect Christmas scene, a man on a mule lit in a precious lantern field, moving slowly down through a snow-caked landscape. Ultimately the camera zeroes in on sections of Byron's physiognomy as Ruth's lunacy hatches out and her identity fragments even as her body becomes ritualistically exalted. Close-ups of Ruth as she first challenges Clodagh see the lower half of her face in shadow whilst her eyes glare out with feral pleasure. Later, she delivers another calculated insult and repudiation to Clodagh by making her watch as she daubs her lips in red lipstick, an act that Ruth seems to think is an act of war and defiance but instead sees what's left of her personality subsumed by the daemonic impulse. Finally Ruth's mad, red-rimmed eyes fill frames, blazing out from the shadows at her objects of lust and hatred, reducing her from person to a kind of malevolent entity inhabiting the convent, flitting up steps as a shadowy, barely-glimpsed wraith.



Ruth's venture through the jungle to reach Dean's house becomes its own, brief waltz through a Freudian id-zone, guttural sounds possibly from tigers echoing through the bamboo. Still time for some observational fillips, as Ruth pauses to don thick and sturdy hide boots that somewhat despoil the image she tries to present, at once the ardently desirous mate and the red-draped, fire-lipped succubus. The war of gazes reaches a climax where at last the camera takes on Ruth's point of view as Ruth chants Clodagh's name in fury and the screen is literally flushed crimson as Ruth sees red. Ruth's show of clenched calm after fainting before Dean is more alarming than her brittle hysterics, and sure enough when she climbs back up to the convent she assaults Clodagh as she rings the bell for morning prayers. Ruth's savagery extends to not just trying to push Clodagh off the cliff's edge but picking her fingers off the bell rope to which she desperately clings. Clodagh's will to live drives her to regain footing even as Ruth unbalances and falls into oblivion, Clodagh's horrified gaze driving down into the shadows, before the film resumes an indirect method and Ruth's striking the valley floor far below is signalled by the flapping of some alarmed birds and the cessation of the thundering drums.



As a climax this more than fulfils the essential requirements of the film's many levels of narrative, good and evil in a deadly grapple, the segments of a psychotic culture trying desperately to find resolve, and the sorry sight of a priggish but essentially decent woman fighting a victim of mental illness for her life. The melancholy of the coda scenes, as Clodagh encounters the chastened Young General and then Dean as she departs expecting demotion and ignominy, becomes a reckoning with lost illusions and cruel tutelage, even as the tacit connection between her and Dean finally achieves something close to authentic mutual understanding and sympathy. Clodagh charges Dean with the responsibility of tending Ruth's grave and gives him her hand as a final gesture of affection. Dean's sad and salutary gaze after Clodagh as she and her escorts vanish into the curtains of rain just starting to fall evokes an extraordinary pathos, Dean finally learning to miss something but also left with a kind of treasure in his hand, evidence that once something and someone meant something to him. And that's ultimately the deepest and most resonant theme in *Black Narcissus* as it takes stock of the inevitable age of disillusionment after the one of mortal struggle and contemplates a new era where the old structures will be dismantled. Some lessons are not just hard but truly wounding, but whatever is left after them can be called the truth.



## 4D Man (1959)



A follow-up to their cultishly beloved, highly successful monster movie *The Blob* (1958) for director Irvin S. Yeaworth Jr and producer-writer Jack H. Harris, *4D Man* is by comparison almost invisible even to genre critics despite being an impressively taut, sober, intelligent film. *4D Man* opens on Dr Tony Nelson (James Congdon), a talented scientist driven by an obsession to recreate an experiment where he managed to make objects coexist in the same space and become atomically permeable and intermingled in a “fourth dimension” state, an obsession that’s almost pushed him off the legitimate scientific map, pursuing his fixation at midnight in the research laboratory he’s been lucky to be employed by. Unfortunately his latest attempt results in fried circuitry in his equipment, starting a fire that burns down the lab, and Tony finds himself looking for work



Tony hitchhikes his way across country to visit his brother, the sober and self-effacing Dr Scott Nelson (Robert Lansing), who heads a unit working for the self-promoting mogul Dr Theodore W. Carson (Edgar Stehli) at his state-of-the-art research facility. Scott is working on developing a new type of ultra-resistant metal he's been obliged to call "Cargonite" in honour of his boss, but Scott professes disinterest in fame and reward. Scott gives Tony a job despite feeling his brother is a flake, and becomes interested in Tony's experiments when Tony shows him the proof of his one successful attempt, a pencil lodged within a piece of lead, and explains his inexplicable conviction that the experiment's success that one time was sourced not in getting the right resonance or charge but in his mind, making it an act of will.



*4D Man's* first half barely contains any genre or suspense elements and unfolds more as a character study and love story, examining the two brothers with sympathy and detail and playing a nimble game with what seems to be its initial promise in regards as to how the story will unfold. Tony, the seemingly possessed and heedless sibling, is slowly revealed as far more thoughtful and conscientious than he initially seems, whilst Scott emerges as a study in furtive repression. Their deeper natures are drawn out by their shared attraction to Scott's assistant Linda Davis (Lee Meriwether). Scott has asked Linda to marry him feeling they're well-matched by their temperaments and dedication to work, but Linda and Tony prove to have an immediate spark as Linda gleefully sets out in determination to beat Tony at something during a picnic jaunt, something Scott seems to recognise and leaves them to it with an air of hangdog deflation. Tony is reluctant to pursue a romance with Linda because, as he explains to her, he stole a girl off Scott once before only for the affair to end badly for him too.



As Tony continues his experiments at night in the lab, he attracts the interest of another of Scott's assistants, the on-the-make Roy Parker (Robert Strauss), who steals some notes and tries to pass them off as his own work to Carson in an attempt to gain his own research division. Scott meanwhile finds he's been having headaches because his work with radiation in creating the Cargonite has radically changed and amplified his brainwave patterns. Deciding to try Tony's experiment himself, Scott accidentally fuses his own hand with metal, and quickly learns he not only can achieve the 4D state easily with his boosted brainpower but gains the ability to do so without Tony's electronic amplifiers. At first Scott enjoys his newfound power, playfully plucking letters from boxes and jewellery from storefronts, even robbing a bank purely for mischief. But the price reveals itself as he finds himself sometimes losing all control over his powers, killing those who touch him, and eventually becoming a kind of energy vampire, needing to drain lifeforce from other people to keep himself from withering dreadfully.



Scott preserves that edge of pathos so vital to the old Universal Horror style of movie monster, initially horrified when his touch accidentally causes a colleague, Dr Brian Schwartz (Dean Newman), to grow ancient in a moment and drop dead, all energy drained from his body. Scott's reaction to his accidentally monstrous state is to ultimately embrace it but only to ultimately confirm his impotence before it. He kills Carson and Parker for their malfeasance, unleashing all his pent-up resentment with sardonic but genuinely murderous intent upon the pathetic Carson when he enters his home and corners him, but finally finds himself trapped outside society and even shared physical reality. Overtones of prototypical body horror are introduced as Scott is confronted by both his victims and his own oscillations between a healthy-looking state and a desiccated, wizened visage. Scott soon finds himself entering the 4D state unwillingly, signalled to the audience by a shimmering sound effect, striking with deadly effect when Scott kisses a B-girl he picks up in a bar.



*4D Man* was produced independently with *The Blob*'s profits and sold to Universal. Plotwise it resembles an updated version of classical mad scientist movies Universal often produced like *The Invisible Ray* (1936), as well as distantly anticipating something like *Chronicle* (2012), as Scott discovers his powers allow him to not only turn the world into his roguish playground but unleash and indulge his dark side. Director Yeaworth was a former child singer and radio producer who evolved into an impresario and filmmaker. He churned out over 400 educational and religious shorts and TV shows including specials featuring the evangelist Billy Graham, before later turning to operating tours of the Middle East for American Christians. An odd background perhaps for a director who enjoyed a brief but memorable stint as a genre film player, but Yeaworth's entrepreneurial streak surely told him to follow the money. *4D Man* is a smoother, more polished and fleshed-out work for Yeaworth than *The Blob*, but his direction remains largely just competent and straightforward. The real plusses of *4D Man* are Harris' strong script and the cast even though the story follows a pretty familiar plot pattern.



The film works up a potent dramatic charge and sports some well-handled scenes, and Yeaworth's seemingly ardent feel for parochial parable actually helps give *4D Man* some of its depth, presenting his study in fraternal rivalry offered initially as a kind of prodigal son variant before gaining a more Cain-and-Abel edge. The special effects are sensibly minimalist and remain effective. The opening strikes a note of nocturnal isolation and eeriness as Yeaworth opens on a clock tower and looks towards the laboratory building where Tony is working through the small hours, finding him within bent in feverish activity over his work table. The sequence where Scott first manages to achieve the 4D permeability is well-staged and acted, as Scott starts to panic when he can't get his hand out of the metal ingot, forced to hide from the snooping Parker. Scott's assault on Carson is equally good as Scott terrifies his boss by advancing through doors and chairs with ghostly insolence, a quality of darkly sardonic malice in his voice as he promises Carson, "You're not going to take this away from me," before slaughtering the undoubtedly venal but ultimately pathetic old man. Parker's death is intriguingly elided despite him seeming to deserve a sticky end by conventional movie standards, his grotesque scream echoing out of the dark to warn others on the vigil that Scott is close by.



The film's initial figuration of the upright brother uninterested in worldly acclaim looking out for the irresponsible, roguish one pushed on by his dedication to world-changing acts of alchemy is steadily complicated and inverted as the narrative advances, with Tony takes on the role as the desperately conscientious sibling forced step by step into an adversarial relationship with Scott. Tony hopes to use his equipment to follow his brother into the 4D state and catch him, but Scott hinders his plan by hiding his device. *4D Man* is immediately poised in both style and story on the divide between the 1950s sci-fi craze and the more thoughtful and starkly fashioned 1960s brand. Yeaworth had some evident eye for acting talent, having given Steve McQueen his break for *The Blob* and here giving Lansing and Meriwether, both of whom would amongst other things clock up two notable *Star Trek* guest appearances, their first movie roles. A very young Patty Duke also appears as the young daughter of Karen's landlady Marjorie.





The leads' strength helps bolster the relative familiarity of the plot, with Lansing's Scott slowly unveiling the undercurrent of self-loathing and melancholy under the officially serious scientist, and then the edge of murderous rage. Meriwether's Karen eventually emerges as the true protagonist of the film and a remarkably mature female protagonist by the standards of a lot of '50s sci-fi. She's introduced negotiating her way past Parker's sleazy romantic gambits and obeys her immediate chemistry with Tony with forthright attitude. The scene where she calmly coaches Tony through a fit of explained misgivings with simple statements of love and belief in him and his ideas contains a rare aspect of romantic maturity Meriwether conveys well, even if it might be argued making the heroine so clear-headed cuts off a potential source of neurotic energy for the narrative.



Karen remains the object of Scott's most desolate desire, to the point where he appears in her bedroom at night and begs her to join him, in a scene that pays off with a neat jolt as Karen flees him, pounds down the stairs, and flings open the front door to run out only to find he's already beaten her there. The film notably refuses to turn Scott into an outright monster, his remaining humanity holding him from turning on Tony and her even as he engages in games of hide-and-seek with the authorities between killings accidental and deliberate, with the punch of the climax lying in the willingness of those who love him to do what he won't. Eventually the would-be superman is glimpsed cowering in the bushes by Marjorie, who fails to recognise him in his haggard state.



The finale maintains the air of forlornly foiled romanticism as Tony and Karen lure Scott in and try to fry him with an energy overload, treachery Scott responds too more in shock and bewilderment than anger, before Karen finally shoots him in the stomach as he kisses her, momentarily maintaining a solid state again. A good ending if one that feels a tad curtailed, as the film ends on an ambiguous note – the end title card appends a looming question mark – as Scott dissolves into the pile of Cargonite, declaring himself unharmed but seeming to be dying. *4D Man* might have been even better if directed by a less prosaic filmmaker than Yeaworth whilst keeping its unusual seriousness and depth intact, but it's really only hampered by Ralph Carmichael's overdone and inaptly jazzy score.



## Conan The Barbarian (1982)



**Director:** John Milius

**Screenwriters:** John Milius, Oliver Stone

Conan the Cimmerian was created by Robert E. Howard, a Texan writer who committed suicide at a young age after writing a string of stories about his ancient warrior hero, mostly published by the fabled pulp magazine *Weird Tales* in the early 1930s. Howard took inspiration from the rugged landscapes of his native state, particularly around the Rio Grande, whilst his vision of a primal champion in Conan was synthesised from a stew of classical and scholarly sources and anthropological theories of dubious worth and validity. His Conan roamed the vast spaces of Eurasia in an epoch, as the memorable opening narration of the film puts it in slightly paraphrasing Howard, “between the time the oceans drank Atlantis and the rise of the sons of Aryas,” battling not just other warriors but also monsters, sorcerers, sacrificial cults, and many a tyrannical ruler. Rising from an obscure background as the son of a village blacksmith to become a famed pirate and mercenary and eventually capturing his own kingdom, Howard’s Conan was nonetheless also an intelligent and chivalrous figure, a figure who, like Edgar Rice Burroughs’ Tarzan, condensed both stubbornly evinced humanity and instinctive natural potency into a singular frame, inhabiting two zones of being at once.



Howard's stories retained a cultish following amongst sci-fi and fantasy writers, with talents like Poul Anderson, Robert Jordan, and L. Sprague de Camp all writing their own stories featuring the character. The famous cover art Frank Frazetta supplied for such extensions to the mythos helped keep the cult alive, soon backed up by comic books in the 1970s. The success of *Star Wars* (1977), which fused science fiction with fantasy and captured the imagination of a generation, sparked a brief moment when producers and studios became interested in fantasy films again. This resulted in some lovably cheap and inventive emulations like Terry Marcel's *Hawk the Slayer* (1980) and Don Coscarelli's *The Beastmaster* (1982), and a pair of truly great entries in John Boorman's *Excalibur* (1981) and *Conan the Barbarian*. John Milius, the most notoriously eccentric, intense, and intransigent member of the Movie Brat director generation, chose to take on the challenge of bringing Conan to the big screen after shooting his plaintive surfing tale *Big Wednesday* (1978), and he talked entrepreneur-producer Dino De Laurentiis and the rights owner Edward R. Pressman into joining forces to produce it. An equally intense and wilful, if politically rather dissimilar young Hollywood talent in Oliver Stone, fresh off his breakthrough success writing *Midnight Express* (1978), had written a script for Pressman. But his purportedly post-apocalyptic take was potentially far too expensive, and Milius fought to revise it.



When it came to who should play the lead, the filmmakers faced the problem of finding someone who could physically inhabit the role of a brawny ancient warrior and act well enough to carry the film. Pressman had kept one man in mind since watching the bodybuilding documentary *Pumping Iron* (1978), an Austrian immigrant who had taken out the Mister Universe title four times, and projected unique charisma despite his thick accent and mouthful of a name – Arnold Schwarzenegger. *Conan the Barbarian*, a big hit on first release that soon spawned its own wave of imitations and rip-offs, has retained despite critical sniffiness its own, special, seemingly ever-growing cult status. One particular, elusive aspect of *Conan the Barbarian*'s appeal is the way what seems to be its faults prove eventually to be part of its unique power. Rather than offering a straightforwardly action-packed, campy fantasy-adventure, Milius set out to create a movie that plays essentially as a fantastical *bildungsroman*, an attempt to encompass a hero's growth from small boy to a man gaining full maturity in the sense not only of physical strength but also mental freedom and moral choice.



This puts *Conan the Barbarian* in a zone with other great works of fantastical metaphor, like Tolkien's alternating visions of individual and communal questing and the original *Star Wars* trilogy's portrait of adolescence giving way to adulthood: *Conan the Barbarian* has a very similar motif, but goes further in following its protagonist into the consequences of that adulthood. Milius was certainly assimilating aspects of his friend George Lucas' hit, borrowing the voice of Darth Vader James Earl Jones to play another dark father figure to his emerging hero, albeit one tweaked to Milius' sensibility. One accidentally self-imposed hurdle *Conan the Barbarian* has to surmount is that its early scenes are so vivid in their soaring, violent, operatic evocation of prehistoric lore and drama the rest has a hard time living up to them. The opening narration, voiced by Akira (Mako Iwamatsu), later revealed as a wizard and eventual helpmate of Conan's, makes like an ancient storyteller with his throaty voice heard over a field of pitch black, beginning his account of the great hero's life in "the days of high adventure."



The opening credits, scored by Basil Poledouris' designedly awesome main theme "The Anvil of Crom," portray Conan's father (William Smith) forging a sword, as his wife (Nadiuska) and young son (Jorge Sanz) look on and help work the billows, in a scene bathed in the light of furnace flames and molten metal. The glowing blade is doused in snow at dawn and the last artisanal features added to complete a masterpiece of craftsmanship, at least by the standards of Conan's Cimmerian tribe living snowy folds under soaring mountains: the sword is creation not merely of martial artistry but a nexus of cultural and communal expression, implement and totem, tool and artwork. One rite gives way to another as father imparts the lore of their tribe's god Crom and the Riddle of Steel to his son as they sit on a mountain peak, boiling clouds rushing overhead. The Riddle of Steel, supposedly a piece of arcane wisdom left on the battlefields of ancient gods after some grand Titanomachy, actually has nothing to do with metallurgy and everything to do with humanity, and grasping the answer is the process of a lifetime, immediately setting the terms of Conan's life, even as his father advises the only thing he can ultimately trust is a good sword.



This lesson proves timely as Conan is about to lose all contact with his roots. A band of mounted raiders, led by the mysterious warlord Thulsa Doom (Jones) and his henchmen Rexor (Ben Davidson)



and Thorgrim (Sven-Ole Thorsen), riding out of the wintry forests and attack the Cimmerian village, slaughtering all in sight, including Conan's father, mauled to death by dogs after being wounded in the battle. Conan's mother readies to defend her son, but Thulsa pacifies her with his oddly limpid, empathetic-seductive mesmerist's gaze before, in a uniquely shocking moment, casually decapitating her, her headless body swaying away from Conan's grasp before the boy even realises what's happened. Conan is taken in chains with the rest of the village children and sold into slavery, driven across the frigid landscape and into a vast, craggy desert region where they're chained to a huge wheel driving a millstone and forced to keep it turning day in and day out. Milius simply and brilliantly conveys the passage of time in montage as the number of slaves pushing the wheel depletes, whether dying from exhaustion or sold off, but Conan remains and grows, ironically refashioned from a small orphaned boy into a hulking, powerful man through his captors' cruelties, until he's pushing the wheel alone.



Here we gain our first glimpse of Schwarzenegger, lifting his shaggy-maned head as he stoically pushes the machine. Conan is bought by a gladiator trainer, Red Beard (Luis Barboo), who pitches him into death matches with vicious duellists for the pleasure of raving audiences. Conan's great strength and instinctive fighting talent quickly turns him from combat grist to beloved champion, but Conan lacks any sense of his existence beyond the pleasure of victory and the crowd's cheers. Soon Red Beard takes him east to be trained in swordcraft, and there he's also introduced to less immediately practical aspects of life, including reading and being given slave girls to impregnate. Conan seems to be forged into the perfect weapon for service to other warriors, glimpsed sitting chained and cross-legged in the camp of some Mongol warlords, a tamed beast perfectly announcing a blunt and brutal warrior credo. But Red Beard soon takes him out of camp and sets him free, for reasons Akiro in voiceover can only speculate over, as if his owner sensed something untamed, despite his pet status, residing yet in Conan, demanding freedom even without knowing it.



Fleeing wild dogs across the wilderness, Conan falls into a hidden pit and finds himself in an underground chamber, part of some lost ruin of a fallen civilisation, possibly Atlantis, where a long-dead king still sits on his throne, patches of skin and bone still attached to dusty bones. Conan takes the king's sword and finds it, despite its caking of dirt and age, far superior to any other sword he's seen, able to cut the shackles still on his ankles away. This long introduction, taking a half-hour to unfold, is particularly notable in managing to convey Conan's stages of early life whilst playing almost as a silent film. Only a few scattered lines of dialogue and passages of Akiro's narration are heard, and even those are essentially unnecessary. Milius displays total mastery over cinematic storytelling, creating the mystique of Conan and his family and conveying the nature of the tragedy that comes upon them on an iconographic level, everything rendered larger-than-life and classically vivid. The spur of Thulsa's raid, his desire for steel weapons, registers in the crucial gesture of Rexor gifting him the sword Conan's father died wielding, the same one he was forging at the start, whilst his gifts of supernatural power are evinced in his act of murderous mesmerism. Conan's growth on the wheel and schooling in a cruel, combative life in the gladiator pits is as close to perfect as visual exposition gets.



Whilst the simultaneous emergence of Peter Jackson's adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings* and the first *Harry Potter* films finally made fantasy film a powerful pop culture mode befitting the age of blockbusters and prestige television, it was long a notoriously difficult genre to sell. Ever since the monumental sets, huge battles, and amazing steam-puppet dragon featured in Fritz Lang's *Die Nibelungen* (1924), it was plainly a genre fit for expansive cinematic visions armed with big budgets and significant production values. But fantasy was also a fairly esoteric genre rarely embraced with great passion by mainstream cinema audiences to a degree where producers and studios felt much confidence in making such epics. Occasionally major works like *The Thief of Bagdad* (1940) were made, whilst scattered international entries drew on various local mythic traditions like Alexander Ptushko's versions of Russia folklore and Japanese films like *The Birth of Japan* (1958), but for decades Ray Harryhausen's beloved stop-motion movies drawn from legends and the Italian peplum genre offered one, epitomised by Mario Bava's *Hercules at the Centre of the Earth* (1961), with fervently colourful visions achieved on low budgets, were the only regular examples seen by mass audiences. But this sustenance came at a price, ghettoising the genre for a long time as a zone of wooden musclemen, cheap sets, and tacky monsters, made chiefly for very young audiences.



*Conan the Barbarian* stood for a long time as one of the few, true examples of a well-produced, highly ambitious fantasy film, and one that represented a rather more mature, or at least more pubescent, wing of the genre at that. Where on the page works like Tolkien's great sprawls of mythopoeic imagination, built on the example of writers like Lord Dunsany and E.R. Eddison, epitomised the loftiest reaches of the High Fantasy style, Howard's early Conan stories helped codify a fierce, weird, violent and sexually aware variation, the so-called "Sword and Sorcery" style. That style would eventually inspire eccentric riffs like Michael Moorcock's Elric of Melniboné tales, and birth more recent, sophisticated and morally complex works like Andrzej Sapkowski's *The Witcher* cycle and George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* novels, with their emphasis on vast world-building, cruel realism mixed with familiar tropes, and slatherings of sex, violence, and satirical humour. With *Conan the Barbarian* Milius managed to perfectly reproduce and amplify the visual lore of the early Sword and Sorcery style presented through illustrations from the likes of Frazetta and Boris Vallejo, one where scantily-clad musclemen and amazons clad with glowing bronze skin battle dragons in strange and teeming landscapes, amidst a mythical past replete with orgies, dancing girls, musclemen, concussive combat, and all the other paraphernalia of macho onanism.



Milius and Stone's efforts with their script nonetheless took Conan some distance from Howard's original concept. Some characters are amalgamations of those found in the stories, like Valeria, who assimilates many aspects of the pirate queen Bêlit, and Thulsa Doom was borrowed from another of Howard's properties, the King Kull stories. Howard's Conan was never enslaved and maintained his liberty jealously, whereas the film essentially concerns itself with Conan relearning a sense of his own identity and mission after being schooled in ruthlessly pragmatic things. Milius' portrayal of Conan as sometimes callow and crude, essentially an overgrown boy on an emotional level, once he's actually let loose in the world, sits somewhat at odds with the character's gallant and sophisticated streak in the books. There is a creative reason for this in terms of the film's overall design, of course, as the journey towards full manhood is Milius' subject here: Conan is becoming himself, complete as a fantasy projection as a certain ideal of elemental manhood. Milius remakes Conan in the image of his own protagonists, including the hero of his screenplay for *Jeremiah Johnson* (1972), who thrives beyond civilisation and learns to survive terrible losses, and the surfers of *Big Wednesday*, who similarly discover the pain of aging is necessary as they leave behind their immature traits and rise to the state of mystic kings in their battle with nature. As in *Apocalypse Now* (1979), Conan embarks on a mission to bring down a self-appointed messiah. Like the title character of *Dillinger* (1973) and Sheikh Raisuli of *The Wind and the Lion* (1975), Conan becomes at once outlaw and a momentary manifestation of the eternal romantic hero, creations out of time that only manifest when history and societies have entered a state of flux.



Conan's path begins to take shape when he comes across the hut of a solitary witch who seems to promise knowledge that can guide him, demanding her price of having sex with her. This seemingly easy price proves rather more steep when at the point of orgasm she transforms into a vampiric creature: Conan manages to hurl her into the hearth, whereupon she becomes a fireball that flees into the night, her cackling laugh heard all the while. Before her transformation she directs him to the city of Zamora, "crossroads of the world." In the morning Conan finds a man chained up behind her hut, Subotai (Perry Lopez), who claims to be a great warrior but fell for the same trap as Conan. The two men are fast friends and allies, becoming thieves to live whilst Conan pursues his quest to track down Thulsa Doom through his twinned snake symbol. Eventually he learns this is now the emblem of the Snake Cult of Set, a rapidly spreading religious cult attracting young adherents but with a reputation for foul rituals and nocturnal murder. Conan and Subotai decide to break into one of the cult's towers hoping to rob the jewels kept within, and meet up with Valeria (Sandahl Bergman), another thief, and they quickly make an alliance. The trio successfully rob the sect's treasures whilst one of the female cultists is prepared for sacrifice to a huge snake living in the tower's basement, which, unknown to Conan, is supervised by Rexor. Conan is forced to kill the snake rites before he and Subotai flee whilst Valeria runs interference, with Conan pausing to snatch a medallion emblazoned with the cult's symbol. After escaping, Conan and Valeria become lovers.



Woven in amongst the high and elemental drama are flourishes of humour that keep the film from becoming too onerous whilst resisting feeling shoehorned or removed from the rest of its finite texture. One of Conan's swordmasters, after slapping his face in censure for a poor move, suddenly swivelling and kicking another trainee in the testicles for grinning at Conan's humiliation. Later, Conan and Subotai wander about Zamora, stoned on "black lotus," recalling the heroes of *Big Wednesday* in their foolish-innocent exploration of the world, and in a gag pinched from *Cat Ballou* (1965) Conan groggily punches out a camel. "Success can test one's mettle as surely as the strongest adversary," Akiro dryly notes in narrating as the three thieves use their riches to indulge hedonism until Conan faints face-first in his soup, a jokey moment that nonetheless reasserts the basic preoccupation with Conan's story as a journey through life. More immediately, indulgence robs their keen edge, leaving them easy targets when some guards sent by the King of Zamora, Osric, come to round them up. Osric, played in a peach of a seriocomic cameo by Max von Sydow, seems to be berating the captive trio but actually wants to congratulate them: Osric loathes the snake cult and is happy the thieves have offended its mysterious leader and his minions. With his own daughter (Valérie Quennessen) recently seduced into the cult's ranks and their assassins sowing havoc, Osric offers Conan and company his fortune simply to travel to the cult's base, the Mountain of Power, and kidnap his daughter back. Valeria and Subotai want to run away with their riches, but Conan sets out alone in the belief he will find his nemeses. And sure enough, he does: quickly found out as he tries to infiltrate the cult, Conan is brutalised and brought before his foe.



The intoxicating fantasy allure of Conan and his world is, of course, the dream of unfettered freedom and perfect self-reliance. Milius' shots of Conan and Subotai running cross vast landscapes, driven on from locale to exotic locale by the sweep of the photography and Poledouris' romantic strains combine to create the kinds of cinematic visions it's easy to want to live within. Similarly, Milius distils Conan and Valeria's love affair into a series of wordless shots that see them moving from first gestures of tenderness – Conan caresses her palm with a huge jewel stolen from the temple – to sexual pleasure, happy companionship, and finally a crucial image of Valeria gathering Conan's head to her chest, making it perfectly plain that they've fallen deeply in love through her look commingling ardour and shock, the surprise of two lonely, hardened souls finding each-other, a moment counterbalanced by the forlorn sight of Valeria awakening to find Conan gone. The quality of warmth and good-humour connects Conan and his small but growing band, and imbues the relished violence and gaudy trashiness with more than mere ornamental amusement: the essential isolation of the characters in a lawless, careless world is a constant refrain, and the assailed likeableness of the heroes is vital.



If *The Terminator* (1984) would fully cement Schwarzenegger as a movie star by cleverly exploiting his formidable and alien side, *Conan the Barbarian* nonetheless gave him his starring break. Whereas in *The Terminator* the façade of Schwarzenegger's body would be peeled to reveal steel and mechanics, an illusory construct betraying the breakdown of natural reference points in a specifically modern fashion, *Conan the Barbarian* shows us rather the perfect body being built, woven in muscle and sinew, as the product of subjugation and adversity, a fantasy ideal of masculinity beheld in its primal cradle. And yet Schwarzenegger's casting was most canny in comprehending his potential appeal was based not simply in his honed physique and stature but in the almost childlike aspect to his persona. The boyish enthusiasm he expressed even in talking about adult things in *Pumping Iron*, and which would later make him beloved to young fans for which he represented a sort of cartoon vision of their own ideals of adulthood, informs his Conan on a fundamental level. The character retains a quality of innocence amidst bloodshed and depravity, the violence of his severing from his roots and the segregation of his life from the common run in maturing leaving him bewildered by the world at large, his driving need for revenge long defined by the distraught and immoderate quality of an orphaned boy.



The potentially discomfoting scene when Conan is given a slave girl to breed with by the swordmasters is marked by Conan's appeasing gentleness in calming the fearful girl and wrapping her in a blanket, a gentlemanly act that ironically makes her entirely pliable, and Conan's expression of curiosity slowly becoming lust reveals some of Schwarzenegger's nascent skill in gestural acting. The quality of innocence returns at crucial intervals, particularly during his affair with Valeria, plain in that key moment of mutual recognition and also in Valeria's sorry appeal to Conan not to go after Thulsa, confessing all her feelings of longing whilst surviving alone: despite their strength and guile as survivors, they're both eternal exiles. Conan gains another oddball friend when he encounters the wizard Akiro (who wouldn't be named on screen until the sequel, *Conan the Destroyer*, 1984), living in a haunted, deserted burial ground of ancient titans on a stretch of coastal plain. Conan and Akiro's point of bonding is found when the wizard tries to ward off his hulking visitor with warnings of his supernatural power, only to earn Conan's sceptical laughter, and they connect in their mutually sarcastic sense of the absurd.



Akiro explains he keeps the spirits inhabiting the mounds company with his mystic arts in exchange for the peace and solicitude he gains from living in a taboo spot where even Thulsa Doom won't bother him. When Conan takes leave of him, he poses as one of the cultists heading to the Mountain of Power. Here Milius indulges some satire on hippiedom and religion in general with the dippy, flower child-like cultists and empty mysticism. "What do you see?" one monk asks him he as she directs him to look into a sacred pool: "Err - eternity!" Conan replies, to the monk's slightly bewildered approval. An uglier edge to the satire manifests as a male monk tries to seduce Conan under the cover of spiritual ministry. This vignette courts homophobia, but also makes a lucid point about exploiters and abusers hiding within officially benign and beneficent organisations like churches. This idea is reiterated on a more ambitious and crucial scale as Thulsa Doom emerges as the head of the cult, preaching an embracing but apocalyptically cleansing faith to the young cultists he attracts, whilst actually practising foul and egomaniacal arts behind the scenes.





The cult of Set is revealed to be an apparatus designed to snare vast amounts of wealth, power, sexual partners for his core enclave of followers including Rexor and Thorgrim, and human foodstuff for Thulsa who proves something not exactly human. In this portion of the story Milius nods to his steeping in noir sources, including something Dashiell Hammett's *The Dain Curse*, in presenting the cult as opportunistic gangster sleazes, mixed with likeness to manipulative faux-gurus like Charles Manson and Jim Jones; Conan and friends' rugged individualism and practicality provides the only firm counterbalance. Milius opens the film with a popular quote from Nietzsche – "That which does not kill us makes us stronger" – which might be gilding the lily a tad, but it's also an idea it certainly weaves into its texture, most literally in the mill wheel montage and connecting the rest of the story and its characters. The Riddle of Steel, as Thulsa eventually explains it when he and Conan finally meet again, is connected to this: "Steel isn't strong, boy – flesh is stronger...What is steel compared to the hand that wields it?" Thulsa illustrates his point by encouraging one of his slavish adherents to jump from a cliff face to her death, the power of the mind to convince itself that reality isn't real when gripped by a powerful idea from without, exposing the deepest nerve of Conan's formative trauma and the ultimate end goal of his journey as gaining sufficient strength of mind to throw off Thulsa's mesmeric control, and the things it represents.



The vignettes within the film, which gift titles to Poledouris' compositions, have a symbolic specificity that signals a sense of the stages of life enacted through Conan's journey. The wheel of pain. The gift of fury. The tree of woe. Wifeing. All feel like places we've all visited from time to time – tiring labour to survive, spurs to strive, pains to be shed, intimate happiness to be gained. Thulsa nominates himself for the role of Conan's true, spiritual father and Darwinian mentor in forcing him to grow into a powerful man. Thulsa, finally coming into proper focus during his confrontation with Conan after his capture, gives Jones his chance to deploy satanic majesty in the character's outsized charisma and air of enigmatic potency, shifting with musical precision from note to note as he admonishes Conan like a teacher chastising a naughty student, beams in conspiratorial glee at Conan when he proposes answering the riddle of steel and then exulting in his own strength as a controller of minds and bodies, before finally condemning Conan to be crucified. Jones' voice, muffled in his famous work as Darth Vader, here gets to resound in all its plangent dimensions: who else could pronounce the words "Contemplate this on the Tree of Woe" so well? Conan's ordeal on the tree, which sees him snapping a vulture's neck with his teeth when it starts gnawing on him, is a desperate passage that almost costs him his life, stranded on the twisted bough on a stark and baking plain. Finally he's saved by Milius' love for David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), that is, by Subotai appearing in the distance and nearing at a run that still feels painfully slow, and Conan starts a febrile laugh that conks out as he falls unconscious, at the very limit of his reserves.



Like all his Movie Brat alumni, Milius had a private roster of beloved movies he would repeatedly reference, wound deep into the texture of his films. This aspect of *Conan the Barbarian* is particularly notable as Milius tries to create a film sustaining the same self-mythologising texture as certain outsized and legendary epic films like *Lawrence of Arabia*, John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) and William Wyler's *Ben-Hur* (1959). The millwheel sequence nods to Cecil B. DeMille's *Samson and Delilah* (1949), another film preoccupied with the nexus of physical and moral strength. Sergei Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) with its intensely rhythmic and stylised evocation of the past is also repeatedly nodded to (Prokofiev's score for the film was actually used in *Conan the Barbarian's* teaser trailer), and Milius directly recreates some shots from Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954) whilst taking licence from its basic plot of a sundry band of outsiders battling a malignant army with modest but lethal craft. Of course there's also the assimilated legacy of every sword-and-sandal flick ever made, as well as many a Western, Sergio Leone in particular.



Another, less expected but insistently referenced touchstone is Masaki Kobayashi's *Kwaidan* (1964). Whilst Kobayashi's stylised and artificial approach to evoking the past was contrary to Milius' attempts to conjure a vivid and three-dimensional world, nonetheless something of the same aesthetic runs right through *Conan the Barbarian*, most specifically in the way Milius shoots Conan's encounter with the witch woman, signalling transformation in the same way as the "Yukionna" chapter with a shift to a cold blue light, and more direct reference comes later when Akiro paints Conan's body all over with sacred symbols a la the "Hoichi the Earless" chapter. Some part of *Conan the Barbarian's* more singular achievement lies in Milius' rigour in trying to convey a sense of landscape and setting as concrete and palpable, almost a living thing in its own right, delivering in a manner fantasy cinema had long deserved but never quite received before. The film was shot in Spain by *Jeremiah Johnson's* cinematographer Duke Callaghan (with some work by Gilbert Taylor, who dropped out of the production), a cliché locale to film fantasy and historical landscapes by that point, and yet Milius managed to make it feel unfamiliar, a place ripped out of some dark Jungian bole.



From the jagged, snowy mountains of the opening to the sun-baked plains and zoom shots across a wind-tossed sea into the setting sun, Milius made great use of Spanish locations, where ancient Roman

and Moorish structures readily supplied Cyclopean ruins, helping deliver the ambience of a world perched between an unknowable legendary past and something more familiar, an ambience that is fascinatingly crucial in much fantasy fiction because past civilisations so often felt just as haunted by their ancestors as we do ours. *Conan the Barbarian*'s sense of grandeur and galvanising physicality is worked through Milius' visual language, mostly purveyed through wide and master shots so as to better drink in the athleticism of his actors, with little of the kind of cheat editing used today to make actors look like great fighters. And to give them context in their surrounds, both the locations and the detail and solidity of Ron Cobb's sets, with a sequence like the heroes' crashing Thulsa's orgy unfolding in a painterly fashion, replete with odd, did-I-really-see-that? touches. Watching the film back in the days of VHS and TV-cropped prints was always to lose something because of Milius and Callaghan's use of deep-focus, widescreen framing.



One of the few others films I can think of to conjure such a rarefied sense of a fantasy landscape as Milius' film is Ronald Moore's *The Silent Flute* (1979), which was adapted from a project begun by Bruce Lee trying to illustrate spiritual concepts inherent in the kind of Zen philosophy attached to martial arts. Milius' themes are of course earthier, his rugged individualist and Libertarian ideals illustrated in the only kind of setting where they're vaguely tenable. Part of Conan's journey is learning how necessary his allies are after his obsessiveness almost gets him killed, saved by Subotai because he and Valeria followed him, and Akiro does his best to keep his soul and body together with mystic healing, whilst warning that the powerful spirits living amidst the mounds will try to claim Conan. Valeria and Subotai literally fight off death in the form of the creepy animated spirits that flock around Conan and try to make off with his body, until his eyes flicker open in the dawn light after a long, dark night of magic and terror. Valeria's promise to Akiro that she will pay the toll for keeping Conan alive to the spirits later prove to have very real consequences.



Milius chose his lead performers because the film needed physical types, including Davidson and Thorsen who were taller than Schwarzenegger and looked intimidating enough to be threats to him. Bergman, a dancer who had appeared in Bob Fosse's *All That Jazz* (1979), earned a few more fantasy roles thanks to her part here, including the villain of *Red Sonja* (1985) and the title character in the bizarre *She* (1985). Her acting limitations quickly became clear, but she's still nonetheless one of the great elements of *Conan the Barbarian*, first appearing out of the shadows and squaring off against Conan and Subotai with a sinuous sense of the sword and immediately presenting a potent, female kind of toughness linked with a depth of feeling that's still rather rare-feeling in movies. She saunters through the rest with her virile physicality, bouncing off walls during sword fights and leaping from the top of the Tower of Set with a laughing cry of joy in impudent survival, and eyeing two opponents and slapping her sword against her palm like a scolding mother. Despite a couple of flat line readings she's mostly excellent at inhabiting Valeria as a character, with her unconventional, lived-in beauty and expressive eyes full of feeling in her love scenes, her flashes of deep passion and fearfulness running under the warrior. Lopez, a professional surfer and pal of Milius, was saddled with having much of his dialogue as Subotai dubbed by another actor to stilted effect, a touch that ironically helps the film keep touch with its peplum and spaghetti western forebears, and also unnecessary as his real, not inapt voice can be heard in a crucial late scene.



As with many of Milius' works it's easy to fetishize the many instances of bluff machismo: lines like Conan's statement about what is best in life to the Mongol warlords (actually a variation on a historical quote from Genghis Khan) have achieved a free-floating life in the annals of awesome cherished by fans with varying degrees of irony. But also as ever in Milius' work there's also a uniquely elegiac streak, flashes of intensely romantic poetic feeling throughout. Of course, the outstanding support he gets throughout comes from Poledouris' score, which is one of the best ever composed for a film. Poledouris was another surfing buddy of Milius' and one who had studied under Miklos Rosza. He rose to the challenge of providing Milius with a score to provide the connective tissue for his dialogue-light film. His big, Rosza-esque score is wound deeply into the film's intensely rhythmic structure, like the two long sequences where Conan, Valeria, and Subotai infiltrate enemy lairs with sneaky art before all hell breaks loose, and the incredible twinned sequences of the raid on Conan's village and the build to the final fight.



Conan's recovery from his ordeal is signalled when he returns to exercising with his sword, and soon he and his friends prepare to snatch away the Princess, who has become Thulsa's glaze-eyed and monomaniacal priestess, officiating at his ceremonies with hands wrapped in snakes a la ancient Minoan art. Sneaking into the underground lair beneath the Mountain of Power, they witness scenes of gleeful depravity and sleaze: Thulsa's henchmen lounge in an orgy pit amidst acres of pliable, slavish flesh, whilst the acolytes are served up stew filled with body parts, whilst Thulsa, the Princess seated at his feet, transforms into a serpentine creature as if all the better to lord over the mortals and indulge his appetites. Milius and Poledouris turn this scene into an odd kind of dance number with the actors moving in choreographed fashion as Conan, Valeria, and Subotai nimbly creep round the edges of this spectacle before attacking, whilst the scoring provides a bolero-esque rhythm offsetting the sick glamour of the bad guys doing bad guy things. When the time finally comes the invaders hack up guards and grab the Princess, Thulsa in snake form slithering away before Conan can attack him. The heroes fight their way out successfully, but Thulsa, using one of the snakes he has such mystical affinity with as an arrow (!), manages to plant one in Valeria, and she dies in Conan's arms.



As if in recognition and salute, the spirits of the mounds allow Conan to light a fire where usually none can burn for Valeria's funeral pyre, the pyre erupting in a spectacular fireball that signifies Valeria's annunciation even as it certainly also gives away their location to Thulsa, so Conan, Subotai, and Akiro begin preparing for the inevitable fight when Thulsa and his warriors come for them. Valeria's death and funeral, channelling Bêlit's in the stories, also echoes the death of Jeremiah Johnson's wife as a moment of crucial loss that signifies Milius' hero is condemned to forge ahead alone on the most fundamental level but still retaining her memory as a source of strength, signified most literally in the climax when Valeria appears as a glittering Valkyrie long enough to save Conan from Rexor who almost overwhelms him. Anticipation mounts as the heroes build their traps and defences around the mounds, smartly mediated with a meditative pause as Conan and Subotai muse on their exiled, rootless, violent lives and Conan recalls the fresh wind of spring in his homeland.



Poledouris' music surges to ridiculously awesome heights in a sequence patterned after the charge of the Teutonic knights in *Alexander Nevsky*, as Thulsa's mounted raiders appear on the horizon and charge in for battle, their looming, steel-clad forms and thundering steeds intercut with Conan making a memorably pithy appeal to Crom to grant him revenge: "All that matters is that two stood against

many...and if you do not listen, then to hell with you!" Fortunately, Crom seems to be the kind of god who helps those who help themselves. The waiting Conan and Subotai, with some clumsy but effective aid from Akiro, manage to evade and bring down most of the henchmen in a bloody tumult, Thorgrim finishing up skewered upon a mantrap and Rexor finally broken, along with Conan's father's sword which is still his weapon of choice, by Conan with the Atlanetean steel, after that timely interruption by Valeria's shade.



Thulsa, standing off from the fight manages to lose not only his best men but his most loyal adherent when he tries to kill the Princess with one of his snake-arrows only for Subotai to stave off the shot. Her faith dashed, the Princess allies with Conan to lead him into the Mountain of Power and help him cut his way through what's left of Thulsa's guards. The ending is anticlimactic in a way in lacking any further explosion of action, but it deals a subtler kind of power in stripping Thulsa's aura of power, rather than offering a last blast of action, whilst also sharpening to a point the story's similarities to *Apocalypse Now* and setting the seal on Conan's journey as he must destroy a wicked priest-king who's set himself up in a zone of atavistic non-reality, and resist the temptation to supplant him. He sneaks up on the evil sorcerer just as Thulsa is ordering his adherents to go back to the world and unleashed an orgy of self-sacrificial destruction and slaughter, a touch extending the interesting likeness to known cultish dynamics.





Thulsa attempts to stall Conan's revenge by arresting him with his mesmeric power and appealing to him as his spiritual son, only for Conan to catch himself on the brink of falling under his spell and immediately hacking Thulsa's head off, tossing it down amongst his followers like so much garbage, finally breaking the grip of awe Thulsa had on him from childhood. Whereupon the cult disbands, tossing their candles into the mystic pool, leaving Conan and the Princess alone. The Princess bows down to him, ready to accept him as replacement god. Conan elects instead to burn down Thulsa's temple as a final statement not simply in destroying Thulsa's legacy but in claiming agency for humankind. The final glimpse of Conan anticipates his canonical ascension to kingship in his own right, "destined to wear the jewelled crown of Aquilonia upon a troubled brow," in his future, a fated end that also signals his eventual shift into the second and most burdensome part of his life journey, something like fatherhood.

## Con Air (1997)



On paper *Con Air* seemed the stuff of a harsh, mean, intense melodrama, like something Sam Peckinpah, John Carpenter, or Walter Hill might have directed back in the 1970s. A luckless ex-soldier and railroaded prisoner is being released, only to find himself caught up in an escape attempt by some particularly scummy inmates and is forced to resist them not only for the sake of his own freedom but the lives of others caught up in the resulting bedlam. Of course, in being produced by Jerry Bruckheimer in 1997, such a story was rendered in the very different lexicon of the absurdist '90s action flick style. Bruckheimer, long adept at picking out flashy visual stylists to sell his movies as the cutting edge in pop movie aesthetics, had just helped elevate Michael Bay to the forefront of blockbuster directors with *The Rock* (1996), and for *Con Air* hired the British music video director Simon West, who had not yet made a feature. Nicolas Cage was cast as the hero, the delightfully named Cameron Poe, a reformed bad boy turned great soldier, first glimpsed returning as a decorated veteran the Gulf War, but who immediately is goaded into battle with some barroom creeps jealous of his beautiful wife, Tricia (Monica Potter), and his gilded aura of martial glory: attacking him in the parking lot, they're beaten up by Poe, but he kills one who draws a knife on him.



Poe is jailed because one of the attackers managed to hide the knife and Poe accepted poor advice from his lawyer. Poe is forced to languish in prison as his wife gives birth to their daughter Casey and Poe only knows her through letters. When he's finally released, Poe is allowed to hitch a ride on a special prison plane flight transferring prisoners to a new facility, which means he gets to keep company with his pal 'Baby-O' O'Dell (Mykelti Williamson) on the flight. But the flight, which is set up by US Marshal Vince Larkin (John Cusack), is also packed with some truly nasty creeps, including murderous Black Revolutionary 'Diamond Dog' Jones (Ving Rhames), vicious rapist Johnny-23 (Danny Trejo), and Cyrus Grissom (John Malkovich), dubbed The Virus for the number of deaths he's caused. Later their number is increased by serial killer Garland Green (Steve Buscemi), and Francisco Cindino (Jesse Borrego), a drug cartel chieftain.



Several of the prisoners, following Cyrus' plan, manage to stage a takeover of the plane, and it emerges Cyrus has cooked up the scheme not simply to make a break for a non-extradition country, but to earn a big payday from Cindino's buddies for his rescue as well. Poe, rather than take a ready opportunity to leave the plane when the convicts substitute some bound and gagged prison guards for , feels obliged to stay aboard and pretend to be a willing helpmate: the villains are forcing Baby-O to stay aboard despite his diabetes, and Johnny-23 has unpleasant designs on the captive female prison guard Sally Bishop

(Rachel Ticotin). Meanwhile, once the hijacking is discovered Larkin keeps butting heads with macho DEA agent Duncan Malloy (Colm Meaney) who advocates blasting the plane out the sky, whilst Larkin recognises Poe is their ally within the enemy cadre. Things go sideways as Poe's attempts to communicate with the cops attract them to a rendezvous at a desert airstrip whilst Cindino's pals lurk, waiting to snatch him away.



Part of what made *Con Air* unusual when it came out, although it's more familiar now when winning an Oscar seems chiefly a stepping stone to being cast in a superhero movie, was its perversely good cast, netting together a bunch of actors of serious standing from out independent and art-house films. These included Cage, who came straight off his Oscar win for *Leaving Los Vegas* (1995) and suddenly branched with his usual unpredictability into high-powered genre fare with the triple punch of this, *The Rock*, and *Face Off* (1997), along with Malkovich, Cusack, and Buscemi, and plunking them down in the middle of the kind of movie Stallone, Schwarzenegger, or Steven Seagal would have carried just a few years earlier. This tendency was thanks to a mixture of cutting-edge, hyped-up filming technique making it less necessary to have physically accomplished or dominating actors anchor action films, and shifts in pop culture that valued a degree of quirky cool in heroes rather than brawny he-men. The glaze of smart-aleck humour with a pop culture referential edge was derived from influences like *The Simpsons* and Quentin Tarantino's films, Tarantino having personally injected his brand into Bruckheimer's *Crimson Tide* (1995).



West does a good job setting up his story essentials in short order: Poe's return from duty, incarceration, and release are all conveyed before the end of the opening credits with just enough character detail and drama to register as sufficiently substantial. Bruckheimer, busy recovering from the death of his longtime producing partner Don Simpson, made sure to bring the usual potent production values, as well as his innate talent for positioning his movies not just as movies but as rolling acts of pop cultural strategizing, with so many of his films from *Flashdance* (1983) on depicting central characters at once carefully signposted in their ordinariness and also spotlighted in their extraordinariness. It's fascinating the way the narrative ties itself in knots to make Poe a sympathetic figure despite being a prisoner, brave enough to avoid making him entirely innocent but assuring us he's a good guy who got a raw deal, goading audience reaction by making his barroom foes actively offensive not just in making plays for his wife but mocking his service too: "It's because of pussies like you we lost Vietnam," one barks.



Cage's Poe comes equipped with a romantically long mane of flowing hair, biceps that look like two pythons fucking, and a slinking Southern drawl, somehow managing to be rowdy rebel, patriotic hero, and jailbird angel all at the same time. Lest we write him off as some kind of truculent redneck he's given a black best friend he'll spend the whole movie trying to save. His driving motivation throughout is his desire to deliver a stuffed rabbit to his daughter, constantly threatened with being outed as

something less than a purebred hunk of psychopathy by the doll's presence in personal effects. Potter, who had a brief moment as an It Girl at the time, meanwhile manages to incarnate a particular Hollywood pervert ideal in looking both like a little girl and a sex bomb all at once. We're assured Tricia is the wise counsel lifetime love who warns Poe when she notices the marauder glint in his eye, "For a moment there you were that guy again." Poe, faster than James Cagney in some '30s gangland drama, is screwed over and stuck behind bars, agonising years fortunately condensed into some fancy montage work. Upon release he's confronted by a magnificent selection of sleaze, violence, and antisocial arrogance, and that's just from the prison guards supervising the convicts.



Malkovich is ingeniously cast as Cyrus, a sly-tongued force of darkness who nonetheless has some standards – he loathes rapists and so keeps foiling Johnny-23's attempts to assault Bishop – and manages to make every line, no matter how functional, sound like some pearl of satanic wit. Meaney is the macho and confrontational professional asshole who wants to shoot first and ask questions sometime next year on the nominal side of law and order, and who come equipped with his own speedy silver roadster. All traits that Bruckheimer would probably have gladly have imbued upon the hero back in the '80s, but here in appealing to a different zeitgeist Malloy is the jerkwad the smarter, snarkier Larkin repeatedly owns when following his own hunches and readings of character. *Con Air's* smartass Hollywood player bona fides and sly courting of reactionary sentiment are both highlighted as Larkin notes that Diamond Dog's prison-written memoir "has been described by the New York Times as a wake-up call for the black community – they're talking to Denzel for the movie."



The prison gang as a motley collection of multiethnic bruisers, also including Dave Chapelle's ill-fated 'Pinball' Parker, who provides a dose of lippy humour, and rounded out by a trans member, the gadabout Sally-Can't Dance (Renoly Santiago), who delights her fellows with a semblance of va-va-voom. Buscemi's Green is grafted on as a Hannibal Lecter satire, introduced swathed in alarming protective gear and handled like fissionable material by his guards, only to prove a weedy, good-humoured oddball who alternates between commenting wryly on the infelicity of the prisoners dancing along to Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Sweet Home Alabama" and noting that he once drove through several states wearing a woman's head as a hat. Stuff like this, as borderline surreal and scattershot as it all is, certainly contributes to the film's dizzy entertainment value, throwing out any pretensions to playing as a lean, mean little thriller and instead rendered with tongue buried so deep in its cheek it's almost burrowed out the other side.



West's music video work included the clips for Rick Astley's "Never Gonna Give You Up" and Mel and Kim's "Respectable," and *Con Air* was his debut feature. West achieved something remarkable insofar as he was the first director whose first three features all grossed over \$100 million at the box office, although his follow-ups, *The General's Daughter* (1999) and *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001), were awful. Here his style is very similar in affect to Bay's with lots of burnt orange sunsets, maniacally canted

camera angles, and erupting fireballs, if not quite as hyperbolic, and he manages to keep it all in some sort of balance. There's enough of the basic melodrama fuelling Poe's mission and the clash of methods and worldviews represented by Larkin and Malloy comes through to give the proceedings body and urgency, even as the film indulges self-satirising flashes of spectacle like Malloy's roadster becoming airborne when chained to the back of the plane, and the crashing aircraft sawing through the jutting neon guitar above Las Vegas' Hard Rock Café.



The impressive bursts of directing technique extend not just to breathless, furiously edited action, but an odd sequence which combining queasy laughs and suspense. Green wanders away from his fellow prisoners during a stopover at the desert runway and stumbles into some kind of American Gothic horror movie update of the monster playing with the little girl in *Frankenstein* (1931). The serial killer encounters a young girl in an empty swimming pool in a scene of chic ruination and play-acts drinking tea with him, whilst the convicts all work furiously to prepare to ambush the approaching forces of justice and Poe takes on Johnny-23 when the thug finally gets a moment alone with Bishop. This sequence, and the action that soon erupts, is replete with technically brilliant shots. West notes one of the tea cups broken and toppled in one shot, Green and girl absent, suggesting a terrible turn, only to reveal this as a fake-out as the girl reappears a few minutes later waving goodbye to her new friend as he wings away in the plane. There's a truly weird sense of humour apparent in this vignette, and in its subsequent bookend, where it's revealed Green has survived all the carnage ensuing in the finale. Green happily starts placing bets and drinking a cocktail at the Las Vegas gaming table, possibly having worked through his psychosis and not representing a danger anymore, or simply having become more discriminating.





Of course the whole shebang builds to a finale involving brain cell-killing levels of nonsensicality as Poe proves unfazed even by a bullet through the arm when he's finally found out and has to unleash the whoop-ass, before the plane crashes on the Las Vegas strip, Green desperately singing "He's Got The Whole World In His Hands" all the way, whilst a cartwheeling propeller slices through the hull and splits Poe and Cyrus just when they're finally about to rumble. Taking a leaf from James Cameron and *Speed* (1994) West appends an extra time action scene, as Poe and Larkin chase after Cyrus and remaining creeps as they steal a fire truck. Poe's vengeful streak has been stirred because Cyrus threatened to hunt down his family, and the two heroes battle the remaining villains at high speed. The frenzied editing saps some pleasure from the stunt work and staging here, but it's still a rather amazing set-piece achieving a state of appropriately maniacal ferocity. West finally and fully embraces the carnivalesque as the careening battle ends up busting open an armoured car, showering Vegas punters with cash, whilst a dazed Cyrus gets an elaborate comeuppance from a road works' steam hammer. It's all absolutely magnificent, a pure relic from an age of imperial decadence just before a once-salty genre was colonised by CGI and the preteen moralism of comic books. Even the Diane Warren-written, Trisha Yearwood-sung hit "How Do I Live," a song that gave a million clumsy newlyweds dances their accompaniment, is used fairly smartly to imbue an edge of outsized romanticism to the opening and closing scenes, where Poe is reunited with his family. But it's the final reprise of "Sweet Home Alabama" over the curtain call credits that hits the more appropriate note of disreputably jaunty rock attitude.



## Waterloo (1970)



**Director:** Sergei Bondarchuk

**Screenwriters:** Sergei Bondarchuk, Vittorio Bonicelli, H.A.L. Craig

*In Memoriam: Christopher Plummer 1929-2021*

Shrugged off by critics and moviegoers when it was released in 1970, Sergei Bondarchuk's *Waterloo* is nonetheless one of those white elephants of cinema history that today demands a certain awe. A movie where the making of it was damn near as epic an event as the history it depicts, it's also one of those rare instances where a mega-budget production and genuine directorial vision coincide. *Waterloo* began life with the ever-ambitious Italian producer Dino de Laurentiis wanting to make a film about the legendary clash that drew a curtain on Napoleon Bonaparte's military career and an age of European history, originally hiring John Huston to direct it. But De Laurentiis had difficulty raising the necessary budget for such a monumental undertaking, even at a time when large-scale international co-productions were becoming fairly common. When he did eventually find production partners it came from an unusual direction. The Soviet Union's state film production company Mosfilm agreed to join forces with De Laurentiis, helping stage the battle scenes in Uzhhorod, Ukraine, and supplying the largest number of extras ever assembled for a film. 17,000 Red Army soldiers played the clashing forces, whilst army engineers laboured to alter a stretch of Ukrainian farmland into a better approximation of the Belgian farmland that served as the battlefield. The film finished up rivalling in costs what was then the most expensive film ever made, 1963's *Cleopatra*.



*Waterloo's* eventual director Bondarchuk was a Ukrainian actor who had been a popular and lauded leading man in Soviet cinema from the 1940s, and established himself as a talented filmmaker with his feature directing debut, *Fate of a Man* (1959). Bondarchuk was and remains best known outside Russia for both directing and starring in a colossal seven-hour adaptation of Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, released in instalments through 1965-7. That work was realised through vast amounts of money and resources poured into it by the Soviet government in its determination to outdo the 1956 King Vidor version and make waves on the international cinema scene. The immense vision of that film saw Bondarchuk prove himself a master of handling colossal surveys of manpower and infrastructure, as well sufficiently intelligent and fine in touch to put across the human drama as well, although given the running time Tolstoy's drama was surprisingly often muted in favour of sheer spectacle. *Waterloo* allowed Bondarchuk to at least provide a kind of historical sequel. *Waterloo's* script was chiefly credited to the Irish former journalist and critic H.A.L. Craig, who had worked for De Laurentiis before including for the odd, interesting war film *Anzio* (1968), although others including Bondarchuk made contributions at different points in development.



Making a film about one of the most legendary and pivotal moments in history and two of its most powerful personalities in Napoleon Bonaparte and Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, is one of those challenges cinema's maximalist creative talents can hardly resist but rarely get to tackle. Indeed, at the time of its release Stanley Kubrick was deeply involved in developing his own film about Napoleon, only for *Waterloo's* box office failure to help foil it. To play the leads De Laurentiis hired two actors it's hard to imagine being more different in performing style and screen presence whilst still being major stars and regarded talents. The Method-trained Rod Steiger, just passing the zenith of his movie career after winning an Oscar for *In The Heat of The Night* (1967) and gravitating increasingly to appearing in European films, was hired to play Napoleon, and the Shakespearean-schooled Christopher Plummer as Wellington. Steiger's Napoleon dominates the film initially, offered as a tragic antihero pushed again and again to try and recapture lost glory. The opening scene finds Napoleon's Marshals, including Ney (Dan O'Herlihy), Soult (Ivo Garrani), and Grouchy (Charles Millot), stalking their way purposefully through the corridors of a palace where Napoleon is trying to conduct his final, desperate resistance against the invading allied armies, their boots rapping on the tiles like a drumbeat of portent.



Bondarchuk's genuine creative touch as a director is plain from this moment, deftly diagramming the game of tense confrontation that unfolds between the Emperor and his Marshals, matched to Steiger's performance with its fast alternations of affect. Napoleon moves with speed through brief flare-ups of his old fighting pith, world-weary exasperation, tight-wound contempt, and eruptions of violent declamation. "You know what the throne is, Ney?" he laughingly asks the Marshal when the cavalry leader tells him he has to give it up, "The throne is an over-decorated piece of furniture. It's what's behind the throne that counts." Claiming it's his genius and will that has put them all where they are, he starts mocking the Marshals: "You all stand before me waving a piece of paper, crying 'abdicate, abdicate'," before bellowing with window-rattling vehemence, "I will not!" over and over, exposing all at once his genuine, force-of-nature strength of will and streak of childish tantrum-throwing. As he settles in a chair by a fireplace an officer enters and whispers to him, and Bondarchuk moves in for an intimate, shadowy close-up of Napoleon's eyes as his voice questions in a whisper, "All his men?" Clearly he's just been delivered awful news that finally deflates the will he so loudly espouses, and he silently stands, signs his abdication and walks out. The officer explains that another Marshal has just surrendered with the last of his armies, "his last hope." The Marshals all suddenly turn as if stung and see Napoleon looking back through the doors at them with glowering resentment mixed with bone-deep pain and defeat.



Napoleon heads out into the courtyard where the members of his old Imperial Guard are at attention, and he gives a final, grand bit of theatre to them as he calls them “My children...my sons!” and wipes away his tears on the regimental flag. Finally he climbs into his carriage and rolls away to exile on Elba, seen as a hazy blotch of land in the distance under the opening credits. Soon titles inform us Napoleon escapes the island and lands on the mainland with a thousand men. The restored Bourbon king, Louis XVIII, played in a brief but effective cameo by Orson Welles, is presented as a languid, balloon-bodied humpty-dumpty in fancy clothes, barely stirred by the news his arch-enemy has escaped. After Ney, who like most of the other Marshals has kept his rank in the restoration, promises to bring his former master back “in an iron cage,” Louis mutters in quiet disdain: “How they exaggerate, all these – these soldiers...Nobody asked for that.” Ney sets out with an army division to intercept Napoleon but when the two forces square off, Napoleon, with a calculated but also genuine show of bravery, waves down his own men and marches up to Ney and his, offering himself as target. After a silent, jittery stand-off, one soldier faints, breaking the spell, and Napoleon is joyously swept up by his former soldiers. Ney throws down his sword to Napoleon, who gives it back to him and, after a few needling comments, accepts him again as his penitent disciple.



Soon enough Napoleon, vowing to displace “that fat King,” is swept into the Tuileries Palace after Louis flees it by a mob of Parisians, and he sets to work with what seems to be all his old energy and brilliance. And yet the Napoleon Steiger provides is not the romantic young culture hero of Jacques-Louis David’s paintings, if he ever existed, or even Abel Gance’s, but a middle-aged, portly, sickening man whose one great weapon is his multivalent brain, which might not be coupled to true instincts anymore. Bondarchuk includes a lengthy scene of Napoleon dictating several letters at once to various secretaries, segueing from subject to subject with breakneck speed but with a certain commonality of argument accruing, as he angrily ripostes to one letter from a prince accusing him of usurping the crown that he found it in a gutter and the people put it on his head, whilst also consoling the mother of a soldier accidentally killed and his begging his wife, now returned to her native Austria, to return his young son to him.



Napoleon’s last spur to regaining his former grandeur and fighting battles, the film suggests as it unfolds, is his desire to leave something more to his son than simply an onerous last name. As he asks one of his men late in the film what they’ll say about him in the future, the officer replies, “They will say you extended the limits of glory.” “Is that what I’m going to leave my son?” Napoleon queries, “The limits of glory?” This quest keeps driving him on even as he perceives, “My body is dying...but my brain is still good.” Soon Napoleon learns that the heads of his allied enemies have declared personal war on him despite his overtures for peace. He knows by this point who his first two adversaries are likely to be: Wellington, the English general whose name has a totemic import for his Marshals because he steadily skinned them in Spain and Portugal, a measure of inspired dread Napoleon registers but dismisses, and the Prussian Field Marshal Blücher (Sergo Zakariadze), whose armies are poised in Belgium. Receiving news that the two armies have separated whilst in the bath, Napoleon moves swiftly to take advantage.



Plummer's Wellington is finally, first glimpsed entering the famous ball thrown by the Duchess of Richmond (Virginia McKenna) in Brussels that finished up becoming the scene for the General and his senior officers learning of Napoleon's hard and fast drive in their direction. Contrasting the fleshy, brilliant, but going-to-seed Napoleon, Wellington seems a man exactly in his prime, every inch the aristocratic warrior and an accomplished social animal, charming the Duchess and amusing her daughter Sarah (Susan Wood) with the most hyperbolic stories of Bony as a monster who drinks blood. He soon however reveals one trait in common with Napoleon in possessing a pithy, unsentimental wit in regards to the business of being powerful. He describes to the Duchess his men as "Scum. Nothing but beggars and scoundrels, all of them. Gin is the spirit of their patriotism," and only murmuring "Umm-hmm," when the Duchess asks whether he still expects them to die for him. Wellington's crew of stalwart warriors, most of them veterans of his long Peninsula War campaigns, are present, including the Duchess's uncle the Duke of Gordon (Rupert Davies), commander of the famous Highland regiment, Wellington's second-in-command the Earl of Uxbridge (Terence Alexander), quartermaster Colonel De Lancey (Ian Ogilvy), archetypal young cavalier Lord Hay (Peter Davies), and Sir William Ponsonby (Michael Wilding), commander of the Scots Greys cavalry division.



And there's the eccentric, hard-bitten infantry commander Thomas Picton (Jack Hawkins), who presents a figure well out of place amongst all the dashing young officers and their ladies. Picton gruffly schools Lord Hay, who tries to impress Sarah by promising to bring her back a cuirassier's breastplate, with the promise he'll learn how to fight from the French, only to earn some sharp teasing right back from Sarah. Her mother confesses to being "a little bit of a Bonapartist" in her admiration for Napoleon's vigour. Meanwhile, in a clever bit of directing, Bondarchuk depicts Wellington's thoughts turning out into the stormy night beyond the gilt-framed windows in his attempts to mentally anticipate Napoleon's moves, only for images of Napoleon's army on the movie to resolve out of the murk. Bondarchuk turns the ball sequence into a dreamy moment of high romanticism, as Hay and Susan and De Lancey and his wife Magdalene (Veronica De Laurentiis) make splendid couples amidst the many on the dance floor. The ballroom is a space of appropriate splendour with its manifold candles, chandeliers, and mirrored walls, rather more baroquely beautiful than the actual scene of the ball, but underscoring Bondarchuk's offering of this as a pure moment of period idealisation, the cavalier dream enjoying a brief flower before hell opens up again, grazing a Jane Austen world of glittering young things honouring Eros before the inevitable orgy of Thanatos.



Bondarchuk offers a slow-motion image of Hay and Susan with expressions of stricken intensity, candle flames in the foreground reaching into the frame encapsulating the brief burning spell of life in the moment even as fate has literally come calling, in the form of Müffling (John Savident), Blücher's envoy. The dirty, harried Müffling, who the Duchess spots and comments, "That man will spoil the dancing," arrives to tell Wellington that Napoleon is on the move and has already seized a strategic advantage. The dance goes on whilst Wellington and his generals retire to another room to quickly forge a strategy, Wellington quickly deducing the basic shape of what must now happen. Napoleon hits and drives back Blücher's force from the crossroads of Quatre Bras, but Blücher expertly manages to keep his army together and says he can come when Wellington begs for the Prussians to rendezvous with him outside the town of Waterloo, as he means to stand and fight with his army, a blend of British, Dutch, and German soldiers.





Many great military conflicts of history can be awkward affairs to coherently and cohesively capture on film, but *Waterloo* quite literally had everything required for great storytelling. The inherent drama of Müffling's arrival during the ball, shattering the frivolity with news of something imminent and awesome. The two polar-opposite yet gravity-locked military heroes squaring off. The race against time that helps decide the battle. Component skirmishes filled with enough drama to serve as films in themselves, like the defence of the farmhouse Hougomont, the grand but doomed cavalry charges by both sides, and the collapse of the French Imperial Guard. Moreover, *Waterloo* became hopelessly wound in with nationalistic legend and culture in Britain, France, and beyond. One of the more niggling aspects of *Waterloo* as a film is a common one amongst the international co-productions from the era: for an event so strongly rooted in such culturally specific legend, the smaller roles are uncomfortably crammed with Italian and Russian actors who needed to be awkwardly dubbed, sapping it, at least for an Anglophonic audience, of the kind of emblematic chauvinistic power that, say, *Zulu* (1964) achieved. But that said, it's keen to the cultural apparatus and memory in play throughout.



Casting Steiger and Welles, and O'Herlihy who does a kind of clipped American accent, is a gesture that almost gives a certain clever cohesion to the French side of things, trying to suggest the brash energy of

the revolutionary French by equating it with the American version. But the supporting players filling out his Marshals and officers have a hodgepodge of accents. On the British side, Hawkins had been severely limited through an operation for throat cancer that left his once-mellifluous voice a hoarse croak, and was usually dubbed by other actors in his later roles: here the post-synched voice often barely matches his lips. A small price to pay, perhaps, for a film that also displays many of the best qualities of the filmmaking in its era, with the fearsome attention to detail and *mise-en-scene* that distinguished both the Italian and Russian film industries on display. Everything has a uniquely palpable immediacy, a grittiness, even before we get to the monumental battle scenes. Even the posh revelry of the ball has an earthy lustre.



The scale of the recreation of the battle is an awe-inspiring apex of pre-CGI staging in cinema, and moreover Bondarchuk wields it with an actual sense of artistic purpose, unlike some lesser battle movies, like the endless B-roll footage of historical recreationists tramping around farmland filling out the back half of *Gettysburg* (1991). As the two armies square off Bondarchuk films Wellington's forces from Napoleon's point of view in a breathtaking survey. The staging of scenes like Napoleon's riotous return to the halls of power in Paris, borne aloft by a joyous crowd, aim to capture the overflowing liveliness of historical genre painting, and indeed Bondarchuk recreates many such paintings throughout. Bondarchuk's melancholy romanticism in the ball room is later mirrored in the most astoundingly epic fashion as he shoots the famous charge of the Scots Greys cavalry, recreating the painting *Scotland Forever!* and adopting a languorous, dreamlike slow-motion as the great steeds pound across muddy ground, Nino Rota's score offering a sonorous pastiche of the ballroom music, turning the thunderous charge into another wistful waltz for what is both the climax of and the doom of a warrior creed and way.



Before the battle begins, however, Wellington and Napoleon spend a long, dark, rainy night pensively failing to rest as they reside in farmhouses on opposite sides of the prospective battlefield, Napoleon trying urgently to understand why Wellington has taken up position in a place that looks poor to his eye, whilst Wellington has already explained to his people why the position is actually ideal, having seen it a year earlier and kept it in mind. Bonaparte suffers a bout of illness that causes concern in his Marshals, whilst Wellington is driven to distraction by the question of whether Blücher can give aid to his outnumbered force, with Blücher himself being chased by a detached portion of the French army under Grouchy. Certainly because it helps amplify the drama, the film rolls with disputed reports from some witnesses that Napoleon was debilitated at points throughout the campaign and at crucial points of the battle by attacks of severe pain – he almost certainly was already ill with the stomach cancer that would kill him six years later – as well as constantly suggested foreboding that wars with his most customary habits of decisive energy and resolve, his confident belief that he has no equal and so can only be undone by his own weaknesses.



Steiger hardly seems at first glance like obvious casting as a stocky American playing the eternally energetic Corsican-born Emperor. And yet he gives one of his best screen performances, revelling in

playing a character that perfectly suits his galvanic, sometimes borderline hambone acting style, moving with musical skill between the poles of Napoleon overboiling character. Plummer, on the other hand, seems very obviously cast, and also gives one of his best performances, expertly flicking off Wellington's turns of wit and finding the vulnerable streak and the ticking intelligence under the Iron Duke's veneer of haughty confidence. Compared to Napoleon's mercurial talents Wellington is taciturn in command and circumspect about revealing any limitations, commenting, "If I thought my hair knew what my brain was thinking, I'd shave it off and wear a wig." Notably, where the film grants access to Napoleon's thinking through a voiceover that explicates his thought processes, Wellington remains sealed off until the very end, although he's obviously rattled as he keeps losing friends during the fight. When Gordon offers him some of the beans he's munching on for energy with the assurance they're good, Wellington responds with peerless honesty in being confounded, "If there is one thing about which I know positively nothing, it is agriculture," a line that always cracks me up specifically because of Plummer's delivery. Or when he barks at a buglist to stop uselessly blowing his horn in an attempt to call back the Scots Greys, only to then console him, "You'll strain yourself."



The two generals are offered as avatars of radically different societies, the once-revolutionary Napoleon who now reclines amidst the captured grandeur of a deposed nobility speaking sniffily of "this English aristocrat" whilst the once-penurious Wellington, reborn a crisply tasteful man of import, comments of his foe, "On a field of battle his hat is worth fifty thousand men, but he's not a gentleman." He disdains the sight of Napoleon riding by on his famous white horse, noting sceptically, "I don't need a white horse to puff me up, by god." When one of his men asks permission to try taking him out with a cannon shot, an appalled Wellington responds, "Certainly not!...Commanders of armies have better things to do than to fire at each-other." As an Irishman Craig's script naturally focuses on a selection of the rankers of the Enniskillen regiment as representative shitkickers amidst the great horde under Wellington, as the also-Irish-born Duke notes "I hang and flog more of them than the rest of the army put together." When he encounters one of the Irish privates, O'Connor (Donal Donnelly), having just stolen a piglet from a farmhouse for food, Wellington eventually laughs at O'Connor's desperate attempts at explaining himself, claiming to me merely seeking the unfortunate piglet's home.



Rather than punishing O'Connor, Wellington has him promoted to Corporal because he knows "how to defend a hopeless position," an amusing vignette if one somewhat contrary to Wellington's famously stern approach to preventing pillaging. O'Connor adapts to rank uneasily as he sneaks a look into an officer's shaving mirror to make sure his new stripes are sewn correctly, much to the officer's annoyance. Bondarchuk also reserves an amused eye for the rituals of the two squared-off armies as the English soldiers begin singing a mocking song about how "Bony fought the Roo-shee-ans!" whilst Wellington and his officers drink a toast to "Today's fox" in reading for a hunt. The British soldiers, like Picton who insists on dressing like a well-dressed man-about-town rather than a soldier, have a quality of individualism that is an odd strength and proves fateful compared to the way Napoleon's people hero-worship their singular leader. Wellington is inclined to indulge everything that "wastes time" to give Blücher a chance to reach them, whilst Napoleon and his Marshals realise the ground, left muddy from the previous night's downpour, has to dry before they can move their cannons and manoeuvre effectively.



Both the strength of *Waterloo* as a film and some of its frustrating aspects are connected. The film was reportedly heavily edited before release, excising a great amount of material. But concentrating on

Napoleon and Wellington and perceiving the sturm-und-drang of the battle as a manifestation of their warring personalities was a good idea, contrasting the usual sprawl of historical epics with their mix of fiction and fact, helping it to play out as tightly focused and realistic, almost to the point of sometimes resembling a docudrama, less like *Gone With The Wind* (1939) or *Doctor Zhivago* (1960) and more like a far more expensive and expansive version of what directors like Peter Watkins and Gillo Pontecorvo were making around the same time. Apart from the sidelong glances at the Enniskillen and vignettes during the ball, there's no distraction by subplots and romances. It takes the idea of portraying inherently dramatic history as for the most part sufficient in itself. Craig's script draws a lot of dialogue directly from the real people if from the expanse of their careers rather than the specific moment, like Napoleon commenting, "Never interrupt your enemy when he's making a mistake," whilst watching Wellington's army form. Apart from a few dashes of historical licence – Hay, portrayed in the film as the essence of doomed youth, was killed two days before the battle, and the version of Gordon in the film is a composite of several members of the family – it's also closely attuned to historical fact for the most part.



This however does to a certain extent limit the film's capacity to dramatise some of the battle's vignettes, like the struggle over Hougomont, which is seen as a selection of random shots of attack and defence. The film does make space for Ponsonby sharing snuff with Uxbridge and reminiscing about the sorry circumstances of his father's death at the hands of French Lancers, before suffering exactly the same fate himself when the charge of the Scots Greys becomes a rout and Ponsonby is caught in the mud. Ponsonby manages to hand on his watch to one of his men with the order to take it to his son, only for the other horseman to also be caught and killed. Bondarchuk zeroes in on the watch with its painted case still in the dead man's grasp in a muddy pool, a potent little image of delicate civilisation amidst the filth and carnage of war, a lost token of a genteel world about to be swept away. Ponsonby's story about his father is fictional, but it helps create an odd sense of time stuck in a loop in the foreshadowing, an evocation of war as unending, claiming generation upon generation. This touch works better than a more emphatic sop to the antiwar feelings of a 1970 youth audience later in the film, as a flaxen-haired young soldier, Tomlinson (Oleg Vidov), who O'Connor's taken under his wing, suddenly freaks out during the attack on the Allied army by Ney's cavalry and wanders out amidst the galloping horses and gunfire screaming, "We've never seen each-other – how can we kill each-other?"



Whilst this touch is a bit much, Bondarchuk still makes it work for him when he films Ney's charge, which the volatile cavalry leader unleashes whilst Napoleon is having a bout of pain and Ney assumes Wellington is retreating when he's just trying to shelter his men from artillery. The Allied soldiers form into defensive squares, leaving the cavalry reeling about them, a stand-off that quickly degenerates into a madcap bloodbath. This sequence is filmed in astounding aerial shots, picking out the ragged geometry of the defences and the squiggles of the charging horsemen as seen from a godlike perspective, contrasted with the hellish furore on ground level, in a sequence of truly gobsmacking effect. Tomlinson's protesting cries echo on the soundtrack as the camera speeds over the battle, Rota's sadly elegant violin theme on sound underscoring the constant refrain of Bondarchuk's vision of the battle as a dance of death. There's virtually nothing like this sequence anywhere else in cinema, and the film's acknowledged impact on the way Peter Jackson shot the battle sequences in his Tolkien adaptations is plain. Bondarchuk weaves in moments of effective battlefield horror, like Picton getting struck by a shard of shrapnel through his signature top hat and slowly falling dead from his horse, and Wellington watching helplessly as De Lancey is also struck by shrapnel, his back grotesquely torn, and collapses whilst the wind and smoke drives down upon him and his fellows. Hay is cut down crying to the soldiers he stands with to "Think of England, men!", perhaps the closest the film comes to nudging the more overtly cynical attitude of something like Tony Richardson's *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1968).



There's also a nice bit of humour as Gordon's Highlanders are sent into battle, bagpipes blasting and kilts flicking about their knees, provoking Napoleon, watching them through a telescope, to query, "Has Wellington nothing to offer me but these Amazons?" The later scenes of the battle gain an increasingly apocalyptic edge as Bondarchuk has a strong wind arise and the scene become a stygian place of whipping smoke and dust, like some distant spiritual anticipation of the atomic bomb is being unleashed. Napoleon bellows frantic commands to his men through the din, whilst the Prussian columns appear on the horizon, forcing Napoleon to try and win the battle as quickly as possible, and for a moment seems to have the battle in his grasp as he captures one of the farmhouses anchoring Wellington's position. Perhaps understandably for a Soviet artist who had lived through World War II, Bondarchuk offers the not-so-faint suggestion throughout the film that with both Napoleon and Wellington granted their measure of sympathy, the real villains as the Prussians, who of course represent the rising power of the Germanic states. Whenever Blücher and his army are seen Rota menacingly plays "Deutschland Über Alles" anachronistically on the soundtrack, and when he finally gets his force close enough to strike, Blücher bellows: "No pity! I'll shoot any man who has pity in him!" "I made one mistake in my life," Napoleon comments, "I should've burnt Berlin."



Only here does Bondarchuk really lose grip on the illustrative sense of the battle's ebb and flow in his desire to portray the French collapse as a chaotic rush, and loses the potential impact of the battle's famous climactic moment, the breaking of the Imperial Guard, which had never before run from the field, in an ambush by the British Foot Guards. Still, Bondarchuk notably continues his theme of modern warfare nesting inside the seemingly more heroically idealised historical brand as he dubs in the sound of machine gun fire when the Guards fire on their French enemies, ripping them to pieces, who, with enemies front and behind, finally crack and flee. The anecdote of Uxbridge getting his leg blown off, a vignette that became part of the odd folklore attached to the battle, allows another great moment for Plummer as the Duke registers his friend's injury with both a note of shock and distress whilst also maintaining a veneer of the kind of English understatement and stoicism that became mythical. As the French collapse with two armies suddenly closing a vice on them, one of Wellington's aides comments, "We're doing murder, your grace." The battle ends with the nobly pathetic sight of the last French survivors, cornered and bedraggled, refusing to surrender – "Merde!" an officer shouts in response to the English entreaty to lay down arms – and so are blown to smithereens by cannons.





Bondarchuk offers a coda that suggests the influence of the post-battle scenes of *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) as, far from offering a sense of triumph, he has Wellington ride across the battlefield surveying the entirely inglorious results. Thousands of bodies, including Tomlinson, lie sprawled on the ground, picked over by thieves in the dying murk of the day, the limits of glory well and truly defined. Wellington's later comment that the saddest thing other than a battle lost is a battle won is heard in voiceover, before the Duke rides off towards his future, one which will bring him to no more battlefields. Meanwhile the bloodied, mad-looking Ney watches as a gutted and dazed Napoleon flails in the rain, allowing the Marshal a flourish of poetic force as his thoughts are heard, making reckoning of his commander's fate: "They'll chain you, like Prometheus, to a rock, where the memory of your own greatness will gnaw you." Napoleon climbs into his carriage and rides off into the gathering murk and rain, a final note surprisingly anticipatory of the very end of *Apocalypse Now* (1979), a film which can be seen as the end-of-the-1970s-zeitgeist bookend to *Waterloo's* vision of warfare and titanic ego devolving into the mud. *Waterloo* is an imperfect film certainly, but it has flashes of real greatness, and demands more regard.

## City of Women (1980)

*La città delle donne*



Throughout the 1960s and '70s following the career-transforming, art form-redefining diptych of *La Dolce Vita* (1960) and *8½* (1963), Federico Fellini had maintained a kingly stature on the international film scene. In that phase he stood a seemingly inexhaustible artist weaving panoramic fantasias from the stuff of his deeply perverse mind as well as an equally perverse world, and who broke down a barrier in film between personal expression and public spectacle. But *City of Women* was seen by many as a moment of exposure and the start of a wane, released a year after Bob Fosse's *All That Jazz* suggested Fellini's acolytes were doing more interesting things now with his example. Many saw the former cinema hero suddenly starting to go a bit flaccid and repetitive in the course of lampooning both his own haplessly priapic imagination and the '70s Women's Liberation movement, and the mutual incomprehension of each. Fellini had tried to make a film about the feeling of being left behind by the times and instead many felt he created a monument to the phenomenon. The film begins with Marcello Mastroianni playing the regulation Fellini alter ego, whose sobriquet of Snàporaz immediately correlates him with the character he played in *8½*, aboard a train rolling across the campagna and entering a leafy tunnel with all its Hollywood-Freudian import.



Taken with a fetching, imperious-looking woman (Bernice Stegers) wearing a Russian-style fur hat seated opposite, Snàporaz follows her into one of the train's restrooms and, carried away with lust, tries to have sex with her, only for the train to pull up at her stop. The woman alights and Snàporaz pursues her into the fringing woods, soon to find her leading him to a large hotel which is playing host to a convention of radical feminists. The tone of *City of Women* is immediately established as one of constant blue-balled frustration which soon is pushed to hyperbolic extremes as Snàporaz wanders around the hotel and the adjoining countryside, encountering taunting, tempting, teasing, terrifying women of every age and stripe. He's exposed and harried, despite his attempts to meekly shuffle his way through the feminist convention, when the woman from the train decides to single him out as the representative enemy. He's rescued by a young woman, Donatella (Donatella Damiani) who keeps popping up at unexpected intervals and maintains a cheery demeanour amidst the variably angry feminists.



Donatella comes across as the grown-up version of the innocent girl in *La Dolce Vita*, a kind of guide figure and emblem of the unobtainable. She admits to possessing a multilayered nature, and is also the daughter of a burlesque artist Snàporaz used to see, one who used to work with her sister as “The Smash Duo”. Donatella ropes him into rollerskating with her and other members of a keep-fit generation, in an upstairs gymnasium space where others train themselves for violent encounters by kicking male mannequins in their imaginary junk. Snàporaz is eventually pushed down a flight of stairs by the rambunctious girls, and he’s taken in hand by an ugly but vigorous and lusty cleaner (Luciano Turina) who promises to give him a ride on her motorcycle back to the railway station, but leads him into a greenhouse where she insists they have sex. Snàporaz awkwardly complies, only for them to be interrupted by the woman’s ancient and infuriated mother, not mollified by her explanations she was only collecting seed. Increasingly chagrined, Snàporaz tries walking to the station, only to be given a ride by a gang of wild young lasses who seem to want to hunt him *Most Dangerous Game*-style after he gets angry with their antics. He gains refuge with Dr Xavier Katzone (Ettore Manni), an aging he-man residing in a mansion who is coincidentally holding a gathering to celebrate will be his 10,000th and final seduction of a woman before quitting sex altogether, a gathering where Snàporaz is surprised to encounter his alienated wife Elena (Anna Prucnal).



*City of Women* can readily be described as a supersized edition of the dream and fantasy sequences in *8½*, but where the earlier film delineated a dialogue between those realms and the real world its protagonist tried to deal with, *City of Women* melts from one surreal set-piece to another. The film dances through the subconscious of its central character, before finally revealing itself as a dream Snàporaz is having on the train, Fellini's mischievous twist on the end of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) underlined as the analogues for his fantasies enter the compartment and take their places. Fellini was generally seen as having left his roots in neorealist cinema, with its emphasis on authenticity and social documentation, far behind by this point in his career. And yet there's still the detectable trace of the old journalistic and documenter's urge apparent in so many of Fellini's frenetic conjurations of group action, scenes like the visit to the spa in *8½* and the film award ceremony in *Spirits of the Dead* (1967) segment "Toby Dammit," charged as they are with a giddy and grotesque sense of experience transformed, akin to what Louis-Ferdinand Celine and Hunter Thompson managed to evoke on the page, but also a fine eye and ear trying to nail down the disorientating sensation of being immersed in a subculture. Fellini applies the same brush to almost every encounter in *City of Women*.



The hotel conference is an astonishing piece of staging and choreography as Snàporaz surveys the gamut of combative feminists, some of whom furiously decry fellatio. Others stage a dance number mocking the housewife life, climaxing with a Frankensteinian husband casually bending his harried wife over the stove for some quick pleasure, in between group singing and celebrating a woman who lives with a male harem, who present themselves with pride to the crowd's approval. Fellini implicitly connects their communal hunger for a transcendental sense of community with the religious seekers he cast a sceptical eye on in *La Dolce Vita* and *8½* and the parading Fascists in *Amarcord* (1973), before Snàporaz finds himself pinioned in perfect humiliation when the woman from the train turns on him, showing secretly snapped photos of him in the throes of his absurd-looking lust. Later in the film Snàporaz is arrested and grilled by female police officers dressed in fetishistically fascist garb, who oblige Snàporaz to go through the motions of confessing his sins in a stark antechamber filled with shrines to defeated men, that feels vaguely inspired by the otherworldly courts of *Orphée* (1949).



Fellini's lampooning of the more absurd side of the period feminism isn't subtle or particularly incisive, ticking off caricatures of ranting lesbian separatists and sex-phobics. The real subject of course is Fellini's own eternal blend of fixation and disquiet with the sensual side of life, that side that constantly demands obeisance but also causes collisions with other minds and bodies. But there is a thread of coherence to his meditations. Where before in his films the carnal dimension of life was in tension with religious mores and social expectations, here he delves inevitably closer to the problem of sexuality in relation to the basic matter of being a human being, at once a mind and body, constantly provoked by the impersonal and inhuman aspect of sex as he's turned on by physiques and body parts – Snàporaz memorably describes himself as an "assoholic" – whilst forced to reckon with the ultimate impossibility of separating the body from the being that inhabits it, a tension Fellini identifies as lurking behind the problems the feminists denounce.



Fellini's constant cinematographer Giuseppe Rotunno and art director Dante Ferretti do their usual superlative work in realising the cavernous spaces and labyrinthine places that give appropriate oneiric setting for Fellini's exposure of his subconscious world, whilst Luis Bacalov offers a fair approximation of Nino Rota's old jaunty strains that helped weave his sense of the carnivalesque. Fellini's impact on fellow Italian directors in the horror genre like Dario Argento and Lucio Fulci in their attempts to weave a similar texture feels here like it might have been reversing: *City of Women* could well be described as Fellini's take on *Suspria* (1977) in its entrance into a illogical space ruled by femininity, or a bloodless exploration of the psychic room next to the one Fulci set *A Lizard in a Woman's Skin* (1972) in. In one of the film's highlights, at once hilarious and queasy in its evoked textures, Snàporaz recalls being deflowered by going to a prostitute in a seedy bordello, a place of cracked plaster and buzzing electrical lights, a place that has a hellish vibe because that seems to answer some need in its clientele, the whiff of sulphur to lend strange piquancy to the alienation from one's own desires. Both the overseeing madam and the bespectacled, lacquered hooker move robotically, like simulacra of beings complete with mechanical sounds as they move, before the beggaring vision of the tiny young Snàporaz pinioned under the prostitute, envisioned as possessing a colossally inflated rear-end and pudendum. The fantasy of bounteous flesh is also a form of horror, a need and a fear of being overwhelmed by the physicality of another, a submission that can only be borne sometimes through the need to annihilate the reality of the other being. Snàporaz's reunion with his half-drunk, bitter, railing wife Elena brings the film down to earth briefly as he's forced to reckon with the tension between the desire to maintain a loving life with her as they slip towards old age versus the ever-corrosive need for sexual satisfaction that just cannot be held in check by his wedding vows.





The most delirious of the many emasculation fantasies comes as Snàporaz is gifted two women by Katzone, filled out by Donatella-as-her-mother and sister decked out in their showgirl garb, or rather lack of it, who dance the Charleston with bobbing-boob enthusiasm, before leading him up to a glass-walled bedroom high in Katzone's mansion. There seems to wait the promise of orgiastic delights, only for Elena to supplant the pair with face caked in cold cream and hair in rollers, a Euripides antiheroine turning her coldly savage turn-off mask on her errant husband, insisting on wailing operatic arias whilst a storm shakes the landscape beyond the glass. This is one of many scenes in the film that feels directly transcribed from one of Fellini's dreams. Snàporaz seeks escape and slips through a vaginal portal under the bed, to find himself borne on a carnival ride through the stations of his sexual development. It's true that as many complained when the film first screened that Fellini revisits flourishes and motifs from his earlier films, with the occasional feeling of a kind of greatest hits compilation: the scene between Snàporaz and Elena obviously extends the scenes between Mastroianni and Anouk Aimee in *8½*, for instance, whilst there are nods to the feverishly distorted memory world of *Amarcord* (1973), like the bizarre sight of a movie theatre full of young boys where the theatre floor is one huge bed the boys tuck themselves into and begin gleefully masturbating to their on-screen idol.



The flustered, clammy compulsiveness of *City of Women* helps give the film associative cohesion, as if Fellini is trying to say something it takes a great deal of effort to say, trying to yoke together various stages of his subconscious and his art to better describe both and delve at something that still provokes him. The film goes on rather too long and never quite finds catharsis or connection: the film might indeed represent Fellini's moment of deepest solipsism. It might be said then that Fellini paid an odd price for remaking himself from the tragicomic artist of *La Strada* (1954) and *The Nights of Cabiria* (1957) with their assailed female characters at the forefront to making his movies from his own psychic playground, fully accessing his private universe but unable to give substance to anyone else's. And yet the showmanship and sense of comic coup apparent throughout is the great compensation, particularly in the deliriously weird sequence of Snàporaz's ride with the teen girls. This clan of neo-barbarians' idea of a great time is watching planes land and riding along country lanes to throbbing disco, panting and moaning in caricatured lust, slaves to the bestial beat that modern pop culture provokes but then offers no concurrent outlet: whilst the film as a whole would be few people's favourite Fellini, this comes damn close to being my favourite individual sequence by him.



Katzone and his house offer a counterpoint to the landscape of female weirdness with the aging doctor, a rather Terry Southern-esque creation played by 1950s Italian film heartthrob Manni. Katzone offers a cruel caricature of would-be imperial masculinity, a rich oddball who has a hall in his house festooned with the images of his lovers and the recorded sounds of their orgasms, a cathedral of memorialised love Snàporaz dances through in delight. Katzone's latest and last lover demonstrates her most amazing skill as she sucks up tossed coins and rolling pearls into her vaginal port. Meanwhile Katzone kisses the plaster bust of his mother with desperate protestations of love and rants against the fascist women who shot one of his dogs. At the end Snàporaz manages to run the gauntlet and gains the right to seek out the embodiment of his ideal woman in an arena littered with symbolic remnants from earlier films like the Romanesque rubble of *Fellini - Satyricon* (1969) and blazing Madonna statues of *Juliet of the Spirits* (1966), as well as a pair of drag kings playing Laurel and Hardy, suggesting it's all a kind of slapstick adventure. Once gained the vision of feminine perfection is a leeringly pornographic balloon in the shape of Donatella that he takes off in, only for the actual Donatella to start shooting at him from the ground, setting him adrift and winging wildly on through the shadow world. Snàporaz awakens to safety, but quickly chooses the dream again, as we all do. *City of Women* is a messy thing, alternatively mesmerising and tiresome, one where every criticism that can be made is valid and yet also still delivers an arresting, occasionally brilliant experience.



## Zack Snyder's Justice League (2021)



At the end of 2017 when the theatrical cut of *Justice League*, credited solely to Zack Snyder but very largely reshot by Joss Whedon at Warner Bros.' insistence, was released, I finished off my review with a note that we might hopefully, eventually see Snyder's version, something I expected might appear one day like Paul Schrader's dumped *Exorcist* movie. I didn't expect that hope to become one of the major *causes celebres* of current pop culture, but it did. Some took umbrage at the fierceness of Snyder fans' demands that helped to get it realised, whilst others saw it as a triumph for the involved over the disdain of both studios and commentators. Certainly, this year's Oscar nominees can only wish they'd stirred so much interest and passion. Ironically, with Whedon's stock now at a dread ebb thanks to reports about his rotten behaviour many are now far more receptive to what Snyder tried to do with his take on the DC Comics universe, which always split the difference between the authentically ambitious and the bombastic, as well as sympathetic to the personal tragedy that helped enforce his sidelining from the project.



I didn't deeply dislike the theatrical version, but certainly felt it was a compromised and confused rump of a movie, a flaky attempt to make a new *The Avengers* (2012) out of what should have been the appropriately majestic apotheosis of the trilogy started with *Man of Steel* (2013) and *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016). Clocking in at just a hair over four hours, the version put together for HBO Max by Snyder, is by any measure one big hunk of movie. The story is more or less the same, only augmented with some new asides, dimensions, and consequences. Demonic alien middle-manager Steppenwolf (voiced by Ciaran Hinds), attracted to Earth after Superman's death at the end of *Dawn of Justice*, arrives on the behest of all-powerful conqueror Darkseid (Ray Porter) to reclaim three pieces of ancient and incalculably powerful technology called the Mother Boxes, which when combined can unleash immense terraforming and matter-arranging capacities.



Steppenwolf steals one kept by the Amazons on Themiskyra, leaving Queen Hippolyta (Connie Nielsen) in the dust, and a second from the Atlanteans in their submerged kingdom, bashing his way past loyal retainers Vulko (Willem Dafoe) and Mera (Amber Heard). Aware of the new potential for terrifying alien threats without Superman's protection, Bruce Wayne (Ben Affleck) is already busy trying to forge a team of defenders, with Diana 'Wonder Woman' Prince (Gal Gadot) already on board: Wayne tries to talk the embittered and rigidly independent Arthur 'Aquaman' Curry (Jason Momoa) into lending a hand, but seems to fail, and so turns to two recently-forged "metahumans" in the form of Barry 'The Flash' Allan (Ezra Miller), imbued with astounding capacities of speed but still guiltily clinging to the hope of getting his imprisoned father (Billy Crudup) out of jail, and Victor 'Cyborg' Stone (Ray Fisher), a fatally injured college football star reborn as a vastly powerful fusion of man and machine when his scientist father Silas (Joe Morton) experimented with a mysterious artefact, an artefact which is of course the third, long-missing Mother Box. Outfought by Steppenwolf and his army of Parademons, ugly flying aliens, the heroes eventually decide to try and use the one Mother Box left to them to revive Superman (Henry Cavill).



One irony of Snyder's career thus far is that almost all his movies have been drastically improved in their extended home viewing releases, particularly *Sucker Punch* (2011) and *Dawn of Justice*, which emerged as more complete, measured, intelligible works. Snyder tries to purvey movies on the scale of Lang and Gance and Lean in modern popcorn movie drag, but his relatively shaky box office touch despite his strong following seems to have limited his ability to impose it. In that regard Snyder oddly joins company with Ridley Scott, who's also long become a master of rescuing his visions that way, and the reedit is on one level simply a fairly regular event in his career. The opening scenes of Zack Snyder's *Justice League* strike radically different notes to its precursor in allowing Snyder's more momentous and import-stacked concepts to sound. Superman's death is a moment that literally vibrates through the fabric of the universe, a loss that's both a symbolic and practical disaster, leaving the Earth without a truly intimidating defender. Bruce's appeal to Arthur, in an Icelandic fishing village which harbours the exiled and embittered merman, concludes with the village women singing a lament as Arthur swims out to see, making clear that the villagers regard him as something close to a beneficent local deity.





This depiction of tremulous fear and anxiety stirred in ordinary people by the appearance of immensely powerful beings in their midst has been the consistently interesting aspect of Snyder's understanding of the material which he correlates insistently with a politically destabilised and questioning age. Where most superhero tales place us in the shoes of the heroes, Snyder views them as inherently abnormal and intimidating. That's one reason *Zack Snyder's Justice League*, like *Dawn of Justice* before it, smartly uses Bruce, an ordinary man distinguished by genius and resolve rather than fanciful powers, as the interlocutor in his experience of feelings of both duty and impotence. This theme is taken up in a different form when some nihilistic terrorists try to blow up themselves and London's Old Bailey, with Diana intervening in dynamic fashion in what is certainly one of the best-filmed pieces of superhero action yet seen. Diana here is called upon to serve directly in the function superheroes have by and large been resurrected from pop cultural dust in the past 20 years since 9/11 to serve more allusively: protecting the innocent from fanatical murderers invoking quasi-religious motives. Similarly well-done is the introduction for Barry, first glimpsed trying to get a job as a dog-walker, who speeds to the rescue of a girl who canonically speaking will become his great love, Iris West (Kiersey Clemons): Snyder here does something he generally resisted doing in his earlier films in offering a straightforward depiction of a superhero doing their basic business, an impressive unit of visual effects used to weave a quality of dreamlike romanticism.



Snyder's attempts to dig into the mythopoeic aspects of superhero stories are always bound to split an audience down the middle between those who find it gilding the cute power fantasy lily and those who find it stirring and interesting. I'm evidently amongst the latter, although it can certainly be pushed too far, as Snyder does at points with his clunky correlation between Superman and Jesus, resumed here as the revived Superman forms a cruciform as he drinks in the empowering light of the sun. But the key quality of *Zack Snyder's Justice League*, given time to breathe and properly resolve in this version, is that it emerges more fully realised as the thematic sequel to *Dawn of Justice* as a portrait in dealing with loss and beholding rebirth, a violation of the natural state that can have ominous as well as awe-inspiring aspects. Snyder gives over time to Lois Lane (Amy Adams) in her state of grief, going through the motions of a morning ritual that involves buying coffee for a cop pal and visiting the memorial to Superman in downtown Metropolis. Steppenwolf, a very standard-issue villain in the theatrical cut, here emerges as a kind of intergalactic Uriah Heep, desperate to get back into Darkseid's good books after some lapse. Hinds actually manages to elicit a note of sympathy for him in his simultaneously slavish and tyrannous streaks. He's considerably better visualised too, his armour consisting of slatted metal mail that can become deadly spikes and blades.



It feels almost superfluous to note that a version of a film that's nearly two hours longer than the theatrical release version is a much richer, far more nuanced experience. Snyder's choice of splitting the film up into chapters announced with title cards, and his approach to organising the story with these, does much to give it a novelistic cohesion and layering in the unfolding. But it's also a lumpy one that confirms the limitations of Snyder's approach as well as its potencies. Some unvarnished pleasures include the complete, booming grandiose depiction of Darkseid's first attack on Earth, fought off by a crazy coalition of heroic defenders including Greek gods, Amazons, Atlanteans, and Green Lanterns, a genuinely glorious bit of pseudo-mythological spectacle. There's much more screen time for Jeremy Irons' wonderful Alfred, indulging repartee with the rest of the team, and a tad more for J.K. Simmons' Commissioner Gordon. But the flashback battle is marred by the awkward choice of using Gadot as narrator, and she's often at her most wooden throughout the film. There's a good scene where Martha Kent (Diane Lane), who's lost her son and farm recently, visits Lois and tries to coach her through her grief. But the quality of this vignette, which adds immeasurably to the emotional texture of the whole, is perversely undercut when it's revealed this is not Martha at all, but a shape-shifting alien watcher who later visits Bruce and reveals himself as the Martian Manhunter (Harry Lennix), who hitherto has been posing as General Swanwick, Superman's uneasy military leash holder.



Granted, this helps signal the eventual filling-out of the classic Justice League line-up and makes new sense of what Swanwick was about all along, but adds nothing to the film overall. There are many points where it seems plain that the optimal cut of *Zack Snyder's Justice League* would probably be located somewhere between the two versions. This one seems to include almost everything Snyder was able to complete to a satisfying degree, a great, teetering feast, but it could have been shaped better, because I wished that Miller's Flash, still the chief source of comic relief in this version but much less obtrusively, had been introduced earlier to inject some humour into the stone-faced early passages. The coda scenes in particular feel like a grab-bag of leftover footage, including a lengthy scene, one of the recurring dream-cum-prophecies Bruce has involving a frighteningly imminent future where a grief-crazed Superman has joined forces with the conquering Darkseid. This scene is interesting, particularly as it depicts Bruce being forced to join forces with Jared Leto's Joker in a post-apocalyptic warzone. But it's also long and serves little real purpose here except to say on Snyder's behalf, look, see what you could have been getting next but won't?



For a movie that despite its pretences belongs squarely in a fun fantasy-adventure genre, the film takes a hell of a long time to get to the point where the fledgling team finally come up against Steppenwolf in their first, awkward battle, and then not again until the climax, although again both versions of these scenes are far more coherent and vivid, and at least this time Aquaman doesn't shout "Booyah!" like he's from the trailer park side of Atlantis (Victor does say it, but it makes sense for him as a footballer). Few modern directors seem capable of making stand-around-and-make-plans exposition bits work, and Snyder's approach, simply having them all stand in a circle around a glowing TV-table thing, feels almost satiric in its stiffness. Truth be told I actually missed some aspects of the theatrical version. I felt the absence of its opening credits with Leonard Cohen's "Everybody Knows", which offered an appropriate revision of the title sequence of Snyder's *Watchmen* (2009). I missed Danny Elfman's score which paid tribute to the disparate legacies of the various characters, although I admit Thomas 'Junkie XL' Holkenborg's new score is impressively propulsive. I missed the sharp and punchy version of the Amazons' battle to keep their Mother Box out of Steppenwolf's hands, although Snyder's full version of the sequence is impressive in its own way. I even missed a couple of the jokes, like Bruce's rueful answer to Arthur's question about him usually working alone. Minor losses, I suppose.



Undoubtedly the character who benefits most from the new version is Victor, whose presence felt distressingly random in the theatrical version and here emerges in all his Frankensteinian angst, furious at his father for his distracted workaholism and perverting act of paternal love. Morton, excellent as ever, is also better served, particularly as the climax of Silas' tale in a self-sacrificing gesture is restored and allowed to register. Cavill's pitch-perfect Superman returns again in this time laced with aspects of misgiving and anxiety in what it augurs for the future, but Snyder also lets his intervention in the finale register as more purely titanic and cheer-along. The final battle is a general blast as the heroes assault Steppenwolf's sealed-off base set up in a don't-call-it-Chernobyl Russian reactor meltdown site, this time actually giving Barry something to do. His attempt to outrun time itself to reverse what seems to be Darkseid and Steppenwolf's victory is damn near as good as the similar turn-back-time scene in Richard Donner's foundational *Superman* (1978), before the others work together to almost literally hand back Steppenwolf's head on a plate to Darkseid. It's imperfect, certainly, but *Zack Snyder's Justice League* actually manages to prove that the current superhero movie craze can aspire to be something more than mild entertainment, and emerging as it has after *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) revealed the ultimate facetiousness behind the rival Marvel brand, it's ironic that it teases somewhere interesting for the genre to go, but won't.



## Dawn of the Dead (1978)



**Director / Screenwriter: George A. Romero**

Since his debut feature film *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) turned him from an obscure Pittsburgh TV crewman into a cult cinema hero, George Romero had first tried to avoid becoming entirely associated with Horror films. But his follow-up, the satirical comedy *There's Always Vanilla* (1971), was barely noticed, so Romero made a string of stringently budgeted but jaggedly intelligent and carefully crafted Horror movies, with *Season of the Witch* (1972), *The Crazies* (1973), and *Martin* (1976), in which he had tried to blend familiar genre ideas and motifs with his distinctive brand of melancholy realism. Still, whilst those movies had gained attention and continued to signal Romero was one of the most interesting and determinedly maverick talents on the wild 1970s movie scene, what everyone really wanted from him was another zombie movie. Romero had no great wish to revisit the territory of his signal hit, but gained a perverse source of inspiration one day in 1974 when a former college friend, Mark Mason, invited him to visit the Monroeville Mall, a large shopping complex just east of Pittsburgh managed by Mason's employers. As the two men joked about the labyrinthine place filled with blissful shoppers, a story hatched out in Romero's mind. When the time came to make the film, he gained an unusual collaborator in the form of Italian Horror maestro Dario Argento, a huge fan of *Night of the Living Dead* and eager to help Romero produce a sequel.





Not that *Dawn of the Dead* was a sequel in the traditional sense. All of the major characters in *Night of the Living Dead* were dead by its end, and Romero's reiteration of the same basic concept spurned any mention of the first film's apparent rationalisation of the living dead phenomenon. Romero later emphasised that he considered all his "Dead" films variations on a theme rather than parts of the same story, at least until his directly connected final diptych, *Diary of the Dead* (2008) and *Survival of the Dead* (2009). Nonetheless the first few minutes of *Dawn of the Dead* seem to take up almost to the moment where the precursor left off, with a zombie plague rapidly spreading and unleashing chaos. The opening scene of *Dawn of the Dead*, depicting the fraying nerves and collapsing sense of mission on the set of a television news program attempting desperately to keep up a necessary flow of information to the presumed audience, contains sidelong meta humour. Romero cast himself as a director who finds himself impotent in dealing with the tide of events, Romero's ironic kiss-off to his days in television whilst also evincing his fascination with how deeply wound it was into the infrastructure of his nation by the mid-1970s, expected to provide something like narrative and enclosure to the vagaries of life.



*Dawn of the Dead* was an immediate and massive commercial hit that many Horror fans and critics also recognised as an instant genre classic. It soon finally vaulted Romero towards Hollywood, for better or worse. And yet *Dawn of the Dead*'s time might be said not to have really come until a good twenty years after it was made, whereupon it suddenly began to influence the Horror genre and a new generation of creators in good and bad ways, most immediately in inspiring a string of imitations and variations, and a proper remake from Zack Snyder in 2004. More pervasively, Romero's template showed how to blend the base elements of Horror, with required levels of gore, suspense, angst, and more gore, with threads of satire and parable wound into the very skeleton of its storytelling so it couldn't be written off as a pretension or affectation, an achievement that's become ever since a grail of ambitious genre filmmaking. Where *Night of the Living Dead* had been, despite its implications in terms of racial and gender politics and socially ironic sideswipes, essentially a straightforward survivalist thriller, *Dawn of the Dead* on the other hand achieves a Swiftian sweep in its comprehensive assault on the modern way of life and its absurdist vision of human devolution.



The film's first is of its troubled heroine Fran Parker (Gaylen Ross) huddled in the insulated corner of the TV studio's control booth, sleeping. She wakes with a start from nightmare, although of course it might rather be said she wakes into the nightmare. Fran soon finds herself battling with the frantic producer over the crawl giving addresses for rescue shelters, because it's plain the information is now dangerously out-of-date, but the producer insists on keeping them up because then the station, GON, isn't providing anything useful enough to viewers to keep them watching. Meanwhile the news anchor Berman (David Early) argues fiercely with his guest (David Crawford), who tries to explain the terrible new facts of life, death, and undeath. Eventually the broadcast begins to collapse as personnel walk out or jeer the controllers, and Fran comments, "We're blowing this ourselves." She arranges to rendezvous with her boyfriend Steve Andrews (Ken Emgee), the station's traffic reporter, as he has control of the station's helicopter and wants to try flying to Canada. Departure is delayed as Steve insists on waiting for a friend, Roger DeMarco (Scott Reiniger), a member of a National Guard unit that's currently engaged in a stand-off with a radical group holed up in a slum tenement building, as the radicals are resisting the Guard's efforts to collect the dead.



Roger's relative decency and seriousness are soon revealed as he manages to bail up the radical leader Martinez (John Amplas) and tries to get him to surrender, only for the man to insist on getting shot down, and then trying to stop one of his fellows who starts on a kill-crazy rampage through the tenement, blowing off the heads of people unlucky enough to live in the building. Here, Romero notably grazes a common anxiety in the 1970s, that outright urban warfare would break out in America's ghettos, the "urban Vietnam" The Clash sang about in their single "This Is Radio Clash" released the same year as *Dawn of the Dead*, as well as finding an effective way of linking the waning Blaxploitation wave to Horror in the images of the literally repressed underclass. The National Guard ignore warnings about parts of the building that have been closed up to contain zombies in the building, and their crashing about releases the walking dead, who immediately and eagerly take great bloody bites out of anyone they get their hands on, as a zombified husband does to his wife when she embraces him amidst the panic of the invasion. Roger and a young Guardsman crash into an apartment where they find a corpse with its foot gnawed off, only for the corpse to start wriggling its way remorselessly after the young Guard, who shoots it and then himself in perfect horror at how the utterly absurd has suddenly become terrifyingly real.



Romero, who as usual with his early works edited the film himself – there’s a case to be made that his films were never as good again after he stopped – strikes a uniquely intense, frayed, off-kilter mood in the TV station scenes, the bristling, reactive hysteria, the ultimate confrontation with the fringe of genuine, proper social collapse beginning in its TV temple. This air of sweaty intensity intensifies to a maniacal extreme as he segues into the frenetic four-front battle between the nominal representatives of stability and order and their rogue members, the radicals, and the living dead. Roger is first glimpsed sarcastically anticipating his commander’s attempts to talk out the radicals, whilst his fellow Guardsman eagerly awaits the chance to blow away all the “lowlife” ethnics. Roger soon finds himself flung into the company of Peter (Ken Foree), a tall, stoic, intense black Guardsman who guns down the crazed racist comrade, and the two men strike up a quick friendship as they take a moment’s downtime from the carnage to have a smoke. An aged, one-legged black priest (Jese Del Gre) appears and comments with baleful simplicity to Roger and Peter, after alerting them to a cache of bodies being kept in the basement, that “you are stronger than us but soon I think they be stronger than you.” Descending to the basement, the two men find most of the dead there revived and mindlessly gnawing on pieces of other bodies in a nightmarish survey, and they begin shooting each zombie in the head, the only thing that seems to permanently put them down.



There's thematic overlap here with John Carpenter's *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976), which itself took some licence from *Night of the Living Dead*. Romero finds emblematic perfection in his illustration of his ideas as the Guards bash at an improvised barricade only for dozens of discoloured hands belonging to what were denizens of this suppurating corner of the body politic suddenly thrusting into view, before breaking loose and overwhelming the lawmen. As characters Peter and Roger are strongly reminiscent of the heroes of *The Crazies*, who were also members of the National Guard whilst being very ordinary men fighting for survival, although their position is at least never as self-defeating as their precursors. One essence of humanity, Romero quickly suggests, is our tendency to treat the dead with respect because they still resemble what was alive, and this crashes headlong into the urgent and gruelling necessity of abandoning that feeling, to turn ruthless and unflinching violence on these caricatures of being. Even men as tough and trained as David and Roger find themselves jittery and almost overwhelmed by the zombies, although the creatures are neither terribly quick and are certainly not smart, but simply because they keep coming on with single-minded purpose when they smell warm, moist, living meat.



Romero had hit upon something original and shocking in *Night of the Living Dead* as he introduced the concept of zombies as cannibalistic rather than simply murderous. Here he took the concept a step further in the gleefully obscene sight of zombies taking bites out of former loved-ones and tearing out entrails from people still alive to watch. Roger and Peter extract themselves from the hellish trap of the tenement and dash to meet up with Fran and Steve, who have their own troubles when they try to fuel the helicopter only to encounter some cops engaged in looting. The cops debate taking the helicopter, but decide against it, and flee in a speedboat. Roger and Peter arrive and, after giving Peter curt introduction, they take off and start northwards. Just before taking off, they do a stock-take on people they're leaving behind: "An ex-husband." "An ex-wife." "Some brothers." As the chopper lifts off Romero lingers on a haunting shot of the lights going out in a skyscraper in the background: will the last person to leave civilisation please turn out the lights. *Dawn of the Dead* offers curt reiteration of the climax of the previous film as the fleeing quartet fly over National Guards and volunteer shooters roving the countryside having the time of their lives gunning for zombies, turning the end of the world into a kegger where nobody has the same scruples as the slum dwellers when it comes to shooting down the formerly respected dead.



Landing to take on fuel in the morning, the cobbled-together gang of mutually reliant survivors soon discover what they're up against, both from zombies and each-other. Attacked by zombies including an undead child that tries to maul Peter and a zombie that tries to clamber over some boxes to get at Stephen as he fuels the chopper only to get the top of its head sliced off by the whirling blades, the team barely survive a relatively mundane task. The jittery, inexperienced gun-user Stephen almost shoots Peter in trying to save him, sparking Peter's anger, pointing his own gun at Stephen: "Scary, isn't it?" Shortly after taking off again, the foursome spot a large shopping mall in an area where the power is still on – Peter theorises it could be coming from a nuclear power station – and land upon the roof. Although the mall proves to be crawling with zombies, the survivors recognise a chance to stock up on supplies. "Some kind of instinct," Stephen theorises when Fran wonders why the zombies are there, "Memory – of what they used to do. This was an important place in their lives."





Part of *Dawn of the Dead*'s then-unusual approach to the horror genre was its relentless pace and rolling set-piece structure, closer in many ways to the emerging blockbuster style than to traditional Horror cinema's slow-burn of disquiet and tension and with bloody pyrotechnics rather than explosions. Romero, of course, was repeating strategies from *Night of the Living Dead* in quickly thrusting characters defined by their ordinariness into a siege situation that becomes a pressure-cooker of survivalism, and would again for the last of the classic trilogy, *Day of the Dead* (1985), where the action would play out in a nuclear bunker. *Dawn of the Dead*'s first two-thirds depict the heroes escaping the city, finding the mall, and labouring first to raid it and then take it over and fortify it when they recognise it could be as good a bunker to wait out the crisis, if that proves at all possible, as any other. The mall, like the besieged house in *Night of the Living Dead*, becomes the defining locale for the drama and an extension of its symbolic dimension. The house in the previous film encapsulated tensions between old and new America and city and country, as well as provided a crucible for the social tensions between the survivors within where different ideas of home and security came into fatal misalignment.



But the shopping mall, by contrast, offers an illusion of embrace that quells and quashes all such tensions, its offer of consumer paradise a beckoning zone of nullification, and where *Night of the Living Dead* was happy to suggest its sociological and metaphorical aspects through self-evident aspects, *Dawn of the Dead* is more overt in presenting its ideas, turning its central situation into the lodestone of meaning. Romero melds quasi-Eisensteinian editing and sick screwball comedy as he cuts between the zombies, reeling in time with the corny muzak Peter and Roger incidentally start piping in as they turn on the mall's power, and shopfront mannequins, interchangeable simulacra of a commercially glamorous ideal. Peter, Roger, Stephen, and Fran collaborate to at first merely trying to strategize a way of getting supplies out of a department store within the mall to their own makeshift hideout in the mall's administrative and storage areas. Then, as the temptation of the place claims them, they establish boundaries, going through an elaborate process of fetching trucks parked nearby and parking them in front of the various entrances to the mall, trying to reclaim a toehold in a world rapidly losing any sense of place for the merely human. Then, they clear out the zombies within and establish themselves as rules over plastic paradise.



This reads like a smooth process on paper, but things go wrong. As they become less automatically distressed by the zombies and come to understand their physical abilities and lack thereof, Peter and Roger begin to enjoy defying, tricking, trapping, and “killing” them, and for a spell the mission of defying and expelling them from their reconquered little corner of the world becomes a lark. Stephen and Fran are reduced to watching out for them, Stephen from the chopper, Fran from the mall roof. The sense of fun is however coloured by macho hysteria, chiefly afflicting Roger, who becomes increasingly reckless in the course of the fortifying operation. He almost gets caught by zombies as he tries to hotwire one of the trucks, with Stephen, seeing his predicament, obliged to use the helicopter to alert Peter to his plight because the noise drowns everything out. Roger gains an apotheosis of enthralled disgust when Peter shoots one attacking him, spraying blood all over him. Roger’s desperate attempts to retain his sense of bravado finally proves his undoing as he gets bitten by the zombies, and the other three members of their little band are forced to watch helplessly as he wastes away, doomed inevitably to succumb to the mysterious force animating the dead. Romero might have been taking cues from the self-destructive behaviour of the would-be mighty hunter Quint in *Jaws* (1975), both films certainly sharing a critique of the action-man ethos in the face of blank and remorseless existential threat. Peter waits in a sullen vigil for Roger to die and revive before shooting him in the head.



*Dawn of the Dead* followed its precursor but also did more to lodge zombies as the coolest and most malleable of movie monsters, both victims of and perpetrators of hideously gruesome violence, both mauled in physical form and mauling. The punishment doled out to them throughout confronts the problem of killing things that are already dead, immune to physical force except for blows directly on the head, annihilating the last spasm of guiding intelligence. In some of his later films Romero would begin granting them something like the sympathy saved for a life form, however devolved and diseased. Here, their sense of threat and edge of comedy both stem from their single-minded and ravenous will matched to limited physical capacity for seeking it out, dangerous when taking humans by surprise or in large numbers, but, as Peter and Roger find, easy to fend off and outwit, giving them a slightly overinflated sense of their own viability. Fran is momentarily arrested by the disquieting sight of a zombie, recently a young man, settling down to watch her through protecting glass with some kind of bemused fascination. But the zombies just keep coming, constantly beating at the doors of the mall. The first time any kind of conceptual link between Romero's living dead and the voodoo tradition of zombie is evinced when Peter muses on his grandfather, a former voodoo priest in Trinidad, and his prophetic comment, "When there's no more room in hell, the dead will walk the earth."



This totemic line, which is also the closest the movie comes to explaining the plague, gives the film a sense of connection with other works of its era in the Horror genre and beyond, with the disaster movies popular in the previous few years as well as the likes of *The Exorcist* (1973) and *The Omen* (1976). Such films were preoccupied with a sense of decay and destruction befalling the modern world for all its Faustian bargains. Like its precursor, *Dawn of the Dead* draws on Richard Matheson's novel *I Am Legend*, and also this time its film adaptation *The Omega Man* (1971). *Dawn of the Dead* amplifies the mockery of lifestyle upkeep and consumerism in a post-apocalyptic environment in *The Omega Man*, as well as taking licence from its trendsetting blend of fantastical aspects and action fare: where *The Omega Man's* hero holed up in an apartment he made a trove of retained civilisation, here the mall becomes the world in small for its heroes, even burying Roger in a small patch of earth in an arboretum in the mall's heart. The difference in these variations on a concept is *The Omega Man's* hero had made his own home into a strongpoint and repository, where here the protagonists lay claim to the bounty of goods, useful and not so much, but also the wealth of wasted space and conspicuousness that ultimately undoes them. Anticipating the possibility of other survivors penetrating the mall, they disguise the entrance to the office and maintenance sectors where they hole up and forge a kind of home for themselves.



Part of the specific power and weird beauty of Romero's early films comes from their pungent sense of place enforced by the low budgets and local-to-Pennsylvania focus of his efforts. He recorded and found a sense of mystery and drama in zones of American life in the 1970s far from the usual focal points of mass media. He mapped landscapes from decaying ethnic suburbs and bourgeois housing tracts in *Season of the Witch* and *Martin*. Here he captures the blinking bewilderment of the shopping mall as a tacky-plush environ offering deliverance from the mundane and run-down, where everything is shiny and plentiful, landing like a great oblong UFO in the midst of the Pennsylvania hinterland, a world that's entirely palpable and workaday, albeit suddenly devoid of people. The fringe atmosphere is enforced by the total lack of name actors. Stephen's status as an extremely minor kind of celebrity – one of the thieving cops they encounter recognises him – and Fran's behind-the-camera job give them a degree of familiarity and contact with the infrastructure behind media authority, and yet they're more keenly aware than anyone how paltry a defence that becomes right away. Stephen, setting up a TV in their hideaway, manages to tune into an emergency broadcast show where a scientist, Dr Rausch (Richard France), and host (Howard Smith) keep on arguing in much the same way the pair at the beginning did, the scientist eventually reduced to murmuring "We must be logical...logical...logical" over and over whilst the sound of Peter's coup-de-grace on Roger rings out with tragic finality.



Where in *Night of the Living Dead* the luckless Barbara became the avatar for the ordinary world completely shocked out of all function, Fran is a very different figure, cut from '70s feminist cloth: she is obliged to be the film's most passive character in many respects and yet she's also its flintiest and more frustrated. Revealed some time into the film to be pregnant, she presents what would be in another kind of movie a spur to gallant behaviour by the men, but here she has to fight her own depressive and recessive streak as well as her companions' tendency to skirt her presence. Fran is almost caught and killed by a zombie that penetrates the hideout whilst the men are running around having a blast, an experience that shakes her profoundly but soon underpins her to demand inclusion and to be taught enough of the arts of survival the others have to stand a chance alone, a demand that's also a prod to herself to keep functioning. She is nonetheless more saddled with the status of Madonna for a new world than anointed: what her pregnancy means, can mean, in such a moment remains entirely ambiguous throughout. States of sickly and inescapable physicality are contrasted as Fran vomits from morning sickness whilst Roger wanes and withers. Fran most closely resembles the detached and forlorn heroes of Romero's previous three films, not stricken with a murderously dualistic nature like Martin but like him responding with a certain degree of realism to her lot.



Fran's alternately loving and strained relationship with Stephen at first blossoms and then becomes disaffected as the couple get to live out a magazine lifestyle but constantly confront the void beyond it. Romero manages to annex Antonioni-esque anxiety and evocation of existential pain within the frame of a gaudy genre film. After Roger's death the remaining trio form a momentarily stable community, the two lovers and their solicitous pal – notably, where Stephen cringes at Fran's demand for inclusion, Peter coolly acknowledges it – who play within the mall. Stephen and Fran practice their shooting on store mannequins set up on the ice rink where Fran also sometimes cavorts alone, shattering the plastic visages with high-calibre rounds as if executing the old world even as they can't escape it. But Fran also takes the chance to make herself over as a plush matinee idol, albeit one clutching a revolver with a mad glint in her eye. Peter plays chef and waiter entertaining the couple with a swanky dinner, a last hurrah for civilised dining and a romantic ideal. Peter excuses himself and goes to pop the cork on a champagne bottle over Roger's grave. This marvellous vignette, one of the warmest and saddest in any Horror movie and indeed any movie, also marks the zenith for the trio's deliverance from the nightmare without. But the zombies are still trying frantically if pointlessly to penetrate the doors, their flailing, mashing physiques matching the fulminating disquiet that quickly enough poisons the heroes in their remove.





The vision of the mall as microcosm of the modern consumer society works in part because of its obviousness: the film is free to engage or ignore it when it feels like it because it's so omnipresent. Orgiastic violence before the J.C. Penney! The heroes are engaged and motivated when fighting for it, adrift and dejected once they have it. The basic notion likening the mesmerised victims of capitalism the zombies is obvious to the point of being, generically speaking, a truism today. In this regard *Dawn of the Dead's* influence has become a bit trying in giving tacit permission for would-be Horror filmmakers to present visions that most definitely stand for this-that-or-the-other. That Romero's vision doesn't collapse as a moraine of pretence is due to his finesse in moving between tones and stances as well as piling on galvanising thrills. The frantic, overwhelmed feeling apparent in the film's first act and the intrepid, sometimes borderline larkish middle third as the foursome take over the mall, unfold with a real-feeling sense of the characters and their mission, giving credence to their motives and choices. Romero puts a sense of process and detail front and centre, presenting them with challenges to overcome. Romero charts the way seemingly benign situations can become fights for life and vice versa, giving weight to everything from the amount of time it takes to close and lock some shopfront doors to the exploitation of a car set up on the mall floor for a lottery prize as a fun and zippy way of traversing the space within when it comes to the survival process.



Indeed, *Dawn of the Dead* is as much farce and adventure movie as gory fright-fest, with Romero allowing an edge of outlandish hyperbole even in horrific moments, from that astonishing zombie beheading to the sight of a zombie Hare Krishna stalking Fran, a dash of satire not that far from *Airplane!* (1980) in the wry depiction of 1970s subcultures and general weirdness. The zombies come in all shapes and sizes, just like people, from bulbous to gnarled and barely hanging together. The scenes of our heroes merrily plundering the shops and turning the mall space into a private playground are reminiscent in their way of Charlie Chaplin and Paulette Goddard at play in the department store in *Modern Times* (1936). When the characters raid a gun shop to put together an arsenal and wipe out the zombies inside the mall, Romero's carboic sense of humour and skill for editing highlight the fetishism for the shiny, deadly weapons and the claimed mantle of empowered heroism – Peter claims twin revolvers to hang from his belt and eyes zombies through a rifle scope with pleasure – through his rhythmic jump cuts. The gun shop's paraphernalia, replete with stuffed animal heads and elephant tusks and African tribal music on the loudspeakers, promise a romp across the savannah on safari shooting whatever moves, oiling up racist macho fantasy. It's a scene that's only come to feel more and more relevant and biting in the intervening decades.



The film's signature touch of sarcastic ruthlessness is the playful muzak theme that blasts from the mall's loudspeakers, repeated over the end credits as a jolly soundtrack to perambulating zombies. The score, provided by Argento and his band Goblin, is one of the odder assets of the film, veering between straightforward suspense-mongering with propelling, atmospheric electronica, and a spoof-like take on B-movie music, particularly in the finale. Romero takes up where *Dr. Strangelove, or, How I Learned To Stop Worrying And Love The Bomb* (1964) left off in contemplating the apocalypse as a space where lunacy reigns with its own strange wit, mocking the forces mobilised to deal with the disaster as symptoms of the problem. Romero even dares take up Stanley Kubrick's discarded pie fight intended for that film and incorporate it in the delirious climax, when a gang of bikers and lowlifes who seem to have formed a mobile pirate fleet attack and invade the mall. This gang ironically has achieved an equally viable way of surviving the zombie apocalypse through open embrace of mayhem and savagery that makes the zombies in their fashion look tame, careening down the wide spaces with their grunting motorcycles, loosing off rounds from Tommy guns and swinging down sledgehammers on the zombies. They're attracted to the mall when they catch sight of the helicopter hovering over it, actually Stephen teaching Fran how to fly it.



The devolution of what we see of humanity apart from the core protagonists, from the redneck gun-nuts, who at least seem vaguely amenable to public service, to these neo-barbarians, is Romero's sourest meditation. *Dawn of the Dead* is still alive in every respect but its ferocity is certainly rooted in its moment, its evocation of cavernous dread and contempt for the state of America in the post-Vietnam, post-counterculture moment, the mood of dissociation amidst the lingering hangovers of a frenetic cultural moment and the promised birth of Reaganism: nowhere else was Jimmy Carter's diagnosed "malaise" illustrated with such brutish, vigorous force. As he did with *Martin*, Romero shows how smartly he was plugged into the boondock zeitgeist and understanding the emerging punk ethos in pop culture with its love of mayhem, force, and violence as cure-alls for a forced and phony culture. The biker-vandals storm the shiny temple of mammon and unleash pure anarchy. Amongst their number is Tom Savini, the Vietnam veteran turned actor and makeup artist who also first laid claim to becoming a Horror cinema legend by providing the film's gore effects.



Savini's gift for creating convincing atrocities with the help of some latex and offal helps Romero achieve wild catharsis in the climactic scenes as the biker invasion devolves into a three-way battle. Stephen shoots back at the raiders: Peter joins in reluctantly but soon finds satisfaction in driving off the attackers. The raiders enjoy unleashing carnage on the zombies, but when their pals flee several are left to be trapped and consumed alive by the dead, cueing gleefully gross visions of gouged entrails and torn limbs. It could be argued that it's a wonder the raiders have survived so long being so stupid and reckless, but then again their approach to the apocalypse is perhaps as valid as any other going, getting high on their own violent prowess. Romero's frenzied editing ratchets up the descent into utter hysteria in a sequence that stands a masterpiece of the demented. Perhaps Romero's goofiest joke is also a black comedy piece-de-resistance, as one of the biker insists on trying out the compulsory mall blood pressure machine only to be attacked and eaten, leaving his arm still in the strap. Stephen is wounded by the wild bullets of the raiders and then bitten by zombies drawn by his blood, and finally he emerges from an elevator as a zombie, his remnant instinct this time leading other ghouls through the false front towards the hideaway. Peter guns him down, but the act feels like an embrace of ultimate nihilism.



Romero had originally planned the end of the film with the suicides of Fran and Peter, but changed it whilst shooting. It's not hard to see why, as such an ending would have been as glum as hell but lack the specific kick of *Night of the Living Dead's* more ingeniously cruel and pointed ending. The one he chose instead sees Peter, resolving not to live anymore in comprehending what's become of the world after shooting Stephen, encouraging Fran to leave in the helicopter whilst intending to remain behind and shoot himself before the zombies can get him. But Peter's fighting instincts kick back in at the last second, forcing him to fight his way out and join Fran in flying away in the dawn light. An ambivalent ending for sure, sending the two off towards an unknowable fate that might meet them an hour or a decade hence. Goblin's scoring as Peter resurges manages to be vaguely sarcastic in its sudden heroic vigour but also genuinely pleased the life impulse still means something. Moreover, it's an ending that suits Romero's theme as expressed throughout the movie, underlining the entire point of the experience in the mall. The act of fighting is life itself; everything else slow death. The departing duo leave behind the mall now filling with zombies inchoately pleased to be back in their natural habitat, wandering the aisles, shuffling gently to the jaunty muzak. Truly a fate worse than death. Despite intervening decades of imitation, *Dawn of the Dead* remains without likeness, one of the singular masterpieces of the genre.

## Godzilla vs Kong (2021)



Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack's *King Kong* (1933) is the common root of all modern monster movies. Kong's fate in bridging the primal landscape of his island home and the steel and cement jungle of a modern city presented the essential blueprint for myriad followers, including the Toho Studios *kaiju eiga* craze kicked off by Inoshiro Honda's *Godzilla* (1954). Kong himself was eventually absorbed into the Toho universe, first in 1961's *King Kong Vs Godzilla*, and then in 1966's *King Kong Escapes*, both also directed by Honda. The 1961 film encompassed subtext about the clash of American and Japanese cultures but downplayed the ramifications in favour of a broad satire on the role of the media in whipping up crises, whilst *King Kong Escapes* saw Kong battling a robot built in his own image, an idea Toho later recycled in the concept of Mechagodzilla, Godzilla's chief nemesis in his last two original series entries. The Warner Bros.-Legendary Pictures Hollywoodised series initiated by Gareth Edwards with 2014's *Godzilla* signalled its eventual intention to bring Godzilla and Kong together for an epic rumble with Jordan Vogt-Roberts' follow-up *Kong: Skull Island* (2017), where Kong was revealed in the early 1970s to still be a growing lad.



Director Adam Wingard, who formed a cult following with his low-budget horror films *You're Next* (2011) and *The Guest* (2016) but fell afoul of franchise continuation with the desultory *Blair Witch* (2017), here was tasked with the job of delivering the genre goods after the rickety critical reception and box office performance of Michael Dougherty's *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* (2019). Wingard's film starts a few years after Dougherty's, with Godzilla shocking the world by suddenly seeming to make a heel turn, when he emerges from the ocean to attack a facility operated by Apex Cybernetics, a cutting-edge technology company founded by flashy entrepreneur Walter Simmons (Demián Bichir). A podcast-recording conspiracy theory freak, Bernie Hayes (Brian Tyree Henry), has infiltrated Apex as an employee, hoping to find out what mysterious tech they're developing, and amidst the carnage of Godzilla's attack he catches sight of a colossal mechanical lens. Madison Russell (Millie Bobby Brown), the teenaged heroine of the previous film whose father Mark (Kyle Chandler) is now a senior figure in Monarch, the organisation tasked with monitoring the various "titans," is obsessed with Hayes' investigations, and with her pal Josh Valentine (Julian Dennison) manages to locate Hayes. The intrepid trio soon venture into the ruins of the Apex lab to find out just what was going down.



Simmons meanwhile approaches Nathan Lind (Alexander Skarsgård), a scientist who's posited wild theories about the theoretical world within a world dubbed the "Hollow Earth" both *Godzilla* and *Kong*



seem connected with, and whose brother died attempting to penetrate it through a portal discovered in Antarctica. Simmons promises to give Lind new flying craft that can resist the destructive gravity switchbacks on the way into the hollow core. Another Monarch employee, scientist Ilene Andrews (Rebecca Hall), is monitoring Kong, who is now kept in a huge simulacrum of his Skull Island home because a destructive storm settled in on the island and wiped out every other inhabitant, including the native peoples who shared it with him, and to keep him away from Godzilla, seeing as their species seem once to have fought a devastating war. Only one survivor of the native tribe, the child Jia (Kaylee Hottle), who Ilene has more or less adopted, remains and has a unique bond with Kong, who is becoming increasingly morose and hostile in his bogus realm. Lind talks Andrews into using Kong to lead them down into the core. Simmons sends his flinty daughter Maia (Eiza González) along with them, for their own, nefarious purposes, as she seeks what is believed to be a power source connected to the titans. Yadda yadda, Simmons is trying to build a monstrous cyborg version of Godzilla, but has taken the extremely dangerous shortcut of using the recovered skulls of Ghidorah to provide a form of intelligence to help interface with the human pilot.



Until now the Warner-Legendary series has maintained an interesting approach to melding the human and monster drama: whilst I found it excessively mannered and weak in certain aspects, Edwards' film was intelligent in trying to connect the supplanting of a fallen father figure with Godzilla's rise as his symbolic replacement, whilst *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* balanced a more crowd-pleasing approach to the monster mash business whilst smartly winding the subtext of recovery from grief and trauma in together with the basic plot business. The city-shattering clash of Godzilla and Ghidorah mimicked and enacted young Madison's perception of her family's diverse response to loss, tragedy and contention resulting in a war of titanic forces. Wingard's film by contrast tosses out any real pretence to tapping the human hemisphere for meaning, skimming over ideas like the decimation of Skull Island and its peoples. Such breeziness may or may not provoke sighs of relief depending on your disposition. Wingard instead goes for a rollicking tone, aiming to recreate the supposedly straightforward mood of an 1980s blockbuster, a pretty common ploy now from Hollywood, one which basically translates as offering a selection of characters who run about yelling. Wingard carries Madison over from the previous entry but now offers her not as emotional barometer but as a blithe and plucky nerd adventurer, with Dennison as her baffled guy pal and Henry providing comic relief as a likable crackpot.



The storyline eagerly embraces an increasing tilt towards concepts harvested from early pulp sci-fi and Weird Fiction. I loved, at least, this latter aspect, which truly lives up to the old Toho series' hard swerves in that direction, where alien invaders and lost civilisations kept serving up their own kaiju to get rumbled, and human supertechnology kept pace. Apex has antigravity-powered aircraft and a maglev transport tunnel between Florida and Hong Kong, which serve mostly as ready plot devices to allow the screenwriters to more easily zip between locales. Wingard goes deep into territory Edgar Rice Burroughs would've been at home in, as Kong descends into the centre of the earth, chased by the dopey humans. There Kong encounters and fights other monstrous life forms, floats between hemispheres in the zone of gravity inversion at the Earth's very centre, and enters a deserted palace-like structure where his ancestors ruled. There he finds a buried Godzilla skeleton that retains incredible energy reserves and a huge axe fashioned with a spine from a Godzilla's back, which provides an Excalibur-like weapon, and Kong settles momentarily on a great carved throne to render his honorific literal. The film never pauses long enough to satisfy any curiosity about any of this. *Godzilla vs Kong's* racing verve is both the best thing about it and the most annoying. It's just creative and inventive enough to present interesting variations on familiar business whilst being utterly resistant to any form of pretension, and the willingness to open up such vistas of concept and image restores some of the wonder and grandeur to blockbuster cinema that's been sapped by the perversely shrinking horizons of its superhero films.



That said, there are signs Wingard was obliged to trim the human aspect of the movie considerably, and the results aren't seamless. Lance Reddick gets high billing despite barely appearing. The presence of Ren Serizawa (Shun Oguri), seemingly a relative of Ken Watanabe's conscientious scientist from the previous two films but working as one of Simmons' collaborators, is given no explanation. *Godzilla vs Kong* is more streamlined than *Godzilla, King of the Monsters*, which aggravated many with its fragmented nods to expanded lore like Zhang Ziyi's appearance as a variation on Mothra's guardian twins, but also less intriguing. Also, I'm starting to get mad at Hollywood's utter incapacity to cast Gonzalez, who gets saddled here with a flat corporate bitch role and gets killed off in rather desultory fashion. Hall plays the usual sort of role she's slotted into, exploiting her aura of posh if limpid intelligence. Skarsgård, on the other hand, is oddly cast as a timorous geek who needs to toughen up, but makes more of an impression than he has in the past when usually sold more as a set of abdominal muscles than an actor: here he reveals a surprisingly light comic touch. Bichir also delivers some hammy fun as Simmons, despite not really being much to work with beyond being told to play the regulation overconfident mogul.



The script pays some cute in-joke nods, like naming Lind's college after Carl Denham, antihero of the '33 film, and Reddick's character after John Guillermin, director of its 1976 remake. Jia is given a role that conflates the usual role of the female who bonds with Kong and the variation often featured in the Toho films based on the Shinto cultural tradition of the shrine maiden. Jia proves capable of communicating with Kong through sign language, a talent both of them have kept hidden because Kong only trusts the girl, not even Andrews. It feels revealing to me that Kong, originally conceived as the embodiment of feral might and impractical but vivid sexual terror, an anarchic force explicitly matched against civilised mores, now is neutered in his conjunction with both the childlike mores of the later Toho films and modern Hollywood proclivities; like *Godzilla*, he's become a victim of his own popularity, cheated of his right to be a holy terror. He's closest to being the proper hero here as a figure desperate to reconnect with the natural world and the possibility of discovering others like him, eventually obliged by what and who he is to go up against *Godzilla*, who's at his most destructively intransigent, even if, as it proves, he has a good motive.



One reason the film succeeds despite the borderline superfluous human stuff is Wingard proves dextrous at putting Godzilla and Kong across as characters, allowing them to dominate properly as rival protagonists and helped by a special effects team who make them both register on a demonstrative level. Even if these CGI creations never quite gain the finesse of expression Willis O'Brien could give his stop-motion puppets, both monsters come across as actual, thinking, feeling beings, and there's a hint of an O'Brien tribute in an early vignette where the waking Kong idly scratches himself whilst heading out for his morning stomp. What the film needs, and lacks, is an equally vivid conflict on the human level to counterpoint and give symbolic augmentation to the titan brawls. Regardless, the film's first set-piece, as Godzilla launches an attack on the convoy ferrying Kong to Antarctica, is a tremendous unit of special effects and camera choreography, with Kong and his human handlers put through the wringer as their ship is capsized and then righted by Godzilla's furious assault. Wingard builds gleefully to the money shot of the released and pissed-off Kong delivering a walloping haymaker to Godzilla's snout as they balance on an aircraft carrier.



The finale is equally bodacious as Godzilla, alerted to Maia's attempts to steal a portion of the buried skeletal power source, literally burns a hole through to the centre of the Earth with his radiation breath and swaps roars with his simian antagonist far below, a moment which is deliriously amusing even if it might give science majors a stroke. Kong quickly ascends to do battle with the great saurian and the

two lay waste to Hong Kong in the process, in a brawl that could be considered an enormously budgeted version of the one between Keith David and Roddy Piper in *They Live* (1988), as they beat each-other to a standstill. Godzilla eventually pins the battered Kong but only after Kong has temporarily doused his fire breath, leaving him exposed and vulnerable to the cyborg beast's attack once Simmons unleashes it. Of course, Simmons' nascent Mechagodzilla proves the real enemy as the zombie Ghidorah takes it over and delights in beating Godzilla to a pulp, providing the two hangover nature gods with an appropriate technological terror to overcome, even if the film doesn't quite know how to dig into that conceptual duel. The tycoon bills his creation as humanity's chance to return to the top of the pecking order by offering protection against further rampaging titans. And, frankly, although the film doesn't want to admit it and his chosen methods prove ultimately calamitous, he has a bit of a point. Never mind: cheer along as Kong and Godzilla get their tag-team mojo working to take on the gleaming, laser-blasting hulk, and you're not disappointed. Extra points for Wingard's final use of The Hollies' "The Air That I Breathe" as a leitmotif for a return to the wild.



## **In The Mood For Love (2000)**

*Fa yeung nin wa*



**Director / Screenwriter: Wong Kar-Wai**

*In The Mood For Love* offered something so rare and specific amidst the frenetic climes of the millennium's pivot it had a drug-like appeal for the international film scene. A bathe in a dreamlike evocation of the past, a tale of illicit passion played by pre-sexual revolution rules, a dose of heady exotica ready to go. Wong Kar-Wai's most acclaimed and beloved film, *In The Mood For Love* has also proved a creative millstone for its maker, at least in terms of his receptive audience, as everything he did after it was largely doomed to be found wanting, and what he'd done before a mere warm-up. From a slightly longer perspective, *In The Mood For Love* might well be Wong's highpoint but, if not exactly an outlier in Wong's oeuvre, certainly an obsessive distillation of one, singular aspect of it. After his debut with *As Tears Go By* (1987), a resituating of Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973) streaked with powerful hints of Wong's emerging sensibility, the director hit his stride with the first of his studies in romantic eccentricity and ambivalence, *Days of Being Wild* (1990). Not for the last time in his career, Wong found himself stymied as he tried to get an ambitious work off the ground, as he struggled to make his purposefully eccentric take on martial arts melodrama *Ashes of Time* (1994), so in the meantime created *Chungking Express* (1994), a diptych of melancholy romances that gained him significant attention in the west.



Wong quickly followed those works with *Fallen Angels* (1995), a darker take on a similar epic of super-modern social fragmentation, evanescent longing, and genre film caricaturing to that glimpsed in *Chungking Express*. *Happy Together* (1997) offered a more careful and considered study in a crumbling relationship with a queer twist and an international scope. Wong again found himself unable to make one film, the ambitious embarkation in metafiction *2046*, and so developed a project designed to work in tandem with it, one that would ironically see the light of day first. Wong and his regular collaborator, cinematographer Christopher Doyle, had developed a specific and very influential aesthetic on their '90s films that they were already leaving behind on *Happy Together*, with Doyle's swimming camerawork and blurred surveys of action and settings evoking a universe in a constant state of flux even as Wong's refusal to traditionally bracket his sequences rendered the flux perpetually past-tense, at once immediate and anxiously remembered. The calmer style of *Happy Together* reflected a deepening concern for the pains of coupling, that attempt to fix one's own nature by mixing it with another, whilst also taking Wong's fascination for people compelled to wander to an extreme.



Filming on *In The Mood For Love* went on for 15 months as Wong laboured to nail down the aesthetic he was chasing, leading to Doyle departing the production and being supplanted by Mark Lee Ping Bin, but the result assimilated them both, and the halting discontinuity became an aspect of its style. *In The Mood For Love* returned to *Days of Being Wild*'s milieu of the early 1960s in Hong Kong, with Maggie Cheung playing a character with the same name as the one she had in that film, Su Li-zhen. Where in that film the character had been a lovelorn shopgirl who learns wisdom after burning her fingers in a romance with a callow, self-destructive womaniser, the one in *In The Mood For Love* is married and proper, feeling less like a mature version of that character as a different manifestation. But if there's one notion that flows through all Wong's films, it's fascination for the way a human individual is often many different people in the course of their lives, changing apparel, jobs, roles, aims, lovers, even fates, often entirely reshaped by experience but with some core being unchanged. Taken on face value, *In The Mood For Love* is a story of romantic longing foiled by manifold forces and principles, but fundamentally, like most of Wong's works, it's actually about individuals trying to escape themselves but doomed to only graze against others because of forces both within and without.





*In The Mood For Love* has a story, and people who inhabit it, but it's just as fundamentally a work of incantation, resurrecting not only people but of a specific time and place, the Hong Kong of Wong's childhood. A humdrum colonial outpost turned by tides of history into a pivot of civilisations and way-station for the dispossessed and yearning. Long before the halogen-lit markets and swooping road tunnels Wong would capture so exactly with *Chungking Express* and *Fallen Angels* arrived, this was a place with streets of peeling paintwork and crumbling plaster, buildings packed to the rafters with human flotsam, people thrust so close together they can barely see each-other. The cheek-by-jowl romanticism of all-night mah-jong matches, basement food courts, and rain pattering on rusty street lampshades, the infestations of period kitsch, sunburst clocks and boss nova albums. The literally translated title original title, *The Flowery Years*, betrays the sense of nostalgic longing for a time of blooming possibility. Before prosperity would throw up skyscrapers, getting hold of a decent apartment is a matter of deep personal achievement.



Two married couples move into neighbouring rooms, each sub-leased from the holders of larger apartments. The Chans' room is in the flat of Mrs Suen (Rebecca Pan) whilst the Chows lives with the Koos, who like getting drunk and playing mah-jong together. We never properly see the other – better? worse? – half of the two couples, leaving us with Mr Chow Mo-Wan (Tony Leung Chiu-wai) and Mrs Chan, aka Su Li-zhen. Their partners become abstractions, variations in an algorithm, cut off from the audience's knowing except through signs and oblique depictions. Chow's wife is glimpsed askew manning a lobby desk festooned with postcards, gatekeeper of the world's promise and seller of cardboard dreams. Li-zhen's husband has a job that takes him to Japan for unstated reasons whilst she works as the secretary for Mr Ho (Kelly Lai Chen) at a shipping company. Japan is a faraway mystic land of attractive consumer goods, the ironic key to identifying glitches in the system: the goods Su's husband brings back are shiny and desirable and give away lapses in fidelity.



*In The Mood For Love's* narrative unfolds over a long time period, weeks and months and then years, but Wong's scene grammar falsifies immediacy and logical connection. Telling moments clipped out of the familiar texture of time and experience and assembled in a manner that makes a sort of sense. Hitchcock's rule of cinema as life with the boring bits cut out is both cited but also challenged: the action, the big moments of drama, are largely what's cut out. Recurring patterns, and violations in those patterns, are instead the flesh of *In The Mood For Love*: "You notice things if you pay attention," Su states at one point, not long before she subtly warns her boss into changing his tie, one she knows his mistress rather than his wife bought for him. The sensitivity to detail is engrained in the film's texture: the languorous slow-motion sequences sensitise not just to Wong's evocation of a lost and melancholically recalled past but also to objects and dress of the period usually dismissed as decoration, but which Wong identifies as the stuff that makes up people's lives. The consumerist fancies that Mr Chan brings back with him are totems of another, more prosperous world – rice cookers, handbags, fashionable ties – and also lodestones of personal meaning and recognition.



Whilst Wong never shows Mrs Chow's face, the film represents her with the recurring sight of the workspace she inhabits, and glimpses of her bobbed hair. At one point, after Su knocks on the Chows' door when she hears voices and correctly thinks she can hear her husband within their apartment, only for Mrs Chow to stonewall her, a phone conversation between her and Mr Chan is heard as she suggests they not see each-other for a time. Wong then privileges a mysterious, gauzily shot glimpse of Mrs Chow weeping whilst showering in some hotel room. Obsession is a matter of both display and receptivity. Chow (and Wong) is mesmerised Su's slim form clad in a series of lush cheongsams, whilst she wears them to express stifled desire and boredom as well as her own elegantly correct sense of how to live. Chow's colleague and pal Ah Ping (Siu Ping Lam) offers comic relief whilst representing a type of human without the same kind of governor mediating between his appetites and impulses that ultimately foils both Chow and Su.



Ah Ping brings a touch of amoral zaniness to Chow's life with his misadventures like getting fleeced in betting on a horse and then visiting a whorehouse all after being in hospital ("You were in no shape for sex!" "I thought it would improve my luck."), whilst his shameless but incompetent ploys in making a play for Su contrast Chow's more gentlemanly approach but also render him something like his personified id. Ah Ping works with Chow in a newspaper office touched with the same atmosphere of seedy romanticism as the rest of the locales in the film, a place where tousled, barely functional men work in a miasma of perspiration and cigarette haze. Place, exile, travel, all are major facets of *In The Mood For Love* despite most of the drama happening within one apartment block. That building itself is a kind of way-station for people who have found a momentary toehold. Chow, Mrs Suen, and others are former residents of Shanghai now crammed on a tight little island, the old Hong Kong soon to be swept away in the mad scramble for real estate in a city-state with a very finite amount of it. Wong had to shoot most of the outdoor scenes in Bangkok for that reason. Wong had gone the other route in *Happy Together* in portraying its fraying male lovers at loose in the world and also adrift. He would return more ostentatiously with *The Grandmaster* (2013) to the mythical Hong Kong of his youth as a tide pool where folk heroes and collective memories congregated and went mouldy amidst the project of survival and hybridisation.



Mr Chan and Mrs Chow both cover their trysts easily because they travel a lot for work, with Chan often going to Japan on errands for his Japanese boss, whilst Mrs Chow's workstation abuts a rack of postcards. Every place is exotic to some other place, particularly when you're going nowhere. Wong's period Hong Kong is mysterious to itself, a mythical place created by the pressures of history and human need, a place where eastern and western sensibilities don't so much mingle as cohabit as restlessly and energetically as its people. to Wong's eye it was a place of bygone splendours, nondescript urban architecture with the faintest curlicues of traditional architectural style here and there, the damaged glamour of a glimpse of a cracked wall and a window frame with fading paint and the glimpse into another person's life-space, inside of which expression blooms in riots of clashing colour and teeming decoration, ringing to a meshed music of laughter and argument and work and soft radio sounds. Wong's fastidious, usually rigid framing keeps turning portals and passages into frames within frames, with a careful conspiracy between Lim Chung Man's art direction, William Chang's production design and costuming, and Doyle and Lee's cinematography helps create this lush world, half memory, half dream, part Edward Hopper, part Matisse painting, part classical Chinese scroll art. Many shots are filmed in distorted fashion, through fogged glass or using lens effects.



Other shots are delivered with a dazzling clarity that only renders them stranger, like a shot down a hotel corridor where red curtains gently billow on a draft and the leaves of a potted plant tremble, absent any being and yet vibrating with mysterious life. The obsessive texture is exacerbated by the music cues, alternating composer Shigeru Umebayashi's languid pizzicato string theme and a vintage Nat King Cole recording version of the Cuban song "Quizás, Quizás, Quizás," musical themes that manage to denote both immobility, the sense of arrested time and foiled action, and a dance-like sense of possibilities in play that come and depart before they're even truly registered. Echoes here of course to one of the restless heroines of *Chungking Express* whose constantly played leitmotif was The Mamas and the Papas' "California Dreaming" whilst existing within a world of escalators and shoebox apartments and hole-in-the-wall businesses. But whilst there Wong remained outside of the bubble of floating insouciance she used the song to weave about herself, *In The Mood For Love* is Wong's entry into and projection of that kind of bubble. *Fallen Angels* was an insomniac fever-dream about people who try ever more frantically to control life's formlessness by contriving to dispense that formlessness, trying to live purposefully alienated and rootless lives, but eventually falling victim to gravity regardless.



In *Happy Together* the post break-up pains of its lovers is couched not simply in the pain of losing a mate but also in the ultimate personal act for each man in confronting their own specific reactions and quirks of character that degraded the relationship, confronting the limitations and perversities of spirit that foil happiness and turn the wealth of possibility into a debit of rueful waste and costly experience. *In The Mood For Love* operates as its echo and amplification as well as its inversion: the portrait of characters who maintain discipline and personal integrity sees them even more thoroughly haunted by what wasn't. Wong's gestures and stylistics accumulate meaning as *In The Mood For Love* unfolds, as Chow and Su inhabit the same discreet zone by virtue of both being mostly alone and stricken with an initially confused but increasingly certain sense of wounding and abandonment. They pass each-other in their evening strolls down to the food court, waiting out rainstorms, smoking the odd pensive cigarette, swapping the odd word of greeting.





Early in development the project that became *In The Mood For Love* was titled *A Story of Food*, and it is that, with the food the characters eat – rice, noodles, sesame syrup, steak – made a vital aspect of how their lives, habits, and gestures of affection interact. Chow and Su's first, and for a long time only, real conversation takes place when Su visits the Koos' apartment to borrow a newspaper because she's keeping up with a martial arts serial story, and Chow mentions his liking for the genre, which he once made an abortive attempt to write in. Wong here nods back to *Ashes of Time*, which had taken on stories by Jin Yong, a real-life Hong Kong journalist-exile turned fiction writer, and translated them into one of Wong's portraits of drifting, disconsolate people who, when separated from the romantic glamour of their prowess as warriors, are case studies in longing and confusion. The frontier post where the master warriors wait for work in *Ashes of Time* likewise is a kind of way-station of fate like the apartment building here.



Part of what distinguished Wong particularly in the 1990s was that Wong was a formalist with a sense of what style could accomplish: *In The Mood For Love* was perhaps the most accomplished work of high style in narrative film since Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), and it shares certain nagging fascinations with that film, most particular its sense of dreamy melancholy and portrayal of swarming city life. Wong's regard for genre writing, however sarcastically reflected through his resolutely slice-of-life tales, engages here with the roots of such storytelling, noting the mid-twentieth century and its wealth of creativity as stemming from people clinging on in such places, dreaming intense dreams, fantasies of power and freedom shot through with reflections of damaged humanity. Wong's fascination for how people inhabit an urban space together but also entirely separately is here illustrated with an intensity that renders it close to a philosophy of life, depicting people who, for whatever reason, cannot ever quite leap over the divide that separates them as bodies and minds.



Wong would deromanticise the theme with purpose when he finally got to make *2046* (2004), as he went to the opposite extreme of portraying desperately carnal relationships only to confront the same spectacle of who people who cannot surrender themselves. When Su finally invites Chow to dinner, it's to try and get to the truth linking them through their partners, a problem that must be approached circuitously, through laughing admissions before direct statements, as when Su finally notes that her husband and Chow both have the same tie despite them being bought overseas, proof that Mrs Chow bought them both. Wong's squared-off shots, engaging both actors in profile within the crystalline perfection of the period setting with studied back-and-forth shots of the two actors heightening the sense of formal games, before a precise violation of the style when Su finally directly queries Chow about what he thinks is going on, Wong moving the camera laterally from behind Chow onto his face, depicting the queasy, blindsiding moment of truth exactly.



The point of connection between Chow and Su is initially a kind of osmotic attraction in shared romantic desolation and the absence of their partners. The deeper one that forms is creative. Thrown into each-other's company as people drawn together through a mildly perverse instinct to penetrate the separate psychic and physical world of the people who are supposed to be close to them but have in fact created their own distinct pocket of life, Chow and Su vow "we won't be like them." as they're quickly driven to begin role-playing in answering Su's pondering of how the affair might have begun. Wong tips the viewer suddenly into momentarily bewildering vignettes where the two flirt and make protestations of love only to then break character because of some detail that seems off or, rather, cruelly accurate, before resuming or restarting. The two set down at dinner, each eating a meal the person they're standing in for would usually order.



This presents a kind of method acting offering proxy introduction the tastes and personalities of the missing person for the person filling their role, and also a casting session, seeing how well the other can fit into their assigned role. “You have my husband down pat,” Su comments when Chow uses a line on her, “He’s a real sweet talker.” These odd rituals are nonetheless ones that helps Chow and Su fumble towards understanding, creating a fiction that explains reality, whilst also elucidating Wong’s interest in the similarity, even interchangeableness, of people, the recurring codes of behaviour and the finite variations that constitute individuality. They also lead to the duo beginning to collaborate in trying to write a martial arts story, a collaboration that begins as a panacea against boredom and loneliness but soon becomes a genuine success for Chow that he sometimes privileges over his journalism. Chow’s habit of hiding from life by hanging around the newspaper office at night becomes a portal of escape into dreams of a heroic past. So compelling does this pursuit become that the two consult in Chow’s room only for Mrs Suen and the Koos and other friends to suddenly return from a night out drunk and rowdy and settle down to a marathon mah-jong game that goes on for a night and a day.



Chow and Su are besieged in their room, afraid for Su to take a chance to dash back to the Koos' apartment in case she might be seen, so Chow covers for her whilst ducking out to bring back food, and the two keep working on the story: Chow is inspired by the sudden arrival of the blotto Mr Koo to introduce a drunken master into the story. Finally the game breaks up and Su gets to return to her room, where she strips off the high-heels she's been wearing with palpable relief, hoist on her own well-dressed petard. The chasteness of Chow and Su's relationship and their toey fear of being apprehended in a compromising scene gives this vignette its irony, as well the old-fashioned brand of sexual tension inherent in their situation as a couple of good-looking people in a small room, the kind that could have fuelled a classic Hollywood romantic comedy, which is indeed one of the many retro things Wong nods to. His plot has the quality of something William Holden and Nancy Olson's characters in *Sunset Blvd.* (1950) might have cooked up, or provided a solid premise for a Rock Hudson and Doris Day vehicle. This misadventure also inspires Chow to rent a hotel room – numbered, with totemic import, 2046 – for a time to try and get the story finished, and also perhaps presenting to Su a locale where they can meet without being found out.



*In The Mood For Love* contrasted most of Wong's previous films insofar as those were mostly tales of characters who can scarcely control an inner drive pushing them into irrational acts, people who are conduits of spasmodic behaviour. Those urges might drive them across the world, to cling to or to cruelly spurn a lover, or face a situation of life and death, in search of something that gives shape to their lives. The torment of being inescapably themselves was often simply intensified rather than cured by gaining what they want. *In The Mood For Love* is instead the tale of characters who pointedly can control themselves, and yet their actions ultimately come to seem just as deeply rooted in satisfying inchoate need. It's compulsory with *In The Mood For Love* to note that it's a film about a love affair without physical intimacy beyond a moment of hand-holding, at least, not that the audience is privy to. Wong's venture back in time also accepts the idea of two people with a sense of personal honour, a gesture that feels equally bygone in its idealism and yet still reflects truth: how many of us day in and day out rein in all kinds of impulses?



The film's opiated haze of nostalgia, its acceptance of the past as another country, can only be sustained as long as Chow and Su don't give in to their romantic impulses, because once they do they become of the earth again. The very lack of any momentous significance in their relationship, its everyday and ephemeral texture as light and brief as morning frost, is precisely the quality Wong sets out to celebrate, to hold as vital to the sustenance of the world as any cataclysms. It can also be read as the two lovers sharing a trait with their creator, a dislike of cliché. Chow and Su's resolve to keep things above board seems as much about their own embarrassment in potentially getting caught being unimaginative as immoral: it would too humiliatingly crass to reproduce their feckless partners' betrayal, although Wong's oblique portrayal of that verboten tryst suggest it's every bit as complex and tortured. More immediately, Wong tries to illustrate without sentiment the fate of falling in love whilst also dealing with heartbreak, leaving his two lovers trapped in a limbo where pleasure is also painful, tender gestures constantly running the risk of mimicking another, and abandoned as they have been by their partners Chow and Su serve as stand-ins for the vanished lover, to be both cherished and also farewelled.





A montage depicting Chow and Su's happy writing collaboration, which is also clearly signalled to be the process of their falling in love if all their happy smiles and pleasure in each-other's company is anything to go by, also sees Wong make a constant refrain of including mirrors, often with more than one facet, in his shots. These split his protagonists into multiple versions, each imprinted with a separate reality, some branching off to become the ones glimpsed in 2046, some uglier, some more perfect. this islet of ease ends when Su gets a lecture from Mrs Suen about being out too often and asking when her husband will return. Despite there being no hint of connection between them, Su still tells Chow they should spend less time together, a moment that despite the vow "not to be like them" nonetheless echoes Mrs Chow's earlier warning to Mr Chan to stop seeing each-other for a time. The two drift in the course of their days subsequently, Su distracted amidst raucous mah-jong games and Chow gazing out through the newspaper office window, and when the word finally comes to meet up again, Chow comes dashing through a downpour for a confrontation that finally demands the two speak honestly but also makes a choice.



The choice is made: Chow decides to accept an offer to follow Ah Ping to Singapore. But the catharsis of admission also finally allows shows of feeling, as Su sobs in Chow's arms and leans on his shoulder as they ride in a taxi together and hold hands, a vignette of perfection to last decades, and Wong would indeed return to it in 2046 with just that meaning. Wong shows Chow and Su on either side of the wall that separates them in their rooms engaged in listless meditation. Finally, Chow retreats back to the hotel room and leaves a message for Su to come join him there if she wants to leave with him. Chow is seen leaving the hotel room with a look of sad but slightly wry acceptance that Su never came and he must head off alone. Su eventually makes a dash to meet him, only to finish up seated on the hotel room bed alone and weeping, suffering the hellish fate in being entrapped by unwitnessed solitude and kitsch décor.



The film's last act offers vignettes that refuse to underscore the drama with any kind of dramatic declaration, accumulating instead as a long grace note signalling Chow and Su maintain a long and halting sense of connection, misty-eyed memory of their time together but refusing to violate the seal of perfect imperfection about it. Chow, working in Singapore, is disturbed by something missing in his room, and finds a cigarette with traces of lipstick on it. Soon afterwards Wong offers a sequence, possibly Chow's imagining or a flashback, depicting Su entering his room and leaving these traces, a glitch in his stable reality. When she actually does call him at his workplace, he answers, but she hangs up after a moment of silence. Later they're both drawn in turn back to the old building where they once lived. She speak with Mrs Suen, the last of the old crowd still around and herself packing up to move to the United States to help her daughter with her kids. The moment is changing, the mood: Mrs Suen is uneasy about the political situation in Hong Kong, and so is ready to move. Su herself has a son and merrily assures Mrs Suen he's doing well, but no more is revealed. The old balance has shifted, history's tides are rolling on. Su chooses a return to a comfortable setting, taking over Mrs Suen's apartment.



Chow arrives with a present for the Koos but finds them long gone, and leaves it instead with the new tenant who agreeably lets him look around, turning a wistful glance across to the window of the neighbouring apartment oblivious to the face Su has returned there. The film's final portion is Wong's most allusive and subtle, as he briefly interpolates some old newsreel footage of Charles De Gaulle as French President visiting Phnom Penh in Cambodia in 1966. A final flourish of postcolonial cordiality, a last glimpse of a vanishing moment of stability. Soon Cambodia will dissolve into anarchy and genocidal tyranny as the Vietnam War spills over its borders and monsters are birthed. Chow seems to be there on assignment, but we only see him visiting Angkor wat, the ancient temple-city: Chow performs a little ritual obedient to an old folk practice he mentioned to Ah Ping, of whispering a secret into some nook and sealing it away to divest one's self of the past. This he does in a gap in Angkor's walls and plugs with a sod of earth and grass, before leaving the ruin which accepts all such memories great and petty. Wong ends the film with a series of slow, exhaling shots of Angkor, weaving a powerful sense of the temple as something at once desolated by time but also standing as a perpetual marker of history in a violently changing world, abiding under the early-rising moon in the waning Cambodian day.

## Enigma (2001)



The late Michael Apted was most acclaimed for his documentaries, like the essential *7 Up* series, and after emerging as feature director with pungently credible takes on regional British life like *The Triple Echo* (1972) and *Stardust* (1974), he also found respect as a director of serious, Oscar-garlanded star vehicles like *Agatha* (1979), *Coal Miner's Daughter* (1980), *Gorillas in the Mist* (1988), and *Amazing Grace* (2006). But starting with *Gorky Park* (1983), Apted maintained a sideline making thrillers. Apted's sober, realistic, rock-steady sensibility, derived from his skill as a documentary maker mixed with his savvy for handling stars, made him an unusual player in the Hollywood genre film game and yet his movies in that mode, also including *Thunderheart* (1991), *Blink* (1993), *Extreme Measures* (1996), and *Enough* (2002), were largely written off as journeyman labours but represent some of the most satisfying movies of their kind. Even his James Bond movie, *The World Is Not Enough* (1999), is easily the best of the Pierce Brosnan-era Bonds as a lumpy but interesting attempt to blend the series' camp aspect with its earlier, tougher self.



*Enigma*, although nowhere near the best of these films, certainly allowed Apted to continue his double-edged game in making an old-fashioned romantic thriller set during World War II, a lush surface wrapped around a pensive deconstruction of both official mythology and basic thriller mores. Adapted from the novel by Robert Harris by no lesser scribe than Tom Stoppard, *Enigma* helped propagate greater awareness of the role of the human codebreakers and the first, crude computers they built at Bletchley Park, and so led on to the likes of the Alan Turing biopic *The Imitation Game* (2014) and the TV series *The Bletchley Circle*. The film was produced by Mick Jagger, who also owned a real Enigma coding machine used as a prop in the movie. Harris' hero, loosely based on Turing, is Tom Jericho (Dougray Scott), formerly a Cambridge savant and one of Bletchley's greatest minds who helped break the "Shark" codes used in coordinating U-boat attacks on convoys with the aid of a captured Enigma machine and the chattering collection of lights and sprockets that is Bletchley's prototypical computer.



Jericho returns to the fold under a cloud of doubt and mistrust after he suffered some kind of mental breakdown resulting from a blend of overwork and fraying obsession with Claire Romilly (Saffron Burrows), a glamorous if minor fellow employee at Bletchley who dumped him after a short, passionate affair. Jericho is needed nonetheless because the encryptions have suddenly been changed, and the codebreakers desperately need a key back in. Just as he arrives back at Bletchley, Claire vanishes, and the worried Jericho discovers hidden cyphers in her bedroom, in the flat she shares with Hester Wallace (Kate Winslet), another low-ranking cryptographer. Jericho is also interviewed by the charmingly insolent toff spy Wigram (Jeremy Northam), who seems to know everything about everyone and patronises Jericho when not threatening to arrest him for Claire's murder.



Despite all its enormously promising elements, *Enigma* is an awkward beast and not one of Apted's best. Apted, as was his way, fleshes out the human drama and the workplace quirks and tensions at Bletchley, whilst the nominal thriller plot flops about in stale bestseller fashion. Apted places emphasis on the initially flailing Jericho's efforts to understand not simply the reasons for Claire's disappearance but also the baffling dynamics of their relationship and his own self-abasing reaction to his first genuine love affair. Proustian languor is generated by brighter lighting and camera filters used in the flashbacks, Jericho's sense-memories of intense erotic attachment evoked as he recollects first meeting Claire on a packed train, as well as the painful memories, as when she tried to laughingly pilfer one of his theorems only for him to furiously snatch the papers back and leave her crying. Jericho's efforts to investigate her vanishing lead him into close contact with Hester, an intelligent but repressed and resentful friend who like Jericho was under the spell of Claire's aura of sexy joie-de-vivre, and of course the two begin falling in love in the course of solving the riddle.





Apted plainly made many of his thrillers as a way of commenting on political and social issues by commercial means. *Gorky Park* mixed familiar cop thriller stuff with a textured, intelligent portrait of the glumly waning Soviet Russia. He made *Thunderheart* in concert with the documentary *Incident at Oglala* (1992) in dealing with Native American rights, tackled homelessness in *Extreme Measures*, and domestic violence in *Enough*. Moreover his thrillers, like his “serious” films, revolve around damaged or doubtful people trying to understand themselves as well as their place in the worlds, and their search for understanding allowed Apted leeway in expressing his own compulsion to dig for veracity. As in the *7 Up* films, Apted often toggles in a telling way between past and present, trying to reconcile who his heroes were and are. Jericho, like the heroes of *Gorky Park*, *Thunderheart* and *Blink*, is distinguished as well as beset by unique gifts for perceiving the world. *Enigma* makes gestures towards a complication of wartime heroism, with Wigram a well-dressed reactionary who mentions his job in peacetime is keeping the people in their place, and compulsory modern doses of institutional cynicism, as Jericho contends with foils like Wigram and Skynner (Robert Pugh), the regulation fiefdom-protecting bureaucrat jerk who runs Bletchley and wants Jericho booted out again. Jericho is initially glimpsed as haggard and shambolic cynic who coldly spoils Skynner’s efforts to mollify some bigwigs, including Corin Redgrave as an Admiral, about the possibility of cracking the Shark code again, explaining the awesome odds involved.



But the war's secret music is plugged into Jericho's twitching nervous system, his fingers constantly tapping out Morse code as if he's picking up transmissions, and soon enough he comes up with a way of breaking the Nazi codes again, by the necessarily cold-blooded method of listening in to U-boats tracking a convoy and using their speed and position reports to pull apart the new encryption. This portion of the film is the best, finding what's potentially thrilling and momentous about a bunch of misfit boffins sitting around tables furiously writing out ciphers on notepads, as the codebreakers work desperately to put together enough information before they can warn the convoy of their massing enemies or the submarines start attacking, a race they eventually lose even as they succeed in their objective. Most vitally, these scenes wring tension and moral terror out of the actual job of the cryptographers and Bletchley in general. Jericho's companions consist of an unusually good collection of actors, including Matthew Macfadyen as the scar-faced naval officer Cave who oversees the codebreakers and nudges them with his harshly gained awareness of what their abstract calculations entail, Tom Hollander as Logie, the cagey head of the team, and Nikolaj Coster-Waldau as Jozef 'Puck' Pukowski, a Pole whose secret connection to Claire proves crucial to understanding her disappearance.



Scott is solid in the lead, smartly letting his accent occasionally slip a hint of a northern accent to suggest class anxieties as another factor underlying Jericho's struggles. Winslet, in the full bloom of her post-*Titanic* (1997) stardom at the time, spends much of the film lurking behind round-rimmed glasses to signal her character's affect of dowdy nerdiness. She is nonetheless terrific as Hester, with an edge of aggravation that despite her coding skills she's been relegated through sexism to little more than a filing clerk and also like Jericho struggling to emerge from a bubble of introverted intellectualism. She soon finds herself a rare talent at espionage as, initially at Jericho's bidding and then with increasing personal verve, she soaks up information and aids him in stealing secret cyphers connected with Claire's activities as it becomes clear she was probably a spy. A scene where Hester and Jericho pretend to be kissing to ward off Wigram and his pet police detective (Donald Sumpter) only to start making out in delightfully stirred passion makes a cliché moment into something witty and affecting. Jericho's admiration for the ingenuity of a captured German Enigma coding machine is just as exciting to him as the sight of Claire's sleek thighs. Northam steals every scene he's in, as the embodiment of everything Jericho isn't, an edge of ruthless intent underneath the Etonian smarm. One touch is worthy of Graham Greene as Jericho hides away a handful of Claire's illicit cyphers from the searching Wigram by hiding them amidst the torn newspaper kept on a spike for toilet paper in his boarding house's lavatory.



Apted's documentary maker touch is readily apparent in the location shooting around Bletchley Park, recreating the atmosphere of the place at once electric as a hive of vital ambition and yet also rather twee as a bastion of shambolic English individualism where the brainiacs rebuff the martinets, rather than trying to pump up the period tale into something more urgent *a la* Michael Bay's *Pearl Harbor*, released the same year. Stoppard's script is littered with good, dryly humorous lines, and some fine little vignettes, as when Jericho, winning a half-bottle of whisky supplied by Skynner for his success in breaking the code again, places the bottle by the exhausted and passed-out Cave so he can get good and drunk after knowingly sacrificing many of his fellow sailors for the greater cause. The broader problem with *Enigma* is that, as it unfolds, the mystery plot never really coheres, and Apted leafs listlessly through some cliché flourishes of spy movie business that someone who had watched *The 39 Steps* (1935) through a fog of cold medicine and brandy might describe as Hitchcockian. There's a couple of arthritic car chases of that kind you get in a lot of period movies where the film crew seems afraid to dent the vintage vehicles they've rented. Jericho and Hester pull risky manoeuvres to get to the bottom of things like stealing one of the Enigma machines from Bletchley's collection so they can understand the messages Claire was purloining, messages which seem to have been generally erased by enigmatic powers.



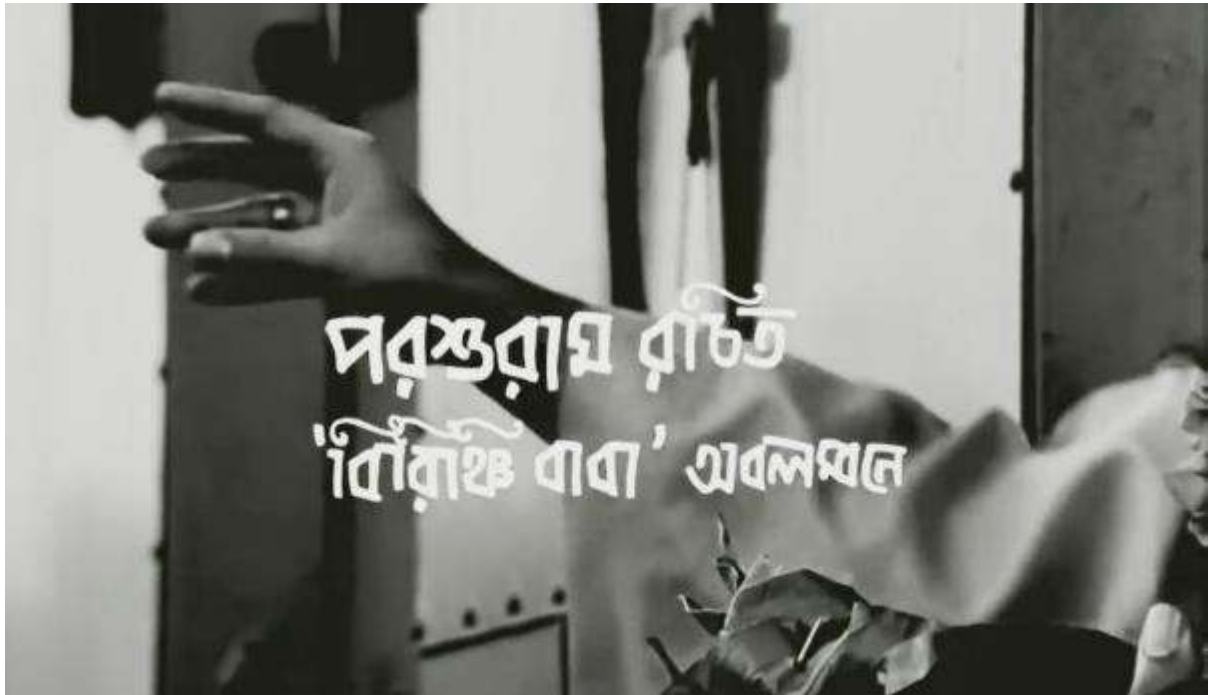
The crux of the storyline involves the obliged wartime partnership with the Soviet Union, as murderous as the Nazis in its own, more circumspect way (in a too-cute touch, one of the codebreakers, characterised as an ardent Marxist, eagerly expounds sacrificing the convoy for the greater good), and like Harris' first novel *Fatherland* exploits real atrocities of the era, this time the Katyn massacre of Polish military officers ironically brought to light by the German invaders. The discovery of the massacre has given Puck a reason to betray the Allied cause, reasons that grant him some level of sympathy in his motives, but he's a badly underdeveloped character. There's also some excessively straightforward cross-cutting tension-mongering, like one laborious sequence in which Jericho and Hester insist on carrying on with decoding with the stolen Enigma machine whilst Wigram and company drive up a long, muddy road towards them. Oddly for a director as rigorous as Apted, the film starts to feel patched together in its last act. Elements of the story float about in stasis, like the failure of anyone to notice the Enigma's absence, and when Jericho is finally provoked into punching Skynner who for some reason doesn't immediately have him arrested and hurled out of Bletchley. Where in movies like *Gorky Park* and *Blink* Apted made the character drama work in concert with the genre reflexes, *Enigma* feels like two or three different kinds of movie coexisting uneasily.



Most exasperatingly, Jericho and Hester's efforts don't actually impact on the outcome of the story at all, with Wigram playing puppet master who's a few steps ahead of everyone and almost all the important events happening off-screen. *Enigma* always seems to be on the verge of saying something interesting about moral compromise in war before taking off as a thrill-ride, but it never does. Jericho's memories of Claire remain too detached from the ultimate revelation of her vulnerability as a spy whose job consists largely of being an easy lay at Wigram's behest. The limp climax sports some gun-waving and punching as Jericho tries to stop Puck from rendezvousing with a U-boat only for Wigram to render it all moot by bringing the hammer down with a sense of showmanship. John Barry's plaintive score – his last – envelops the drama in a naggingly nostalgic and hauntingly emotional tenor that backs up Apted's nostalgic evocation of the Bletchley achievement, a melancholic remembrance that is linked to Jericho's obsession with Claire, each part of a communal myth-dream of fleeting glamour and romantic vitality. The film's coda at least resolves the disparity with some grace as, sometime around the Suez Crisis, Jericho catches sight of Claire alive and regal in the post-war world in downtown London before linking up with Hester, now his very pregnant wife, happily turning from the romantic dream to the romantic reality.

## **The Holy Man / The Coward (1965)**

*Mahapurush / Kapurush*



**Director / Screenwriter: Satyajit Ray**

On the international film scene of the mid-Twentieth century, Satyajit Ray represented India in much the same way Ingmar Bergman represented Sweden, Akira Kurosawa Japan, and Federico Fellini Italy. In general perception today Indian cinema is virtually synonymous with the popular 'Bollywood' style with its gaudy storytelling, free-form sense of genre, and interpolated song numbers. But there's been a long tradition of a more traditional dramatic approach in the country's cinema, and Ray stood for several decades as its preeminent exponent. Ray came from an old and respected Bengali family. His grandfather had been a thinker and the leader of a social and religious movement, whilst his father had been a poet and children's writer. Young Satyajit would inherit their polymath gifts, and would sustain a career as a writer alongside his more renowned movie career, as well as often writing the scores for his films. Born in Kolkata, then Calcutta, in 1921, Ray lost his father early in life. When he attended university he became interested in art and worked in an English-run advertising firm, and also becoming a designer of book covers, in which capacity he helped put together a children's version of the famed novel *Pather Panchali*, which would eventually become the basis of his debut feature film.



Ray helped to found the Calcutta Film Society in 1947, and it became a nexus for British and American servicemen and locals to mingle and share their love of movies amidst the fervent and transformative climes of the independence moment, a zeitgeist Ray's cinema would soon become a major component of. Ray met Jean Renoir when he came to India to shoot *The River* in 1951 and helped him scout locations. When he was sent to work in London by the advertising firm Ray encountered Vittorio De Sica's *The Bicycle Thieves* (1948), and later reported he walked out of the movie theatre determined to become a filmmaker. It took two-and-half-years for Ray and the inexperienced movie crew and amateur cast he put together upon returning to India to film *Pather Panchali*, mostly through lack of financing. But with some support from John Huston, who hailed a great new talent when Ray showed him an assembled portion of the movie, and a government loan, the film was completed. When released in 1955 it proved an instant and galvanising success, screening for months in its home country, where critics felt it transformed the national cinema, as well as around the world. *Pather Panchali* also helped introduce the score's composer Ravi Shankar to international audiences.





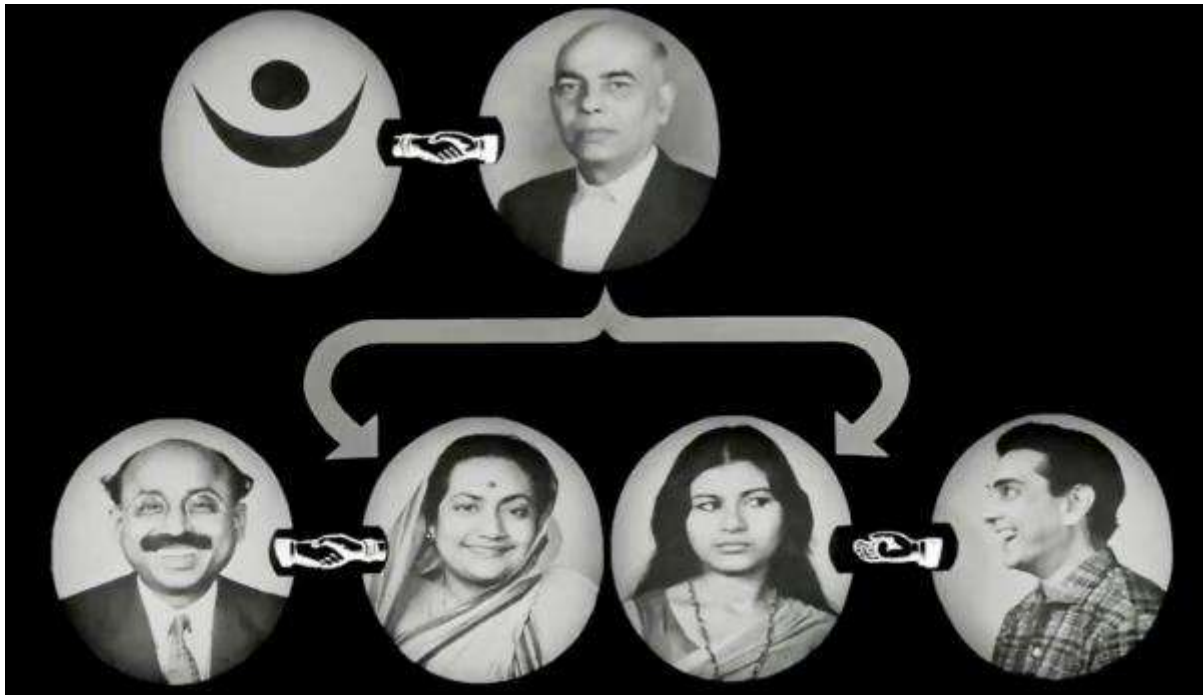
Ray's blend of unvarnished authenticity and humanist intimacy in depicting the hard luck of young hero Apu and his family gave poetic depth to subject matter that might have proved off-putting for many potential viewers in portraying the threadbare genteel pretences of the Brahmin but broke family. *Pather Panchali* and its follow-ups forming the so-called Apu trilogy, *Aparajito* (1956) and *The World of Apu* (1959), still largely dominates appreciation of Ray, one of those compulsory viewing exercises for cineastes. But Ray continued making movies for another forty years, and where the Apu films concentrated on rural poverty and the uneasy march of India into the modern world in a manner that however well-done also suited a certain external view of the country, Ray's filmography veered off into all sorts of movies, taking on comedy, romance, adventure, children's films, and magic-realist fantasy, very often struggling with the tension between cosmopolitanism and traditionalism. He also often studied the psychology of people involved in making movies, and those who watch them, with a fretful sense of the relationship between art and life, image and truth, and the incapacity of such anointed people to transcend weakness in offering simulacra of life, studying a matinee idol in *The Hero* (1966) and a screenwriter in *The Coward*.



Ray often portrayed characters from the city who travel into the country and in the tradition of the Shakespearean pastoral find their fates taking jarring twists, a sense of connection strengthened by the prominent glimpse of a volume of Shakespeare in *The Holy Man*, as well as the local literary tradition. Ray remained throughout his career a prolific adapter, with his last film a transposition of Albert Camus' *The Stranger* (1991). *The Coward* and *The Holy Man* were made as immediate follow-ups to Ray's *Charulata* (1964), reportedly his favourite of his own films and generally regarded as a highpoint in his oeuvre. *The Coward* and *The Holy Man* are two quite short films, at just over an hour long each, made independently but often exhibited together, their rhyming titles in Bengali helping make them seem well-matched as a diptych of portraits. As films they nonetheless reveal something of the breadth of Ray's ambitions and talents. Where *The Coward* is a curt but definite masterpiece portraying frustration, solitude, and heartbreak, *The Holy Man* is a gently satirical comedy officially making sport of another important facet of Indian life, religion, but really rather examining cultural deference to people who seem to know what they're talking about, a problem hardly limited to India.



*The Holy Man*, adapted from a story by Rajshekhar Basu, is generally regarded as lesser Ray and that may be true enough, but it's a wry and well-made divertissement that stakes out its basic approach in the opening scene: The Holy Man of the title, the so-called Birinchi Baba (Charuprakash Ghosh), is farewelled at a railway station by a crowd of admirers who cheer for him and crowd close. The Babaji tosses chillies to people in the crowd they swear are blessed with healing properties, before sticking out his big toe for people to touch and gain their blessing as the train pulls out of the station. This is a good visual joke that's also a perfect example of Ray's economic style, immediately giving the game away as to Birinchi Baba's lack of sanctity and the tendency to unthinking and slavish devotion turned towards figures like him. Settling in on the train with his perpetually awestruck-looking disciple Kyabla (Rabi Ghosh), the Baba fascinates a man sharing the compartment with him with his ritual of spinning his fingers in counter-rotations and acting as if he's managed to will the sun into rising. The witnessing man is Gurupada Mitra (Prasad Mukherjee), a prosperous lawyer travelling with his less than credulous-seeming daughter Buchki (Gitali Roy).



Mitra is nonetheless fascinated with the Babaji and soon confesses to him his great pain and confusion following his wife's death, which have made the former pragmatist suddenly spiritually curious. Unwittingly, Mitra has placed himself at the mercy of a man who specialises in hooking people like him, and Mitra soon becomes not only his host but his acolyte too. A little while later, Nibaran (Somen Bose), an intellectual, plays host to his little clique of friends, including his perpetual chess opponent, the insurance agent Paramadha, the money-hungry accountant Nitai (Satya Banerjee), and friend Satta (Satindra Bhattacharya). Nibaran knows about Birinchi Baba's sway over the Mitra house because he is the lifelong friend of Professor Nani (Santosh Dutta), the husband of Mitra's eldest daughter. Casually making fun of the Babaji's supposed divine powers, he tells Nitai about how the Babaji specialises in regressing people back in time to 1914 to let them discover troves of scrap iron left over from the war and make a fortune, only for Nitai to be convinced to try his luck with Birinchi. Satta is much less thrilled by Birinchi's apparent new home and following, because he's in love with Buchki, and she seems intent on joining the ranks of Birinchi's followers along with her father.



Nibaran, a sceptical and distractible hero for the story who proves formidable once roused, feels like an avatar for Ray himself, or rather Ray's ironic sense of himself as a thinker in a world not always so terribly interested in thinkers, a cigar smoker with his pile of books in many languages and penchant for playing chess, a game Ray himself loved (he'd later make a film called *The Chess Masters* in 1977), teetering on the fine line between engagement and withdrawal. Nitai spots what is possibly an erotic picture of a woman peeking out from behind a pile of his books, a gently humorous hint of non-intellectual interests furtively lingering behind the learned veneer, but the intrigued Nitai is interrupted before he can reveal the whole picture. When he visits Nani, who has a sideline playing crackpot inventor who's trying to synthesise a new foodstuff by oxidizing grass, Nibaran becomes increasingly disturbed and appalled when Nani reports to him Birinchi's absurd pronouncements, and Nani plays a tape recording allowing Nibaran to hear for himself. Birinchi claims to remember all his past lives and has had experiences with great figures through the ages including Jesus, Buddha, and Albert Einstein, whom he claims to have taught the  $E=mc^2$  equation, as well as being an internationally regarded peacemaker: "He's solved a lot of problems in Czechoslovakia." Nani also explains the idea behind Birinchi's signature finger-twirling habit, symbolising his concept of the present as the mere, perpetual grazing point of past and future. Nibaran is annoyed Nani didn't stand up for science when listening to the Babaji's claptrap, but Nani is far too enamoured with any kind of fascinating jargon to critique it.



True to the spirit of the Shakespearean pastoral, *The Holy Man* centres on some good-natured older men trying to help a younger fellow win a girl, in this case Satta and Buchki. The problems of communication between the young lovers echo the integral themes of *The Coward*, but in a teasing, upbeat fashion. The film's jests at the expense of the over-educated as well as the gullible and the dishonest skewer the irritable and proud Paramadha, the fuzzy-logic-loving Nani, and Satta, who has attempted to write a marriage proposal to Buchki but his letter was too obscure, filled with bewildering quotations from poets, for her to make sense of. Buchki seems irritated enough with him for such stodgy romancing to make good on plans to become a priestess. Satta is reduced to constantly trying to sneak messages to Buchki, and finally he gets a smuggled note back from her stating she know well that Birinchi is a fraud but cannot defy her father. This aspect of the film, the place of women under patriarchal control, is another connective theme between the two films. Satta reports with good humour to Nibaran after gaining Buchki's reply, reporting his adventure in sneaking up to the Mitra house to try and deliver one of his notes to Buchki, tossing it to her as she seems to be rapt in one of Birinchi's mystic rites, in which he waves flaming brands around and seems to invoke a manifestation of Shiva in his holy dancer form Nataraja.



By this point in his career Ray had moved away from the blend of neorealist starkness and flashes of intense poetic visual metaphor – the flock of birds flurrying away at the moment of the death of Apu’s father in *Aparajito* always leaps to my mind – found in the Apu movies, towards a style more open-flowing and relaxed in engaging his actors and the space around them, expertly using a widescreen format to enable this approach to filming. *The Holy Man* pauses for a rather French New Wave-like visual joke as Nibaran’s efforts to explain the knot of character relationships with a graphic aid joining pictures of the various cast members including the gormlessly grinning Satta gazing at Bucki’s picture. The influence of Renoir’s cinema is apparent with the architectural integrity to compositions that are nonetheless allowed to form according to behaviour. A perfect example is the introduction shot for Nibaran and his friends, with Nibaran and Paramadha playing chess on a bed with the moaning Nitai sitting at a remove as the apex of a compositional triangle, literally and figuratively interrupting the game. Ray often refuses to cut unless doing so for a specific purpose, and yet there’s nothing dull or static about his work, preferring subtle camera movements to stop his shots becoming rigid. *The Holy Man* allows a certain level of indulged theatricality to manifest in Bhattacharya and Rabi Ghosh’s performances, the former marvellously, effete mocking as he explains how he came to “see Brahma,” the latter eddying in boredom and misfiring energy as he wanders about his and his uncle’s rooms, half-naked and partly wearing his costume for playing the manifested Nataraja.



Soumendu Roy's cinematography on both *The Holy Man* and *The Coward* offers a deceptively limpid, deep-focus mise-en-scene that can nonetheless suddenly unveil treasures in careful lighting and camera movement. Particularly fun is the scene where Satta spies on Birinchi's fire invocation, filmed in expressionistic shadow-and-light-play. Birinchi is transformed into an ogreish vision wielding arcane powers before the appearance of the bogus apparition behind him, a sight that drives Mitra to ecstasies, all background to Satta's industrious attempts to communicate with Bachki. This scene could well double as a touch of lampooning on Ray's behalf of horror movie imagery as well as portrayals of eastern mysticism in many Hollywood films. Birinchi's sermons are comic set-pieces entirely relying on Charuprakash Ghosh's ability to suggest fatuous delight under a veneer of transcendental bonhomie, declaring when asked about her veracity of Jesus, "People say 'crucifixion' – I say 'crucifact'!", before swerving suddenly into a show of anguish as he claims to have admonished Jesus for contradictory messages only to feel regret after he was put to death. Asked by another seeker whether the path of urge or the path of satisfaction is the better, Birinchi gives a ridiculously convoluted answer involving ancient sages that eventually winds up justifying consumption because "there can be no satisfaction without consumption." But he refuses to help Nitai when he makes his appeal, bemused by his request and telling him to spend years master his meditation first.





*The Holy Man* is often criticised for not being particularly funny, and it generally isn't in a laugh-out-loud way, more on a level of spry and sardonic sense of flimflam and character as a lodestone for mirth. It's hard to get across the film's tone, except to quote a moment like when Nibaran decides to help Satta and resolves to expose the phony sage: "He must be exposed, because if he is not exposed, they will also not be exposed – those who are going and falling at his feet, encouraging him, letting him grow." Satta replies, immediately fretful at having his clear-cut romantic objective entangled with a quest to reveal truth and exact justice, two things someone Birinchi is an expert at subverting, "You've just increased the scope of our work." When Ray finally offers a glimpse of Birinchi and Kyabla behind the curtain, they're revealed as a pair of actors who have to live their act, moving like locusts from one feeding ground to another, Birinchi reading H.G. Wells' *The Outline of History* to harvest his anecdotal pearls, whilst Kyabla longs to go see a movie. Nibaran is cautious about just how to expose them in his awareness that Birinchi must have formidable memory and improvisational skills to do what he does. Nibaran's eventual method of exposure involves staging a fake fire during Birinchi's nightly descent into a supposedly unbreakable divinity-enforced trance, with Nibaran, Satta, and Nitai joining in with the nightly audience at the Babaji's sermon, teasing the housekeeper acting as doorman with their own little show of uncanny skill and playful promise.



The climactic moments when the fire is started and Nibaran turns out the lights to increase the confusion and panic gains the desired result as Birinchi immediately awakens from his “trance” and cries out: Ray spares an empathetic close-up for the dazed and appalled Mitra. This scene allows a brief burst of loud filmic technique in blending jump cuts and quick zoom shots to create a sense of chaos, with glimpses of the hilarious sight of Kyabla, caught in the middle of applying make-up for his appearance as Nataraja, suddenly dashing through the darkened house with false arms still strapped to his back. Nibaran grabs the abandoned Birinchi by the feet and wiggles them until Birinchi loudly protests, before telling him to get out and not to try plying his act around his district again. Meanwhile Satta takes up Bucki in his arms and carries her out in an act of “rescue.” It seems like a clear-cut victory for the forces of rationality and good as Nibaran and his friends share a smoke and celebrate their success, but Ray appends a final, mirthful sting as Birinchi, glimpsed fleeing the Mitra house over a fence, meets up with Kyabla, who has stolen all the wallets and handbags left behind by fleeing guests, some dangling from his fake hands. “Towards the future,” Kyabla advises, “Let’s go.” Birinchi, with a fleeting expression of fatigue quickly replaced by the resolve of a natural survivor, shuffles away with his nephew.



*The Holy Man* most obviously connects with Ray's preoccupation with portraying actors and people who weave fiction for a living. But there's also a manifestation of interest in the concept of a person with moral and intellectual authority trying to expose chicanery and do people a good they don't necessarily want done: Nibaran as a protagonist prefigures the embattled truth-teller in Ray's filming of Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* (1989), albeit winning through here because it's a comedy. The appeal of fiction, of immersion in an alternate reality of potentials, is an ironic zone existing within and alongside of Ray's realist streak, a zone loaned particular urgency by the problem of India as a place becoming something, a place that must be invented day to day in the course of patching together its manifold cultural reference points and contradictions. Language is unstable in both *The Holy Man* and *The Coward*, characters switching seemingly randomly between Bengali and English, tracing out faultlines not merely in education and social sect but also modes of thought and expression, a counterpoint that bespeaks much about the still-lingering impact of colonialism but also grasps a certain assimilating power.



Similarly, having worked on the Apu films where Shankar's strict classical Indian folk style suited the evocation of a communal past but proved difficult to attach to his images, Ray started composing his own scores blending aspects of western and eastern music to create a more cohesive expressive accompaniment for his films. The spare, jazz-inflected scoring of *The Coward* helps weave a melancholy mood, just as his more sprightly and traditional-sounding score fits well with *The Holy Man*. *The Coward*, whilst occupying a very different space in terms of tone and outlook, is nonetheless similar in the basic precept of its central character, Amitabha Roy (Soumitra Chatterjee), a travelling purveyor of fictions, in his case a screenwriter travelling for research, taken in by a generous host with needs of his own, and contending with over the fate of a woman. Amitabh is travelling rural Bengal and heading for Hashimara where his brother-in-law lives when his car breaks down and is told by the mechanic it will be at least a day before he can fix it. Amitabh accepts the offer of the hospitality of a friendly local tea planter, Bimal Gupta (Haradhan Bandopadhyay), who's making a phone call from the car mechanic's office and overhears his predicament.



*The Cowards's* opening shot is a sublime example of Ray's efficiency and simplicity, sustained for over five minutes including the credits, but without any kind of ostentation. Ray simply moves his camera with Amitabh as the mechanic gives him the bad news and then up to the office window, forming a frame within a frame that now includes Gupta as he talks on the phone and Amitabh gets the bad news, and then following the two men as they descend from the office and get into Gupta's jeep. Gupta is fascinated when Amitabh explains what he does for a living, intrigued by the kind of story he might be writing, but Amitabh isn't terribly chatty, so the beefy, middle-aged Gupta happily does all the talking. Gupta sets about getting drunk as he hosts Amitabh at dinner and complains about the wearing boredom of being a planter – "It drives you to drink!" – and the limited social circle he's obliged to keep amongst neighbouring planters, and his general sense of frustration, disdaining Bengali films and claiming that "Bengalis of this present generation have no moral fibre." He introduces Amitabh to his wife, Karuna (Madhabi Mukherjee), and they have dinner together. Gupta presses Amitabh to drink with him despite Amitabh never having been a drinker: when Karuna asks why he's insisting, Gupta replies, as if he and Amitabh have entered into some psychic pact involving composing a story, that "the protagonist in his story has his first drink, right?"



*The Coward* plays to a certain extent like a theatrical chamber piece, Chekhovian in its blend of dramatic simplicity and emotional complexity, but with the interactions of the actors matched throughout to a subtle yet deeply expressive cinematic approach. Consequential details in dialogue fall by the wayside, with Gupta casually mentioning that Karuna said she knew someone named Amitabh Roy in college when he first mentioned the name of their guest, and Karuna's biting comment that her husband won't travel to Calcutta or let her do it either despite his complaints about isolation. It's the camera that tells the real story waiting to manifest: when the trio speak after dinner with Gupta increasingly sozzled, Ray frames him leaning forward in the frame, his puffy face crowding space with a tiger skin on the wall behind like a captured standard from another age, before Ray shifts to a delicate but endlessly consequential medium close-up of Amitabh, the camera performing a dolly shifting focus from Amitabh to the silent, boding-seeming Karuna: the hitherto only vaguely suggested connection between Amitabh and Karuna, the former's intense and queasy awareness of the latter despite acting the polite guest, and Karuna's own, evidently curdled disposition are all immediately established.



Later Amitabh confronts Karuna when she shows him to their guest bedroom, protesting that he can't stand her acting so formally and falsely with him. Soon enough the secret drama is spelt out in a flashback as Amitabh collapses in a self-pitying meditation. Karuna was once Amitabh's sweetheart, and back when he was struggling she came to him with the news her uncle and guardian wanted to move with her to Patna as he was getting a transfer and also, she suspected, to separate her and Amitabh: Karuna gave Amitabh the chance to marry her then and there, but Amitabh was ambivalent in being put on the spot, and so they separated. That's the smooth description, anyway, of the complex dance of emotions, crossed wires, and quietly raw drama glimpsed when Ray offers this scene in flashback, unfolding in Amitabh's squalid little apartment. Amitabh's sense of inadequacy as a potential provider is exposed as he mentions that he knows Karuna is used to comforts, whilst Karuna's slow-dawning heartbreak as she realises what she thought was a beautiful leap of faith has been met with ambivalence manifests first as teary intensity and then a calcifying removal that becomes in turn maddening for Amitabh. "My house?" Karuna retorts to Karuna's statement of scruples: "Did you see the person in it?" The fatal kiss-off when Amitabh asked for more time: "What you really need isn't more time, but something else."



The coward of the title is most visibly Amitabh, his failure of nerve before Karuna's ardent appeal a turn of character that haunts the lives of all three people at the film's heart, although Gupta never seems entirely cognizant of just why his life is a quagmire he can't work up the will to escape. Nonetheless the topic of cowardice is woven through the film, from Gupta's accusation of the lack of "moral fibre" presaging his own confession to being unable and unwilling to disrupt the class barriers bequeathed unto him and his fellow planters by the departed British, to what's eventually revealed to be Karuna's method of switching off from reality. Cowardice is a constant aspect of existence, Ray suggests, everyone's life marked by things they conscientiously ignore, chances untaken, ignorances cultivated, and it's a state of being that can infect entire populaces, and perhaps not even a bad thing. The choice of making the main character a screenwriter invites a sense of emotional if not literal autobiography, one that resonates on both a metafictional level and a more pragmatic one. As with Bichindi Baba, Amitabh is a professional fantasist, albeit unlike the conman he is gnawed at by his conspicuous compromises.





*The Coward* gets at something about the lives of creative people, those who don't yet or won't ever have the kind of success that opens up worlds, in observing the constant emotional holding pattern they're obliged to subsist in, where every potential gesture must be weighed for how it will ultimately impact their professional life, and their interior one, that one that always threatens to take over anyway. *The Coward* complicates the familiar motif of the struggling artist who loses a lover to a rich person who could uncomplicatedly fulfil worldly needs. Whilst more subtly portrayed than the comic characters in *The Holy Man*, Gupta is like them as carefully captured type, a man struggling in awareness of his blowhard tendencies and the slow sublimation of his better qualities into a cliché as he overindulges drink. Otherwise he's a charming and solicitous host who even jokingly states that if Amitabh ever stays with them again he can be the one who talks all the time. It's easy to feel a certain amount of sympathy for him even as Amitabh justifies plotting to win away his wife by only concentrating on his bad traits.



At the same time, *The Coward* also resembles a fiction composed by Amitabh in his mind, roving the countryside and creating a scenario for their reunion involving coincidences and strange meetings from the threads of private preoccupation. Gupta's invocation of a kind of conspiracy of accord between him and the writer suggests this aspect, whilst the planter and the writer seem to long after a fashion to live each-other's lives, whilst his jokey reflection on basic plot patterns – "Boy meets girl, boy gets girl, boy loses girl." – becomes a nagging leitmotif on repeat in Amitabh's head. After recalling their last meeting, Amitabh awakens in the middle of the night in a muck sweat, and leaves his bedroom. He finds his way into the Guptas' living room, a space where filtered light from gently swaying curtains plays on the wall like the ghosts rummaging Amitabh's mind. Amitabh soon makes appeal to Karuna to abandon her joke of a marriage and run off with him, telling her he still loves her and feels utterly desperate at being thrust back into her company again. But Karuna remains aloof and taciturn, refusing to plainly answer his questions about whether she's happy or not: "Fall in love again," she comments whilst strictly brushing her hair: "Am I to blame for that?" She gives a practical remedy for his sleeplessness, loaning him a bottle of her sleeping pills. The next morning, Amitabh receives news that his car still isn't ready, so Gupta and Karuna drive him to the railway station.



*The Coward*, whilst articulated with a blend of candour and lightness of touch that's entirely Ray's own, suggests Renoir's influence most keenly, recalling his *A Day in the Country* (1936) in its brief but concise portrait of romantic disappointment and sense of journeying through both life and physical space. One of Ray's more interesting formal touches is the way he deploys the flashback vignettes of Amitabh and Karuna's relationship, starting with the moment of crisis and then later depicting a crucial moment in falling in love, when Amitabh helped out Karuna by buying her a tram ticket back when they were both students: the seeds of the affair's end are planted when Amitabh jokingly notes it would be a bad thing if she didn't pay him back: "I study economics – I can't look at things philosophically like you." This memory is provoked when Amitabh gazes fixedly at the back of Karuna's scarf-clad head as he rides with the married couple in the back of their jeep. When he sees her touch Gupta's shoulder, her finger festooned with a fanciful ring, he recalls one of their dates when he read her palm, an act he admitted he performed purely for the chance to hold her hand.



Karuna admitted she let him do it for the same reason, and Amitabh went off on a tetchy rant spoken by a million young would-be intellectuals decrying timidity and adherence to outmoded mores, speaking of how couples act in England. Karuna irritably decried, "They take it too far!", but it's plain that Amitabh's boldness of thought was part of his great appeal for her, a boldness that in the end failed at its most crucial hurdle. Moreover this sequence helps give depth to Karuna's reaction to Amitabh's failing, highlighting the way she's caught in an odd situation where she wants to escape her anointed role as obedient female without quite having the courage to escape it without the help of a man, Amitabh anointed in her mind as the man who can allow her to both fulfil an expectation to a degree whilst also defying it. Recollection of such moments when things were still possible are the queasy burden Amitabh keeps a lid on whilst play-acting friendliness with Gupta. When Gupta pulls over on a stretch of road passing through a stretch of forest by a river to get water for the radiator, the trio settle down for a picnic. Amitabh gazes in heartsick longing at Karuna as she sits on a rock watching the cascade whilst Gupta asks of the writer, "How's the story coming along?" "It's coming," Amitabh answers with a thoughtful metre. Ray and Roy's careful use of deep focus with looming foreground elements giving Gupta an imposing quality reveals its purpose as dramatic strategy in one shot as Amitabh looks towards the snoozing man and sees the cigarette burning down in his fingers, knowing he has a very short time to make his move.



Once Gupta falls asleep, he pens a note he tosses in her lap when she won't look at him, saying he will wait at the train station for her to show up until the last possible second if she wants to leave with him. Amitabh, once finally dropped off at the railway station, waits alone until the sun sets. Chatterjee was Ray's favourite collaborator having played the adult Apu in the second two films of the trilogy, and he's crucial to the success of *The Coward* in the way he plays Amitabh's suffering here: you can almost feel him eating away at his internal organs in his stewing regret and borderline pathetic admission of need. Ray dissolves from a shot of Amitabh sitting on a bench with face in hands to almost exactly the same pose after nightfall, only for Karuna to march into the frame. Amitabh rises to his feet beaming as he thinks she's come to leave with him, only for his smile to fade as he registers her stern expression, and she states her purpose in coming, to get her sleeping pills back from him. Karuna's simple words, stating she needs them and requesting, "Let me have them, darling," gives a cruelly subtle answer to all of Amitabh's ponderings: no, she's not happy and yes she still loves him, but choices were made, and must be lived with. Ray leaves off with a close-up of Amitabh's utterly gutted expression but with his features blurred and out-of-focus, a startling final note of pain and bewilderment. *The Coward* is damn near perfect in the economy and incision of emotional blows, and for any other director would count as a crowning achievement.

## **The Blood Beast Terror (1968)**

*aka The Vampire Beast Craves Blood ; Blood Beast From Hell ; Deathshead Vampire*



Vernon Sewell is one of the more interesting figures of classic British horror cinema and one of the most frustrating. Sewell had been making movies since the 1930s, usually melodramas, thrillers, and war movies, including the strong World War II propaganda film *The Silver Fleet* (1943). By the 1950s he was stuck resolutely in making very cheap B-movies, but he became something of a master of the form. He directed several variations on the same basic theme of a young couple buying a haunted property, including the odd and moody *Ghost Ship* (1952) and *House of Mystery* (1961). In the early 1960s he made the excellent blend of crime flick and ghost story *The Man In The Back Seat* (1961) as well as the taut thriller *Strongroom* (1962), but his career was certainly waning. Perhaps because of his experience and interest in the genre, Tigon Pictures, an American company that wanted to get in on the British horror business, hired him for three horror films that proved his last works but also his best-remembered: *The Blood Beast Terror*, *Curse of the Crimson Altar* (1968), and *Burke & Hare* (1971). Sewell's sense of low-key weirdness was never going to compete well with the gaudy approach of Hammer and others, and *Curse of the Crimson Altar* proved an utter mess for trying.



But *The Blood Beast Terror* is made relatively unusual and interesting precisely because Sewell plainly is barely interested in delivering a standard-issue monster movie. In story and theme it's a variation on John Gilling's *The Reptile* (1966), in depicting a Victorian patriarch inscrutably cursed by having his daughter afflicted by a mysterious force that transforms her werewolf-like into a deadly monster. The film begins somewhat amusingly with Gilling trying to pretend some stretch of English waterway is a branch of the Congo as an archetypal pith-helmeted explorer, Frederick Britewell (William Wilde), leaves behind a canoe and hunts for rare insect specimens: from the outset the film implies a price being paid for invading realms of men and nature hitherto untrammelled. The opening credits intervene before a coachman (Leslie Anderson) driving through along a country lane in old Blighty hears a scream emerging from the woods: halting to investigate, he comes across a dead man bloodied and battered, and hears something large and terrifying flapping overhead.



The coachman turns up babbling mad and Detective Inspector Quennell (Peter Cushing) is called in to investigate the string of similar attacks. Two victims were students of entomological expert Dr. Carl Mallinger (Robert Flemying), so Quennell interviews him. Mallinger lives in a large house with his daughter Clare (Wanda Ventham), whose name father has given to their home or vice versa, and their butler, Granger (Kevin Stoney), a sadist who torments Mallinger's pet eagle, and who also plays pervert chaperone for Clare and whichever luckless male she manages to draw out into the woods with her at night. Quennell hovers in the locale, working with the local police Sergeant Allan (Glynn Edwards), turning up scant evidence save some mysterious scale-like matter scattered around the attack sites. When Britewell returns to England he visits Mallinger and soon falls victim to the mysterious creature. Mallinger denies knowing him but Allan reveals this as a lie, and when Quennell investigates Clare House he finds father and daughter have fled, Granger dead, and piles of bones in the basement.





*The Blood Beast Terror* was released when the Gothic Horror boom sparked by Hammer was starting to wane and give way to more realistic and modern sources of anxiety, but also coincided with a pop cultural pleasure in Victoriana in the late Swinging '60s milieu. Sewell's anomalous, ambling, almost naturalistic approach to horror movie style seems more interested in exploring the vintage world he recreates fastidiously, fascinated by minutiae like the vintage technology used in a slideshow Mallinger shows his students and his laboratory gear, some interesting stylistic touches like filming within a moving carriage, and a lengthy diversion into a pastiche of period theatrical production. He emphasises a quotidian texture as the manifestations of strange and terrible things break up the texture of a way of life that's otherwise gently eccentric and unhurried, giving as much weight to Quennell talking with a hotel manager over a pair of stuffed pike displayed in his establishment, which turn out to be faked as a lure for tourists, as it does to the supernatural detective drama. At the same time Sewell teases various genre clichés, most pointedly in a long depiction of said theatrical production where Mallinger plays host to some students putting on their Grand Guignol play. This makes for a gently comic vignette that luxuriates in the evocation of bygone entertainment that also doubles as Sewell's sly send-up of Hammer's *Frankenstein* films, and well as offering a meta-narrative joke as Clare performs as the artificially revived and murderous daughter of the mad scientist.



The rich and glamorous Britewell seems set up to be the compulsory young male hero, but he proves such an arrogant jerk it's almost a pleasure to see him killed by the monster. Sewell instead brings in another, more properly nerdy young hero in the form of William Warrender (David Griffin), son of a holidaying businessman (John Paul) Quennell meets, who begins romancing Quennell's merrily naïve daughter Meg (Vanessa Howard): Sewell quietly makes a point about the gentry being steadily displaced by a new class. Sewell effectively counterpoints this sense of the wryly mundane with flashes of grotesquery, like glimpses of the vicious Granger, keeper of the Mallingers' secrets, tormenting the doctor's pet eagle until it turns on him and savages him. A lackadaisical fishing expedition where some kids outdo the well-kitted angler ends when a corpse is reeled in. Sightings of the monster are fleeting and minimalist even at the climax – a glimpse of a pair of red eyes and a black, swathing wingspan. What seems to be a segue into a D.H. Lawrence-esque tryst amongst the ferns as Clare seduces her father's groundskeeper Clem Withers (Simon Cain) gives way to the sight of her hand morphing into a black, clawed gauntlet as it cups her would-be lover's head, followed by his terrible scream. Mallinger's basement is a sleazy brick-walled space where he's growing a male companion for Clare's companionship, a grey and bulbous figure with huge red eyes swathed in a cocoon, a seed for the perverse visions of malignant birth and transformation in fare like *Alien* (1979) and *Xtro* (1982).



Fleming effectively plays a similar sort of character as he had in Riccardo Freda's *L'Orribile Segreto del Dr Hichcock* (1962) as the superficially respectable figure who's also a keeper of bottomlessly depraved secrets, this time those of another, even if the film never gets around to explaining how he came to "create" Clare. Ventham, whose best claim to fame today is being Benedict Cumberbatch's mother, was briefly a hot property in the late 1960s, and she brings a striking, strident intensity to her characterisation. Her Clare lacks the usual dualism of such tormented creatures, offered instead as a creature of unbridled and barely restrained appetite that disdains all limitations, Ventham's potent, cat-like glare and savage grin turned to good use, convincingly depicting something that looks and acts human most of the time but isn't. Where other films that had previously dabbled in the reversed gender expectations of a female monster had generally muted the idea of equally reversed sexual dynamics, Sewell presents Clare as an unabashed pursuer of hunky young men, luring victims like Britewell and the sweaty gardener, before waylaying them and leaving them bloodied and shattered. Clare alternates seductive charm and shows of rage when she sees fellow animal life forms harassed by humans. She finally even turning on her "father" when he furiously disavows his work and sets fire to her mate, which is just beginning to twitch and shiver in its cocoon. The main problem with the film's discursive approach is that she doesn't appear nearly enough.



Instead we have to put up with some shabby comic relief from Roy Hudd as a garrulous morgue attendant who likes to settle down for a beer and supper surrounded by corpses, although there is a nice touch when this seemingly gormless type suddenly starts using precise medical terminology. The main problem with *The Blood Beast Terror* is that whilst it teases clichés it never overcomes them, and it moves lackadaisically through its familiar plot. The story takes an awkward twist when the Mallingers suddenly flee their abode and hide in another part of the country where Quennell just by coincidence, also decides to head on a holiday. Glimpsing her out romping with William by chance, Clare begins hypnotising and kidnapping Meg so her father can use her blood transfusions to awaken his new male monster, only for him to furiously avenge Clem's death by setting fire to the creation. The excellence of Stanley A. Long's photography with its gentle colours and vivid sense of light gives the film a distinct atmosphere from much other '60s horror, particularly in the finale where the solitary Meg runs in panic about the Mallingers' house after discovering the father's dead body. The finale is a little goofy as Quennell and Allan literally draw the moth to the flame and the threadbare special effects budget is finally exposed. *The Blood Beast Terror* isn't a classic or even a ragged gem, but it has a likeable streak hard to deny.



## **The Poseidon Adventure (1972) / The Towering Inferno (1974)**



**Directors: Ronald Neame / John Guillermin, Irwin Allen**

**Screenwriters: Wendell Mayes, Stirling Silliphant / Stirling Silliphant**

Sparked by the success of *Airport* (1970) but really catching fire with the release of *The Poseidon Adventure*, the disaster film became the premier genre for star-laden blockbuster filmmaking and special effects spectacle through much of the 1970s before *Star Wars* (1977) rudely supplanted it with science fiction. Whilst he didn't make all of the era's big disaster movies, producer Irwin Allen became synonymous with them to the point where he was granted the popular nickname "The Master of Disaster." Funnily enough, up until *The Poseidon Adventure* Allen had instead been better known for sci-fi, making films like *The Lost World* (1960) and *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea* (1961), and TV shows including the latter film's spin-off, *Lost In Space*, *The Time Tunnel*, and *Land of the Giants*. The son of Russian Jewish immigrant parents who grew up poor in New York, Allen first grazed show business by moving to Hollywood in search of job opportunities after the Depression forced him to drop out of college. He spent time editing a magazine before moving into radio and then a syndicated gossip column, before his understanding of the shifting gravity in Hollywood away from studios to talent agencies let him begin producing TV and finally films.



Allen gained success and plaudits with the stock footage-laden documentaries *The Sea Around Us* (1953) and *The Animal World* (1954), and applied a similar technique to the much-derided, patched-together fantasy-historical survey *The Story of Mankind* (1957), a film that evinced his faith in star power and interest in Biblical-scale tales of travail. Soon Allen turned to colourful sci-fi fare to appeal to a young audience. As a director Allen was only competent, and often the films he made himself, as would befall the very expensive but hilariously bad *The Swarm* (1978), betrayed his lack of instincts in that direction. But as an impresario he had few rivals, and *The Poseidon Adventure* and its immediate follow-up *The Towering Inferno* were huge, glitzy hits that cut across the fond legend that at the time everyone was watching moody art films about losers in washed-out denim, although they certainly matched the tenor of the moment with its sense of decay, bad faith, and lost idealism. When he pivoted to disaster movies, Allen found a way to recreate Cecil B. DeMille's storied brand of epic, fire-and-brimstone storytelling for a new age, tailored to exploiting the mood of the 1970s with its guilty hedonism and equally guilty hunger for old Hollywood values even as the New Hollywood was officially ascendant. Indeed, the basic plot of *The Towering Inferno* is very similar to the modern-day half of DeMille's original *The Ten Commandments* (1923).



*The Poseidon Adventure* and *The Towering Inferno* today might look like relics of a certain phase in Hollywood despite still being enormously entertaining. The '70s disaster movie genre never quite recovered from the pasting delivered by *Airplane!* (1980), a film that paid immediate homage-cum-ridicule to the style. In their time Allen's films deftly tapped fashionable trends: they have something in common with *The Exorcist* (1973) not just in craftsmanship and storytelling savvy but in exploiting a certain guilty moralism amidst the zipless vicissitudes of the Me Decade as well as its fulminating fantasies about weathering such storms with a renewed sense of solidity. But Allen's two best disaster films are still crucially emblematic of the emerging ideal of the blockbuster movie: indeed few other passages of cinema represent the blockbuster promise better than the opening credits of *The Towering Inferno*. Allen's sense of Hollywood glamour was entirely rooted in movie stars and production values, and despite dealing in spectacle would rather spend his money on them rather than special effects, one reason he was completely bewildered by the rule-rewriting popularity of the almost big-name actor-free, FX-heavy *Star Wars*. There's detectable Allen influence present in hit films as diverse as *Die Hard* (1987) and *The Avengers* films with their roster of carefully selected star turns, as well more obviously in Michael Bay and Roland Emmerich's mega-budget breakage festivals. One obvious bridge between these two ages of Hollywood was the composer Allen brought over from his TV shows, John Williams, whose talent for emotionally textured scoring matched to outsized storytelling is as vital to the two Allen films just as it would be for Steven Spielberg.



Critics often take umbrage at the theatre of cruelty inherent in disaster movies, with some good reason, being as it is a genre that involves death on a mass scale. But that's also part of its weird appeal, a quality it shares with horror movies: whilst there are usually certain expected didactic beats, it's still an unusually unstable and unpredictable mode of storytelling in terms of characters and their fates, as well as usually boiling down to plain adventure tales about ordinary people trying to survive terrible situations. Paradoxically, they also purvey a dark-hearted lampooning of a crumbling ideal of Hollywood's specialness, portraying quasi-celebrities and hangers-on or people thrust into situations once fit for Hollywood mythicism – ocean liners, skyscrapers – only to behold the fragility and tacky insubstantiality of such glamour. Allen's films proved marketplaces where many different strata of Hollywood actor could commingle and attract different sectors of the audience.





Serious-minded, theatre-trained A-listers like Paul Newman and Gene Hackman rubbed shoulders with young, over-polished TV ingénues, veteran character actors, and aging studio-era stars who brought with them the aura of faded class, walking the line between retro camp and pathos in their presence. For his two signal hits in this mould, Allen was smart enough to employ well-weathered directors, although he would handle shooting action sequences for *The Towering Inferno* himself. Both *The Poseidon Adventure* and *The Towering Inferno* were directed by experienced, robust, no-nonsense British filmmakers, with Ronald Neame handling the former and John Guillermin the latter. Both films deal with situations where a number of characters are trapped in a deadly situation and race against time to survive, the former film depicting the survivors of a cruise ship capsized by a monstrous freak wave, the latter recounting efforts to save people trapped in a new skyscraper that becomes a flaming death trap. The former film is the superior in terms of its dramatic integrity and intensity, the latter as a piece of grandiose entertainment.



*The Poseidon Adventure* was adapted from a 1969 novel by Paul Gallico, a writer who had cut his teeth writing for publications like *The Saturday Evening Post* in the 1930s and '40s with their hunger for slick, polished, sentiment-greased turns of prose, and was best-known for his delicately symbolic novella *The*

*Snow Goose*. Gallico reportedly took some inspiration for his plot from a story told to him by a crewman on the *Queen Mary* during its World War II troop ship service when it was almost capsized by a colossal rogue wave. Fittingly, the film's early scenes were shot on the *Queen Mary* shortly after its retirement and installation as a floating hotel off Long Beach, California. Allen produced the film on a substantial but relatively restrained budget of \$4.7 million at a time when Hollywood was counting its pennies stringently after the deadly days of the late 1960s. Gallico's novel, despite his somewhat flat characters, tried to articulate a philosophy in portraying their straits when their world is literally turned upside down. Perhaps the most unexpected aspect of *The Poseidon Adventure* as a film is that some of the philosophy actually survives the transfer, and might even have been clarified.



Hackman, stretching his legs for his first bit of Hollywood leading man business after winning an Oscar for *The French Connection* (1971), was cast as Reverend Scott, a strident, charismatic slum priest being deported to an African parish by his superiors. The film fixates on Scott as the angry and rebellious voice of defiance against helplessness and false idols, chiefly authority and illusory comfort, memorably illustrating his conviction the Lord helps those who help themselves: "You can wear off your knees praying for heat in a cold-water flat in February." In this way *The Poseidon Adventure* cleverly courts the way the anti-authoritarian mood of the moment as it was being converted into a mode of pop culture shtick. The distrust of certain forms of power is signalled early in the film when Harrison (Leslie Nielsen), Captain of the aging, about-to-be scrapped ocean liner S.S. *Poseidon* butts heads with the representative of the owners, Linarcos (Fred Sadoff). Linarcos wants the ship delivered on schedule to the wrecking yard and won't allow any delay to take on more ballast, leaving the ship top-heavy to a degree everyone aboard becomes queasily aware of as the ship rides out heavy weather in the mid-Mediterranean. On New Year's Eve, many passengers assemble for a party in the first class dining room, but the Captain is called to the bridge when, following reports of an earthquake off Crete, the radar picks up a huge tsunami heading their way.



These scenes introduce key characters, all familiar types, in vignettes mostly striking a humorous note whilst establishing who and what everyone with little subtlety. There's Mr Manny and Mrs Belle Rosen (Jack Albertson and Shelley Winters), an old Jewish-American couple heading to Israel to see their infant grandson. Mike Rogo (Ernest Borgnine) is a sceptical New York detective travelling with his brassy, high-strung former prostitute wife Linda (Stella Stevens). James Martin (Red Buttons) is a haberdasher and luckless bachelor preoccupied with his health. Susan Shelby (Pamela Sue Martin) is a comely young lass resentfully stuck with her overeager, nerdy younger brother Martin (Eric Shea) as they travel to meet up with their parents. Nonny Parry (Carol Lynley) is a sweet and blowsy singer in a band with her brother, employed on the ship for the cruise's duration and bound for a music festival. And there's Scott, who forcefully explains his peculiar worldview to the ship's more conventional if quietly decent Chaplain (Arthur O'Connell) and gives a vigorous guest sermon attended by many of the important characters where he espouses an existential, questing, empowered kind of faith, where he declares God "wants winners, not quitters – if you can't win then at least try to win!"



The opening vignettes often border on camp, particularly with Stevens' loud performance as a loud woman ("For chrissakes I know what suppositories are, just get them out of here!" she tells her husband

in her seasick eagerness to get rid of the ship's doctor and nurse) and the theatrical confrontations between the Captain and Linarcos, who's offered as a kind of slimy Onassis stand-in. Nielsen was later cast in *Airplane!* in homage to his performance as the doomed captain here, who so memorably mutters in stark solemnity, "Oh my god!" when he spots the wave bearing down upon his ship and makes a last-ditch effort to turn into it. The film clicks into gear in this sequence, as the wave hits whilst the midnight celebrations are in full swing. Neame cuts with shamelessly effective technique between the passengers' increasingly merry, dizzy, oblivious sing-along to "Auld Lang Syne," including close-ups of the obviously not celibate Scott carousing with a woman on each arm and young Robin frantically cheery, contrasted with the bridge crew's stark, horrified awareness of impending disaster. When the colossal wave strikes the ship it rolls over with agonising slowness and finality, wiping out the bridge and tossing the passengers in the dining room about like so much confetti, climaxing with a famous shot of a luckless passenger who managed to cling onto a table losing his grip and plunging a great height into a false skylight.



Scott inevitably greets the disaster as the ultimate challenge to his special brand of muscular Christianity as he begins trying to organise the survivors and follows Robin's advice thanks to his knowledge of the ship, as the kid suggests they should head for a propeller shaft where the hull is thinnest and most easily cut through by rescuers. Scott immediately finds himself in a shouting match with the ship's purser (Byron Webster), who recommends staying put and waiting for rescue despite the obvious precariousness of their lot. "That's not true!" the purser bellows when Scott declares no help is coming, to Scott's retort, "It is true you pompous ass!" Scott and others appropriated the collapsed steel-framed Christmas tree to use as a ladder to reach a way out, where injured steward Acres (Roddy MacDowall) is stranded. Scott also repeatedly butts heads with Rogo, but the cop and his wife still join the Rosens and the Shelbys in aiding Scott. Martin coaxes the stunned and grief-stricken Nonny, whose brother died in the capsizing, to come with them. The sea breaks into the dining room, starting to flood it just as Scott's party have ascended, and the ensuing panic causes the Christmas tree to collapse, obliging the agonised Scott to move on with what flock he has. Led by Acres through the formerly civilised but now dangerous obstacle course that is the ship's interior, including the fiery death-trap of the kitchen and various shafts and stairwells, the survivors make agonising progress, and Acres falls to his death when exploding boilers shake the ship.



Neame, a former cinematographer who had collaborated as producer with David Lean before he moved into directing himself, was an intermittently excellent filmmaker. He sometimes got bogged down in glossy productions like the dull *The Million Pound Note* (1955) and a string of flat melodramas when he went to Hollywood in the 1960s, but made some terrific films including the underrated thrillers *The Golden Salamander* (1950), *The Man Who Never Was* (1956), and *Escape From Zahrain* (1962), as well as prestigious, well-regarded dramas about prickly, asocial or combative characters including *The Horse's Mouth* (1958), *Tunes of Glory* (1960), and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1969). *The Poseidon Adventure*, Neame's biggest hit and one he later referred to dryly as his favourite work because it made him enough money to retire well on, was nonetheless perfect for him as it allowed him to sustain his interest in dynamic but difficult characters and combative relationships from his dramas in a survival situation close to those he liked in his genre films.



There are touches of gauche Hollywoodism, of course, finding excuses to get Stevens and Martin partly undressed and leaving Winters fully clothed whilst using her plumpness as a source of humour, as when Scott has to push her broad rump up through the spokes of the Christmas tree. Part of the film's mystique as popular hit was the inclusion of the lilting, syrupy, insidiously catchy song "The Morning

After”, nominally warbled by Nonny early in the film during her band’s rehearsal but actually sung by Maureen McGovern, providing an apt note of promise in regards to survival in almost Greek chorus fashion. The song won an Oscar and Allen would recommission McGovern to perform the similar “We May Never Love Like This Again” in *The Towering Inferno*. Nonetheless *The Poseidon Adventure*’s tautness once it gets going derives from the relentlessness of both the storyline, the banal yet chaotically defamiliarised setting and the constant flow of obstacles to be surmounted, and the hell of other people, as the survivors contend with each-other in brittle fashion in pinball game of personality.



The script, penned by the talented Hollywood ultra-professional Stirling Silliphant, an Oscar-winner for his work on *In The Heat of the Night* (1967), and Wendell Mayes, buffs down the edges of Gallico’s story a lot, excising a pathetic alcoholic couple as well as Susan and David’s parents from the group. In the novel Robin vanishes and is presumed dead, leaving his parents guilt-ridden and mutually hateful, whilst Susan was sexually assaulted by a panic-stricken young crewman who she then, rather oddly strikes up friendship with, only for him to run off in remorse to presumably die. The film instead places emphasis on the dynamics of the smaller group of survivors in their discovery of hidden resources and mixture of necessity and unease in mutual reliance. Sparks constantly fly as the rival types of alpha masculinity Scott and Rogo represent clash, Scott with his unflinching sense of mission aggravating Rogo’s cynical resistance and tendency to look to other figures of rank for authority. Scott with his turtleneck somehow still manages to look dashing when bedraggled whilst Rogo is a lump of boxy, grimy flesh. Rogo eventually demands to know why Scott is so utterly resistant to other options, as when they encounter another group of survivors being led by the doctor who are intent on heading for the bow rather than stern. Scott on the other hand maintains his utter derision of anything resembling herd mentality and blind obedience to empty promises based in fear and deference to anyone who sounds confident in denial of facts.



In this way, the inner core of surprising seriousness working as a parable about leadership and faith is enacted in the best way, through action and necessity of dramatic flow, whilst Hackman and Borgnine's big, bristling performances provide the energy. Scott's behaviour borders on the messianic even as his resolve and sense of purpose keep the others alive, berating the infuriated Rogo for failing to save Acres, whilst Rogo's own wife constantly mocks his tendency to rely too much on a veneer of authority as meaning in itself. Martin's gentle, solicitous way with helping Nonny through the disaster reveals his remarkably level head, whilst Lynley is excellent in playing the sort of character everyone tends to dislike because Nonny is the one no-one wants to be, a waifish innocent paralysed with fear at points: I particularly like the way Nonny vows "No, I won't," when Martin tells her to not to let go of him, nailing a note of giddy-fretful overemphasis in trying to be brave. Susan meanwhile has a crush on Scott, who treats her with fatherly affection and appreciates her support as he forges ahead despite the friction with Rogo. Her brother is an unusually believable kind of movie kid in his blend of cheek and fervent knowing, cheerily telling Mrs Rosen as he helps heave her up a stairwell he's experienced in this sort of thing after helping boat a three hundred pound swordfish once, only to later apologise for any comparison.



In a much-beloved and oft-lampooned twist, Mrs Rosen, who constantly frets about her weight and status as an encumbrance, discovers her inner action hero and leaps to the rescue in recalling her glory days as a swimmer when the group must traverse a flooded section of the engine room and Scott gets trapped under a piece of wreckage blazing the trail, saving his life but promptly dying of a heart attack. Belle's death is registered as the film's signal moment of authentic tragedy, the passing of a motherly, gutsy figure played by an actress whose presence kept the film tethered to the mythology of old Hollywood. The ugly toll mounts as Linda falls to her death when the survivors seem on the brink of their goal, Rogo unleashing his rage and sorrow on Scott for his own empty promises, whilst the minister is confronted by a leaking steam valve blocking their path, an impediment that almost seems to personify the vindictive forces that seem intent on foiling their efforts to prove their living worth. Scott certainly takes it as such, berating it as the stand-in for the God he's frustrated with as he makes a dangerous leap to grab the wheel to shut it off and then, as if in self-sacrifice, lets himself drop into the flame-wreathed brine below.



*The Poseidon Adventure* might well have been the first film I'd ever seen as a small boy where the hero dies, and so inevitably left a deep impact on me in this regard. What's significant to me now is that the film clearly stands out from the pack of similar films through the way it tries to explore survival not just in a video game-like fashion of surmounting problems and stages but wrestling with its meaning. This theme runs through the movie like a live nerve, probing the worth of Scott's conviction whilst ultimately validating them, and the way fighting for survival immediately provokes the characters to rise or fall depending on their capacities. The ultimate moment of rescue for the remaining characters is a plaintive, surprisingly muted moment, as they stand watching the cutting torch of rescuers burn through the hull, the answering light of salvation in comparison to the devil of the steam valve. Finally they're pulled out and learn they're the only survivors, before they're ushered onto a helicopter that lifts off, leaving behind the upturned ship. As if by sarcastic design, *The Towering Inferno* begins with a helicopter in flight bringing its hero into danger: Paul Newman's genius, playboy architect Doug Roberts, making for San Francisco to behold his masterwork, the 138-floor Glass Tower, rising like a great golden lance above the city.





Allen spent more than three times the budget on *The Towering Inferno* he had on *The Poseidon Adventure*, making a film that set out self-consciously to emulate grand old Hollywood extravaganzas like *Grand Hotel* (1932) with an added edge of apocalyptic drama, and was rewarded with an even bigger hit. Allen again hired Silliphant to write the film, this time melding two different novels with the same basic plot, *The Tower* by Richard Martin Stern and *The Glass Inferno* by Thomas N. Scortia and Frank M. Robinson, a mating demanded when Allen convinced both Twentieth Century Fox and Warner Bros., who were planning rival films of the two books, to pool resources. This time the director was the Guillermin, who was both admired and hated for his demanding, exacting, even bellicose on-set style. Guillermin worked his way up through weak screen filler in the early 1950s before gaining attention with films including the brilliant neo-western *Never Let Go* (1960) and the plaintive drama *Rapture* (1965), and his string of sardonic, antiheroic war films *The Guns of Batasi* (1964), *The Blue Max* (1966), and *The Bridge at Remagen* (1969). Despite his very real talents, in the '70s and '80s Guillermin found himself more prized for his ability to corral big budget opuses.



As in *The Poseidon Adventure*, responsibility for disaster in *The Towering Inferno* is laid not merely at the door of terrible chance but nefarious and corrupt business dealings. This time the theme is pushed more forcefully, in a movie that also proved uniquely well-suited to the season of Watergate's last, sclerotic spasms and all the ensuing fear of decline and torpor it generated. Leaving aside any questions as to why someone would want to build the world's tallest building in an earthquake zone, Doug's magnum opus required engineering on a demanding scale, but he soon finds the electrical contractor, Roger Simmons (Richard Chamberlain), has installed cheap and inadequate wiring and pocketed the money saved. Roger is happy to point out that his father-in-law, Jim Duncan (William Holden), the real estate mogul responsible for financing the build, regularly pushes all his contractors to keep costs down. They soon discover the price for hubris is steep, as electrical fires begin breaking out all over the building on the night of its official opening, with a swanky gala being held in the Promenade Room on the 135th floor and every light in the structure turned on, overloading the frail systems.



The rapidly multiplying blaze, uncontained by sprinklers that won't work, soon threatens the life of everyone in the building, which is split between residential and business floors. Doug and his chief engineer Will Giddings (Norman Burton) try to track down one outbreak, only for Giddings to be fatally burned saving a security guard as the conflagration bursts loose. Like many disaster movies the storyline's ritual structure courts likeness to the *Titanic* sinking, with much made of the new building's seemingly invulnerable façade and nabobs forced to display grace under pressure when things go to hell. Amongst the many characters entrapped by the blaze are Doug's magazine editor fiancé Susan Franklin (Faye Dunaway) and Roger's wife Patty (Susan Blakely), Senator Gary Parker (Robert Vaughan), city Mayor Bob Ramsay (Jack Collins) and his wife Paula (Sheila Matthews Allen), Duncan's PR man Dan Bigelow (Robert Wagner) and his office lover Lorrie (Susan Flannery), and building resident Lisolette Mueller (Jennifer Jones) and her date for the night, sweet-talking conman Harlee Claiborne (Fred Astaire).



The blaze soon attracts the SF Fire Department en masse, under the leadership of Chief Mike O'Hallorhan (Steve McQueen), who along with his firefighters confronts a blaze that proves impossible to tame by any conventional tactic. Duncan is initially reluctant to halt the party when he thinks they're only facing a small, localised blaze, and doesn't begin to evacuate until Mike tells him to in no uncertain terms, but the spreading fire soon cuts off all routes. Doug finds himself tasked with saving Lisolette and the two children (Carlena Gower and Mike Lookinland) of her neighbour she ventured down to fetch, after spotting her over a CCTV camera and dashing to the rescue. High winds make helicopter landings too dangerous – one attempt to brave the gusts causes a chopper crash. With the help of the Navy, the firefighters make recourse to suspending a breeches buoy between the Glass Tower and a neighbouring building and drawing people over one by one, a method that proves painfully slow and perilous as the guests draw lots to escape.



The opening shots of *The Towering Inferno* track Doug's helicopter flying down the California coast and bursting out of a fog bank to behold the Golden Gate Bridge and sweeping over the bay in screen-filling vistas. Doug's '70s bachelor cred is fully confirmed he swans in wearing a Safari jacket, beholding his

magnificent yet terminated creation from the chopper as it barrels over the San Francisco skyline, all set to Williams' surging, venturesome scoring, immediately declares this film is going to be a thrill ride, as opposed to the tragic ominousness his scoring for the earlier film suggested. The spectacular cinematography by Fred Koenekamp and Joseph Biroc would win one of the film's several Oscars, despite having some rivals like *The Godfather Part II* and *Chinatown* that year with more artistic quality to their shooting, but the Academy seemed to sense a reclamation of Hollywood's imperial stature apparent in the *The Towering Inferno's* technical might and gloss. The quiet early scenes are better than those in *The Poseidon Adventure* if grazing high class soap opera or bestseller territory – the presence of Flannery, much to later to become a fixture on *The Bold and the Beautiful*, makes that connection more literal. The percolating social movements of the moment are nudged as Doug and Susan negotiate potential wrinkles in their relationship – Doug wants to retire to a remote ranch and become a rich dropout whilst Susan wants to take a big new job – after enjoying an afternoon shag in his apartment in the Tower.



Other characters go about their lives, with good little touches like Lisolette's neighbour, mother of the kids she sets out to save, being deaf and so potentially oblivious to alarms. Astaire and Jones provide the regulation shot of old school star power. Astaire, rather astoundingly, gained his first and only Oscar nomination for his performance as the professionally charming, deceitful but essentially good-hearted Harlee. Astaire's class in his tailor-made role is apparent when Harlee is introduced with a clue he's busted as he laboriously counts out change to the taxi driver who delivers him to the building, and later confesses his wicked ways to Lisolette: "I brought you up here tonight to sell you a thousand shares in Greater Anaheim Power and Light...There is no Greater Anaheim Power and Light!" His sincerity is signalled when he dashes to cover a burn victim with his tuxedo jacket, a garment Guillermin has already let us know is rented. This detail is noted in an earlier scene that offers a gentle parody of his famous *Royal Wedding* (1951) hotel room dance scene as he similarly prepares himself for a date only to note the wrinkles on his face and throw down his hands in despair, only to strike a newly confident stance and get down to flimflamming.



*The Towering Inferno* demanded a lot more special effects work than *The Poseidon Adventure*, and whilst some of L.B. Abbott's effects haven't aged well, like the many rear-projected shots, there's still some frightening majesty in the exterior surveys of the blazing building, as well as the admirable stunt work throughout. The film is of course replete with strong cliffhanger sequences, like the long scene mid-film where Doug leads Lisolette and the kids to safety finds them traversing a mangled stairwell, forced to climb down a dangling, twisted piece of railing over a bottomless pit. The cute kids are safe in such a movie, but elsewhere the film delights in dealing out death and mayhem. In true morality play/slasher movie fashion Bigelow and Lorrie die when, having snuck away for a quickie, find themselves trapped by the flames and die memorably cruel deaths. Williams' music surges in grandly tragic refrains as Bigelow tries to make a desperate run for help only to quickly stumble and catch alight, all filmed in gruelling slow motion, whilst Susan accidentally blasts herself into space when she smashes a window and gets struck by the backdraft. When a bunch of party guests cram themselves into an elevator against all warnings and try to descend, the elevator returns soon after and disgorges them all ablaze and charred. Later the film ruthlessly inverts the game of moralistic expectation when Lisolette, the most innocent character in the film, falls to her death after saving a child, a shocking moment even after the umpteenth viewing.



If not as interesting and sustained as the survivalist philosophy in *The Poseidon Adventure*, the film is also given a level of depth beyond mere pretext in its approach to Doug, Roger, and Duncan and their varying levels of complicity in the disaster. Doug questions, "What do they call it when you kill people?" whilst knocking back stiff drinks mid-crisis. Early in the film Doug's visit to Roger's house to rumble him for his cheats leads into a vignette of odd pathos as Roger and Patty graze the void between them – "All I want is the man I thought I married" – that is weirdly similar in tone and undercurrents to Chamberlain's early eye-catching role in *Petulia* (1968), and in the same locale to boot, with Chamberlain playing the superficially suave and sleek golden boy who's actually a mass of furies. Roger is a progenitor of all the spineless creeps who would soon become regulation villain figures in '80s genre films, but offered with a deal more complexity, with his blend of guilty, pathetic chagrin and will for self-preservation. He declares his intention to "get quietly drunk" and needles Duncan over his complicity in his own misdeeds, before trying to butt his way into the queue for the breeches buoy, only for his father-in-law to sock him and declare they'll be the last two out. Roger eventually dies along with Parker and others in a battle to control the buoy during which it collapses. Parker, whilst generally acting like a good guy throughout the drama, is nonetheless introduced being courted by Duncan with a soft bribe involving a case of vintage wine.



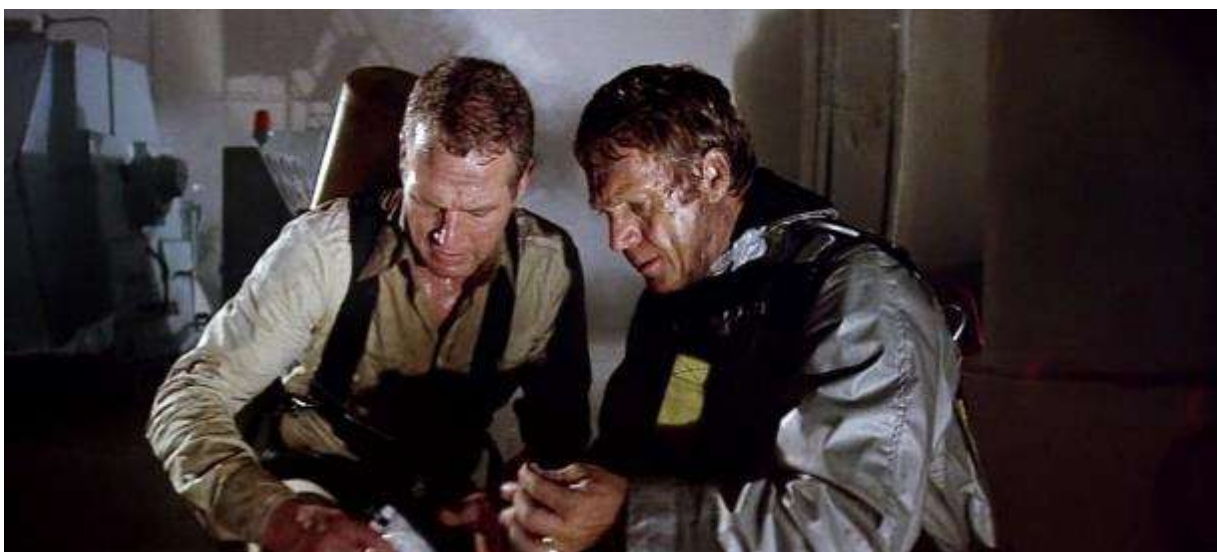
The amazing cast extends down to excellent character actors like Don Gordon as Mike's number two. There's even O.J. Simpson giving a surprisingly deft and personable performance as the stalwart security chief Jernigan, who saves the deaf mother and later delivers Lisolette's pet cat to a distraught Harlee. Scott (Felton Perry) and Powers (Ernie Orsatti) are two firemen who are appointed as the representative workaday heroes: Scott groans in distress when he first realises, as they ride atop a fire truck through the city streets amidst the din towards their destination, just where the fire they're going to is. They find themselves in the centre of the action when they meet up with Doug and his charges and climb to the Promenade Room, having to blow their way through the blocked fire door to reach the guests. Later Powers draws the job of accompanying some guests down in a hotwired elevator that rides along the building exterior, only for a gas blast to knock the elevator off its rails and leave it dangling, causing Lisolette's fatal fall. Mike has to get himself choppered up to get the elevator hooked so the helicopter can lower it to the ground, with Mike hanging on to Powers after he's nearly jolted loose during the agonisingly slow journey down. In a spectacular twist on the man falling into the skylight in *The Poseidon Adventure*, Powers slips from Mike's grasp still far above the street only to land on an inflatable cushion, in perhaps the film's greatest moment of spectacle.



The credits notably gave McQueen and Newman equal, staggered billing, a moment of wry triumph for McQueen considering he'd long regarded Newman as both a figure of emulation and his singular rival for a lot of roles. Aptly if ironically, *The Towering Inferno* eventually becomes a '70s buddy movie as Doug and Mike try to work together with their sharply polarised personas but equally professional temperaments, as well as Newman and McQueen's very different acting styles. Mike doesn't appear until forty minutes into the film but immediately dominates as McQueen's signature minimalist, hangdog look of frayed and weathered stoicism where emotion lives only in deep wells behind his lethal blue gaze, is perfect for playing an action hero who's also a world-weary working stiff. He's the living embodiment of everything that's the antithesis of the glossy magazine world represented by the people on the Promenade Room, accepting all the crazy and dangerous jobs the fire demands and quietly but exactly telling Doug off for building death-traps people like him have to risk their lives in: "Now you know there's no sure way we can fight a fire that's over the seventh floor. But you guys just keep building them as high as you can." Later, in a particularly great shot, Guillermin's camera surveys the building lobby full of the injured and shattered and finds Mike, having performed a great feat of bravery, slumped against the wall and resting, indistinguishable from his fellow fire fighters in exhaustion, only to be called off to action again. Dunaway, like Newman and McQueen at the apex of mid-'70s star power, is by comparison pretty wasted, although Susan's early scenes with Doug are interesting in introducing a nascent meditation on emerging feminism obliging new understandings.



The balance between Allen's investment in human drama as a channel for and manifestation of the politics of Hollywood star power and Guillermin's fascination for disillusioned romanticism and agonised social climbers lies in the sputtering empathy shown the characters who all have their spurring ambitions that turn into queasy self-owns. It's telling that despite Duncan's culpability the film spares him and grants him a level of dignity as a conflicted patriarch whose upright side ultimately wins through as he tries, once the situation becomes plainly urgent, to hold things together and run the evacuation right, even socking Roger when he tries to push his way into the breeches buoy. Perhaps this respect is because Duncan feels most like an avatar for Allen himself, a man of vision and enterprise who nonetheless knew how to get things done in cutting the right corners at the perpetual risk of producing something tony but shoddy, squeezed between the conscientious auteur Doug, the on-the-make young gun Roger, and Mike as the embodiment of all the bills coming due, throwing parties for the rich and famous whose air of glamour and power is mocked by calamity. Harlee, likewise has some resemblance to a down-on-his luck industry player trying to sustain himself between hits through constantly promising a slice of the next big thing.





*The Towering Inferno* is then a film really about Hollywood, its sense of anxiety and dislocation matching that of the country at large in the mid-1970s moment, surviving on the fumes of former greatness but finally looking to its big new stars to save the day. And save it they do, in both senses. Mike is sent up to take the last chance for saving the remaining guests, dropped onto the Tower's roof to meet up with Doug and blow open some colossal water tanks in the building's upper reaches. This unleashes a flood that douses the fire, even if the cure proves nearly as dangerous as the disease, blasts and torrents of water killing several survivors including the Mayor and the affable bartender (Gregory Sierra). The climax is tremendous as Williams cranks up the tension with his music in league with Guillermin's editing.



The unleashed war of fire and water finally offers an entirely elemental battle, amidst which the humans are reduced to flailing afterthoughts, including one startling shot of Astaire tied to a column with hands over his ears, water crashing upon him. The flood subsides and leaves the survivors to pick themselves up amidst drifting mist with a touch of mystical import, echoing the sea mist at the opening. The coda blends triumph with a tone of exhaustion and forlorn loss, registered most keenly by Harlee as he looks for Lisolette only for Jernigan to plant her cat in his arms, whilst Duncan consoles his widowed daughter. It's hard to imagine a movie as pricey and popular these days signing off with one of its major protagonists considering leaving his grand creation as a blackened husk as Doug comments, "Maybe they oughta just leave it the way it is – kinda shrine to all the bullshit in the world," and asking Mike for advice, the fire chief heading off home after another day at the office.



And that's perhaps the most appealing and potent aspect of Allen's twin great disaster movies nearly a half-century later – big, brash, and cheesy as they certainly are, they are nonetheless movies that take themselves seriously on the right levels, and offer cinematic spectacle still rooted to the earth and the travails of ordinary people whilst finding biblical-scale drama in eminently possible situations. They convey a lingering sense of existence very fitting for creative hands borne out of Depression and war, the feeling that every now and then, no matter how stable and safe the world is, the bottom can suddenly drop out and demand every particle of a person to survive. Allen's problem was that having found a good thing he went back to the well too many times, first with *The Swarm* with its ridiculous tale of a killer bee invasion, and then when that failed essentially remaking *The Towering Inferno* as *When Time Ran Out*.... There Allen swapped the Glass Tower for a resort hotel next to an erupting volcano, with Newman and Holden basically playing the same roles whilst offering screen time and sympathy to the film's Roger equivalent, played by a subbing James Franciscus. Whilst not as a bad as often painted, it was certainly cheap and tacky and represented a formula milked dry, huge success supplanted by try-hard failure. Which is perhaps, the oldest morality play of all, at least in show

## Dark City (1998)



In the late 1990s two films with strikingly similar themes and overlapping influences were filmed on Sydney sound stages, blending the strong influence of film noir with a paranoid strain of science fiction revolving around characters who find themselves living in a simulated reality and drifting free of any sure sense of individual identity. One of those films, the Wachowskis' *The Matrix* (1999), emerged as a giant, zeitgeist-defining hit, whilst Alex Proyas' *Dark City* proved whatever the opposite of that is. Cairo-born Proyas moved to Australia as a child with his family and emerged as a successful director of music videos after a stint in film school, before debuting as a feature director with 1987's *Spirits of the Air*, *Gremlins of the Clouds*. His 1994 comic book adaptation *The Crow* made Proyas a hot property and he used the resulting clout to make *Dark City*, based on a story he wrote and adapted as a screenplay by Lem Dobbs and David S. Goyer. The film was a flop at the time but has sailed on a quietly cultish zephyr since. *Dark City* kicks off with a hyperbolic take on a classic film noir situation, as a man (Rufus Sewell) is awakened in a hotel room by a phone call from a stranger telling him to flee. The awakened man is in a state of amnesiac blankness, with no memory of who he is or how he got there, although his ID tells him his name is John Murdoch. The corpse of a gruesomely murdered prostitute lies splayed on the floor.



Fleeing the scene of the crime, Murdoch begins an odyssey through the unnamed and peculiarly generic metropolis he seems to live in, a place where the sun never rises and where the outer suburbs and nearby seaside seem utterly unreachable, as if they exist beyond the margins of what's been imagined. As he roams the perma-midnight, Murdoch becomes the object of two converging searches, one by the police, led by the world-weary and thoughtful Detective Frank Bumstead (William Hurt), the other by a rather more alarmingly strange and enigmatic faction of men with bald heads clad in long overcoats and felt hats known only as the Strangers. Murdoch is briefly reunited with the woman who seems to be his wife, nightclub chanteuse Emma (Jennifer Connelly), who tells him he stormed out of their apartment after she told him she had an affair, a break that's left her stricken with guilt and languor. Still disoriented and seeking shelter, Murdoch goes home with a friendly prostitute (Melissa George) only for her to soon turn up killed in the same way. The humane and intelligent Bumstead works to track down Murdoch after his colleague Walenski (Colin Firth) became unbalanced in perceiving aspects of the truth, and Murdoch glimpses Walenski throwing himself under a train after claiming to have discovered the truth behind the city. Emma is contacted by Dr Schreber (Keifer Sutherland), an enigmatic pathologist who wants her to bring Murdoch to him, but is also working with the black-clad Strangers towards their insidious purpose.



*Dark City* signalled after the bleak-cool neo-expressionist visuals of *The Crow* that Proyas belonged squarely to a generation of directorial talents driven by a desire to create totalised aesthetic visions, visual imagineers who emulated films of nascent high style like Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) and David Lynch's *Dune* (1984). Those ranks set about creating similarly encompassing and dreamlike worlds, with works dotting the late 1980s and 1990s like Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989), Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro's *Delicatessen* (1989) and *City of Lost Children* (1994), Walter Hill's *Streets of Fire* (1984), and Proyas' fellow Aussie Russell Mulcahy's *Highlander* films and *The Shadow* (1994) – movies that aimed for grand stylisation and immersion in a fastidiously manufactured world. Some movies of this kind were strong but others gave rise to a feeling summarised by a quip I once read that held when the production design of a movie is praised it means the rest of the movie stinks. *The Crow* was a straightforward supernatural revenge drama gussied up with cutting edge spectacle much of a muchness with the high-end music videos Proyas had made, but *Dark City* aims many notches higher in ambition. Proyas worked closely with production designer Patrick Tatopoulos to help create the film's awesome look, with the titular city a mishmash of architectural styles and retro chic grittiness, a place that seems like everywhere and nowhere, reshaped at whim its creators with spectacular displays of then cutting-edge CGI. There's a good, clever thematic and plot purpose behind this, too.



The science fiction story unveiled behind the noir pastiche revolves around the Strangers, actually a race of aliens inhabiting human shells, desperate to discover and assimilate into themselves the nature of human identity and individualism because they only have collective memories and experiences. They've forced Schreber, the only human in the city aware of what's really going on, to help them as they implant memories and traits into their myriad human guinea pigs – at one point Schreber makes over a dowdy pleb couple into a pair of snooty toffs, turning the stuff of social theory into a working tableau – and the whole of the city is a simulacrum created by huge imaging machines on a deep space satellite turned permanently away from the sun because the Strangers can't stand bright light. Proyas' magpie-like eye and imagination is well-suited to this story that foregrounds its own bricoleur status, piecing together the disparate mystique of Hollywood noir tales and Weimar German thrillers into a photo spread-like assemblage of striking pictures and fetishised textures. The submerged tough guy mythos of *The Big Sleep* (1946) collides with villains dressed like bankers from a Fritz Lang film. The detail-obsessive detective work of *M* (1931) is given a surreal twist as huge images of fingerprints from a murder scene are revealed to form the same spiralling shape as is carved into the hookers' bodies. Murdoch clings to possibly illusory memories of a seaside childhood envisioned as David Lynch-like zone of lacquered colour and phony-homey billboards.



This pick-and-mix approach is justified to an extent in how the Strangers operate with the same motive and method as Proyas, trying to synthesise an artistic vision based around a desire to recreate and absorb a way of seeing and thinking and feeling. Their human subjects are actors in their play as they are for Proyas, constantly switching roles and facsimiles of character but with the purpose of digging down to a fixed essence, a transcendental quality within the vagaries of formative experience. Murdoch, the anointed hero, becomes fixated by his need to give reality to his childhood memories, memories that are themselves provided simulacra, and as the movie unfolds he finds his semi-accidental release from the weight of memory and identity frees his repressed powers to tap into the Strangers' machinery and rewrite reality, turning him from character in search of an author to artist-rebel. There's a fascinating sense of the feedback loop of created images in giving substance to identity, a sensibility that might well have been rooted in exploring Proyas' immigrant experience, the sights and sounds retained in memory from pop culture ultimately better yardsticks than the random and shifting signifiers of the external world.



As such *Dark City* spurns any surface contact with Australian culture and yet is a profoundly Australian creation in its uneasily and frenetically emulating sense of cultural inheritance, much like Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge* (2001) to which it plays as the conceptually similar if tonally opposite creation. It's more interesting than *The Matrix* despite not gaining its success in avoiding shallow political themes and action movie clichés, instead taking up where *Blade Runner* took off in exploring the texture of a certain kind of melancholy nostalgia and correlating it with a search for identity and meaning. Trouble is, like many similar visually obsessive talents, Proyas proves nowhere near as accomplished in dealing with the minutiae of human drama and pacing. *Dark City* is great on a visual and conceptual level, and has vast potential, but it's foiled significantly by a lack of certainty in how to unveil its layers of mystery and make them matter. The storyline unfolds spasmodically, revealing too much too soon in some regards and dragging on forever in confirming others. The Strangers, their nature, and their activities should take some time to emerge clearly, but their overt bizarreness is swiftly rammed home. Some spectacularly obvious casting choices, like Richard O'Brien, Nicholas Bell, Paul Livingstone, and Bruce Spence amongst the Strangers' number, and Ian Richardson as their plummy overlord, undercuts the necessary sense of banal surfaces repurposed by grotesque creatures for an overdose of campy theatre.



The film as a whole feels uneasily perched between a kind of mobile photo spread for a high-end magazine – *Vanity Fair* presents *Dark City* – or a show reel for its CGI outfit's genius, and an actual narrative: Proyas wants to describe the essence of being human and yet none of the characters truly resolve beyond emblematic cliché. Whilst it could be argued that it suits a story revolving around simulation and role-playing, the acting is also violently uneven, a mishmash of performing styles and tones with far too many Aussie actors doing their dinner party old Hollywood movie voices. Sutherland probably comes off best as the alternately sinister and tormented physician whose motives remain unclear until the end. Sewell, a rising face at the time, is a solid lead in a role that nonetheless remains rather fuzzily conceived, beginning as a victimised noir everyman who eventually emerges as a nascent superman. Proyas lingers on visions of Connelly, who at that point in her career was too often cast as the image of retro feminine perfection, trying to provide the film's wellspring of melancholic beauty but too often coming across as rather blowsy.

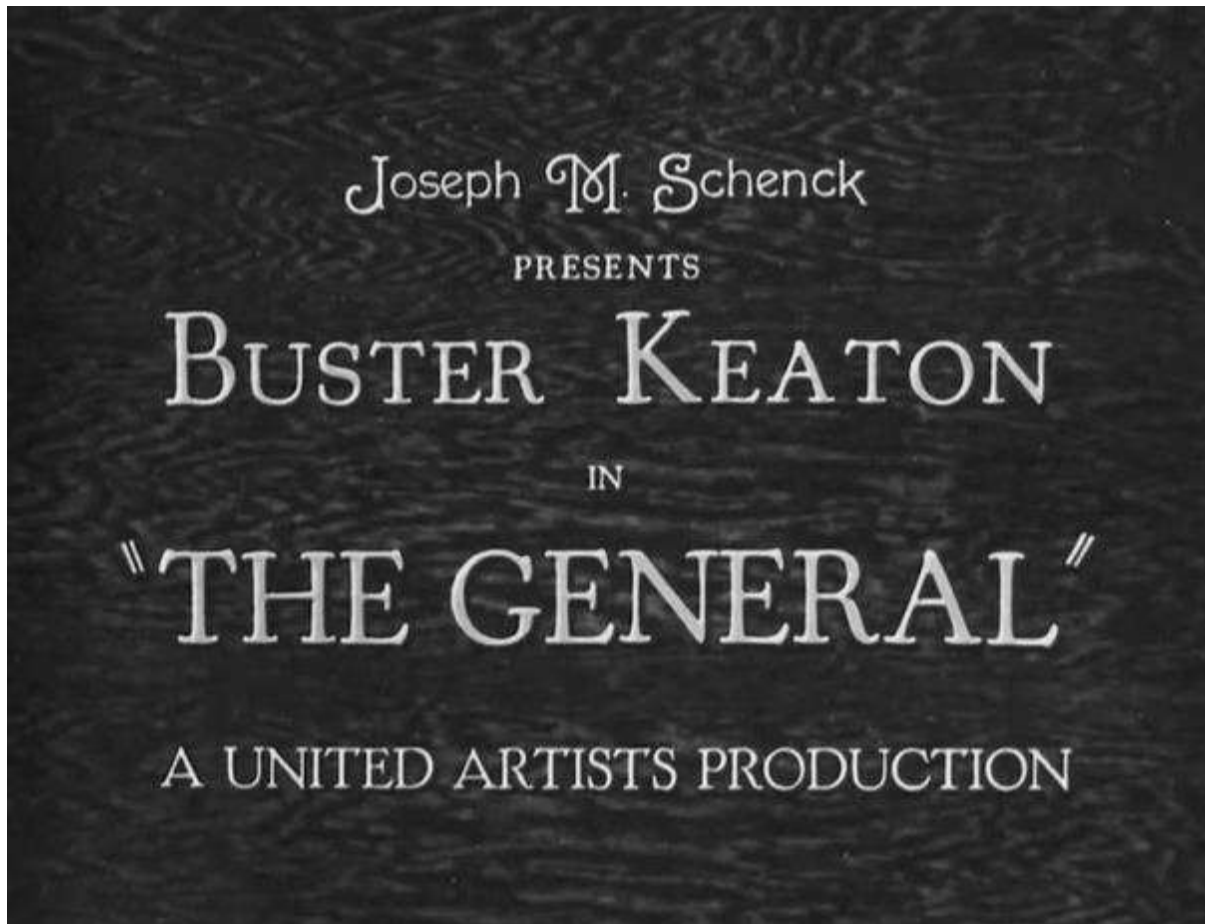


Hurt for his part walks through his part without passion. He does nonetheless contribute to the film's best scene in the revelation of the truth of the city as Bumstead and Murdoch bash their way through a brick wall only to reveal the endless void of space beyond, before the detective and a Stranger grapple and float out into the void. Here there's a real flash of the sense of dream logic Proyas tries to marry throughout to a clear sense of logical story function. But much as he would later with the even more ambitious and spectacular *Gods of Egypt* (2016), Proyas' genuinely vast imaginative palette never overcomes the feeling he lacks any real sense of invention on a more prosaic level. There are some good touches, that said, like Emma warbling a midnight jazz version of "The Night Has a Thousand Eyes" that wryly nails down both the note of pining, estranged romanticism and nerve-tingling anxiety Proyas chases. The climax where Murdoch is finally unbound thanks to Schreber's conniving to bring down the Strangers devolves into clunky *deus-ex-machina* power fantasy that's rushed as a pay-off, and it's hard not to conclude the story might have been worked through better as one of today's high-end TV series. The very ending, as Murdoch uses his new powers to recreate his dream past, returns to the artist-makes-the-world concept as well as the mood of Lynchian pastiche. *Dark City* remains something of a quandary, an intriguing *objet d'art* that's neither calamity nor classic, a failure in terms of the genres it emulates but retaining nagging appeal on a more rarefied level.





## **The General (1926)**



**Directors:** Clyde Bruckman, Buster Keaton

**Screenwriters:** Al Boasberg, Clyde Bruckman, Buster Keaton, Charles Henry Smith, Paul Gerard Smith

*This essay is offered as part of the Fifth Annual Allan Fish Online Film Festival 2021, a festival founded by Jamie Uhler and hosted by Wonders in the Dark, held to honor the memory of the late cineaste extraordinaire Allan Fish, considering films in the public domain and/or available online*

Long after most of the continent of silent cinema split away and became the rarefied preserve for a sector of movie lovers, silent comedy has retained its impudent life, its heroes still recognisable. The works of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, Harry Langdon, Max Linder, Mabel Normand, the Keystone Kops, and even the ill-fated Fatty Arbuckle still have the ability to charm and wow any given audience. Think of how many pastiches of it you've seen over the years, automatically making the connection between farce and the stylistics of silent cinema, a language unto itself. Silent comedy survives because the emerging art form and style were uniquely well-suited. Slapstick, loud and crude and personal on the stage, became a weightless ballet of pure movement without sound and the ancient traditions of mime and farceur suddenly found a new and perfect venue, cutting across all conceivable

boundaries of cultural and linguistic tradition. Despite an intervening century of argument about the two actor-directors, Chaplin and Keaton merely offered distinct takes on the basic comic concept, of a man fighting both other humans and the random impositions of life in a rapidly modernising world for their share of dignity.



Chaplin's Little Tramp, trapped eternally on the wrong side of the glass from acceptance into the world, had at least a certain degree of roguish freedom, a capacity to pick himself up and move on after calamity, to compensate for his eternal exile. Keaton's characters were trapped within the world, surrounded by bullies and blowhards as well as ornery if not downright malignant machinery, more able to play the romantic lead but always obliged to prove himself, never given the option of failure or surrender. Keaton, blessed with the real first name of Joseph as five previous generations of Keaton men had been before him, emerged from his mother in the town of Piqua, Kansas in 1895, a pure happenstance as his parents were vaudevillians and that was where they happened to be at the time. Keaton's father was in business with Harry Houdini with a travelling stage show that sold patent medicine on the side. Keaton supposedly gained his stage name when he weathered a tumble down a flight of stairs at 18 months of age, and Keaton himself said it was Houdini who so anointed him. Contrary to his later persona as impassive and unflappable, Keaton's initial persona in his performances with his parents was a temperamental brat who would fight with them and hurl furniture about.



Keaton had to dodge enforcers of child labour laws to continue his career but he was on the rise as a teenager as his alcoholic father faltered. Around the same time as a stint in the army during World War I, Keaton encountered Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle, already an established and popular comedy star, who encouraged him to try acting in a short he was filming. Keaton adapted so quickly Arbuckle brought him into his company immediately. Initially uneasy about his new medium, Keaton nonetheless became swiftly enraptured by the mechanics of filmmaking, borrowing, disassembling, and rebuilding a camera overnight. After making 14 shorts with Arbuckle, including his directing debut *The Rough House* (1917), Keaton gained the backing of Arbuckle's producer Joseph M. Schenck and appeared in the first of his solo starring vehicles, *The Saphead* (1920). As he moved into making feature films, Keaton tried to stretch his screen persona, but had more luck with stretching his approach to filmmaking to a degree that was at the cutting edge of filmmaking at the time, resulting in exercises like the still-vital experimental cinema of *Sherlock Jr* (1924) and the self-satirising, proliferating selves of *The Play House* (1921) poking fun of the one-man-band tendencies of Keaton and many of his fellows.



Demonstrative in his early appearances on screen, Keaton began perfecting his “great stone face” act. He became the emblematic stoic, beset at all times by the random perversities of the world and muddling through. Keaton was proud that his persona was essentially that of a working man, getting on with things, holding to principles no matter how drastic his situations became. *The General*, Keaton’s magnum opus, came after an unbroken run of success, but Schenck, who by this time was the head of Metro Films, soon balked as Keaton spent upwards of \$750,000 on the production. Keaton shared directing duties with his constant writing collaborator Clyde Bruckman, and filmed the movie, set in Georgia during the American Civil War, in Oregon instead to take advantage of the old-fashioned railway equipment still littering the landscape, including two vintage locomotives the production bought up for shooting. The shoot became increasingly arduous particularly as the engines kept sparking fires in the locality, and the climactic shot of a train wreck became the single most expensive image created in the silent era. *The General* proved a failure with the 1926 audience and also critics who seemed bemused by Keaton’s insistence on blending comedy with more serious aspects. This hurt Keaton’s career, compounded when his production company collapsed during the shooting of *Steamboat Bill, Jr* (1927), and forced him to take refuge with MGM, a partnership that began well with *The Cameraman* (1928) but soon became a ruinous straitjacket for the creatively sovereign and personally fraying Keaton.



The reason for *The General's* failure seems mysterious today, given that it's long since taken pride of place as Keaton's most regarded film and one of the essential works of cinema in general. There are some possible reasons, including the unpopularity of films with its Civil War subject matter, as well as more subtle dimensions to what Keaton was trying to do. *The General's* simple plot is also the engine of its purity, a work about motion and possessed of it, the mechanical problems with which Keaton liked to illustrate a proto-existential worldview now become not only an aspect of the drama but its governing and dominating infrastructure. Keaton was inspired by the true story of a raid to steal a train and wreak havoc led by Union soldier James J. Andrews, as recorded by one of his men William Pittenger in his memoir *The Great Locomotive Chase*. The real story wasn't a lark – Andrews and several of his men were captured and executed as spies – but a surprising amount of the story's detail, including the name of the captured train and a pursuit by hand-cart, wove its way into Keaton's telling. Keaton cast himself as a train driver whose chief motive is recapturing his beloved locomotive, the *General*, from the men who steal it.



There's a touch of irony, given the way even the Civil War seems to be being perpetually refought rhetorically today, apparent in the way Keaton decided to play a character who becomes a Confederate hero because it suited his assailed, everyman persona better, noting that given the South lost the war it was easy to take pity on. The film conspicuously avoids any degree of political dimension beyond describing automatic sectarian feeling, but the very name of Keaton's character, Johnnie Gray, identifies him as the emblematic Southerner. The first dialogue title card tells us, "There were two loves in his life. His engine - and—" before cutting to the photo of Johnnie's lady fair Annabelle Lee (Marion Mack) pinned to the engine canopy. At the outset Johnnie pulls the *General* and the Western and Atlantic Flyer train behind it into the town of Marietta, Georgia, in early 1861. Johnnie's simplicity and almost childlike affect are confirmed as he happily shakes hands with a couple of urchins interested in the engine, and the lads bend over in inspecting the pistons in imitation of Johnnie's focused obsession with the running of the locomotive. The kids follow Johnnie single-file through the streets of Marietta as he advances with intent towards Annabelle's house, only for him to pass by Annabelle herself whilst she's borrowing a book from a friend: she spots him and joins the procession to her own front door, before politely stepping before Johnnie and entering her home before inviting him in.



There's already an amusing obsession with linear movement, pursuit, and little surprises of chance here that reverberate through the rest of the film apparent in this gently comic sequence. The emphasis is placed on Johnnie's intense experience of the moment, his tiny gestures and large all part of his attempt to maintain a glaze of courteous eligibility to Annabelle and her family. Inside, the two boys sit in polite attendance whilst Johnnie tries to woo, and finally to get rid of them he makes like he's leaving, donning his hat and waving the lads through door, before closing it on them. Johnnie's romantic connection with Annabelle is however immediately threatened with far more dramatic import for him than any other factor as her brother (Frank Barnes) informs her father (Charles Smith) that Fort Sumter has been fired on and war is breaking out. Father and son immediately prepare to go volunteer, as does the virtually oblivious Johnnie, who nonetheless once his patriotic duty is pointed out to him becomes properly determine to follow through.



Heading to a general store where the clerks have set up a swiftly formed recruiting office, Johnnie finds himself refused induction without reason, although the audience is privy to the recruiters' conversation about him which establishes he's far more useful as a train driver than a soldier. Johnnie, in his annoyance, tries again with face partly concealed by a cocked hat, using a pseudonym and, guessing why he was refused, also giving another profession. Recognised and refused again, his next attempt to steal another man's induction card sees him finally booted out the back door. Walking past Annabelle's father and brother as they queue, they invite him to stand in line with him, but he sadly shakes his head. Taking this as his sign that he doesn't want to serve, they tell Annabelle about Johnnie's cowardice, and Annabelle refuses to listen to Johnnie's account, telling him no to speak to her again until he's in uniform. Keaton illustrates Johnnie's forlorn lot with one of his most famous visual gags, as Johnnie settles wearily upon a piston and doesn't notice to one of his fellow drivers moving the train down the line, Johnnie lifted and lowered by the motion of the piston in an ingenious counterpoint to his arrested obliviousness. This is one of the great screen depictions of sadness, and one that also suggests a rather bluer joke: Johnnie will be alone with his piston for some time to come.





Johnnie's predicament elicits sympathy for his protagonist, in a fairly familiar manner for Keaton, as misread and beset, regarded with suspicion as unmanly and shiftless. When the narrative picks up over a year later, Keaton depicts a Union general, Thatcher (Jim Farley) making plans with his chief spy Captain Anderson (Glen Cavender), who wants to raid into Confederate territory, steal a train, and use it as a Trojan horse to wreak havoc along the line to make Thatcher's planned advance easier.

Unfortunately for Johnnie, the *General* proves in the right place and the right time for Anderson and his men to grab as the train pulls up in their planned rendezvous town of Big Shanty. Annabelle is aboard the train as she's heading to visit her father who's been wounded in battle, with Johnnie shooting her mournful looks as he tends to the engine. Annabelle goes back to the train after everyone's alighted for dinner to dig through her valise for her purse in the baggage compartment, just as Anderson and his men congregate by the train and move suddenly to capture it. Anderson takes Annabelle captive and ties her up whilst the train tears out of the station. Johnnie, seeing only his train being taken, give chase on foot, pursuing along the narrowing course of the railway line into the distance as everyone else gives up.



The following chase is an extended set-piece where both the orchestration of the great, unwieldy train sections and Keaton's willingness to constantly put his body on the line, his ability to depict struggle and imagination purely by body language, are equally important. Small wonder Keaton was considered quite the heartthrob by female fans. First Johnnie clammers aboard a handcart and manages to get it moving by utilising his whole body weight upon the crank. He's given a chance to catch up as Anderson keeps stopping the *General* so his team can rip up the tracks. When Johnnie hits the gap he's thrown off the cart as it runs off the tracks, throwing Johnnie off, the luckless engineer landing on his backside whilst the cart tumbles down the slope into a river. Undaunted, Johnnie spies a man who's just hitched up his early bicycle at his front gate: in a perfect blend of Keaton's athletic prowess and his skill in framing it, he dashes into the shot, springs upon the seat, and takes off in renewed pursuit without missing a beat. He follows it up with a hilarious travelling shot of him trying to ride the wooden-wheeled bike along a bumpy path only to tumble over again. When he manages to reach the next stop on the line, Kingston, Johnnie finally returns to his native realm as he alerts the soldiers on a pulled-up troop train to the theft, explaining he thinks deserters took it, and leaps to the controls of the engine named *Texas*, only for him to accidentally leave behind the soldiers as the engine hasn't been connected to their carriage.



*The General* is reminiscent of Keaton's earlier *The Navigator* (1924) in revolving around his character's battle with a large and intractable piece of machinery – there it was a ship, and Keaton was playing a rich kid learning independence. *The General* by contrast offers up Johnnie as an ordinary man who knows how to do one thing exceedingly well: run a train. He approaches everything else with the same quicksilver inspiration fuelled by necessity, proving himself remarkable if also often ridiculous throughout, which could be Keaton's ultimate commentary on being human altogether. That Johnnie doesn't even know that both of his "loves" have been snatched by the raiders gives antiheroic piquancy to his adventures. When they're finally reunited and Annabelle expresses her thanks for him coming to rescue her, he looks like he's tried to swallow a doorstep for a moment before simply going along with it. Johnnie ultimately finds himself gaining real heroic status by the film's end, but he's also just as often lucky or unlucky. Keaton's single most famous and endlessly recreated joke, the collapsing wall in *Steamboat Bill, Jr* that falls upon the oblivious hero with his life only saved by his body lining up with a window, contained a similar sense of both the haphazardness of life and the vulnerability of people as well as the mysterious grace that pulls them through danger.



Today, it feels as if *The General* has had its deepest impact less on comedy than on modern action cinema, with its depiction of chaotic events caused by a similarly blend of heedless motive and snowballing cause and effect. The film's imprint can be registered in sequences as disparate as the climax of *Stagecoach* (1939), the desert truck chase in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), and a vertical edition in *Die Hard* (1988), as well as overt tributes like the climax of *The Lone Ranger* (2016). One of the few followers who genuinely grasped onto what Keaton had demonstrated with the film has been Jackie Chan, who set about emulating him in both his action and comedy staging and dissolving any conceptual distance between the two, as well as playing with Keaton's mechanistic sensibility. Of course Keaton didn't invent a connection between slapstick comedy and action: it was lurking since the very beginning of cinema, Chaplin had done funny-thrilling cliffhanger sequences like the finale of *The Gold Rush* (1923), and Lloyd made a career out of them. But the way the action plays out in *The General*, hinging on details like the rate the trains burn wood at and use up water in their boilers, and the limitations of the trains as machines that can only move where track lets them, tries to take a certain realism as a starting point rather than a burden or nicety for Keaton in creating his epic slapstick.



Decades later, in an interview for the book *The Parade's Gone By*, Keaton would recall the problems presented for comic filmmakers by moving from short two and three-reel films into features, because previously none of them had ever done anything as undignified as write a script. Longer films demanded strong storylines rather than haphazard farce, unless they could fit in a dream or fantasy sequence. Writing films for them became chiefly a matter of coming up with a good start and a good ending and everything in between would take care of itself. The situation presented in *The General* could almost be a commentary on this creative process, setting up the motivating idea and finding every way possible of impeding the rush to the end. With *Sherlock Jr* Keaton had taken the dream option to dig into the very workings of cinema and correlating them with the malleability of the psyche, *The General* instead surrenders most of the way to the working of the world, the machine, the narrative. One possible reason the film didn't quite land with its contemporary audience might well lie in the fastidiousness of Keaton's method in this regard: the situation isn't just a pretext but a structure, the necessary linearity of the train chase Keaton's vehicle for exploring cinema narrative itself as a chain of events.



When Johnnie loads a cannon he's hauling in his attempts to halt the other train, only for the cannon to start losing inclination: after haplessly detaching the cannon car, Johnnie flees right to the very cowcatcher on the train's front in his fear of the cannon going off: right at the last moment the curving of the track abruptly opens a clear field of fire for the weapon, which goes off and blasts a crater narrowly missing the *General* and the raiders. In another ingenious bit, Johnnie, trying to clear the tracks of sleepers the raiders drop behind them to impede their pursuer, balances uneasily on the cowcatcher and fumbles to grab up one sleeper and uses it to flip another out of the way. This stunt, exceptionally dangerous and utterly beguiling, is also in the flow of Johnnie-as-dynamic-problem-solver a rough draft for video gaming. In terms of staging and technique this sort of thing wasn't so different to the meticulously orchestrated automobile and trolley car chases Mack Sennett had done with the Keystone Kops, but Keaton's more meticulous, slow-burn method approach resists their frenetic tenor.



The paradox in this is it helps Keaton achieve a more authentically absurdist tone. Johnnie keeps blinking in bewilderment when an unhitched carriage from the train ahead seems to appear and then vanish, and twists in seemingly settled forms and functions, like the missing rails that throw him from the handcart: everything works until it doesn't, and the tunnel-visioned Johnnie is as helpless despite his proactive efforts in the face of such undermining as the audience. Keaton illustrates how and why Johnnie keeps getting this impression, but the man himself is left with the woozy impression of reality suddenly rewriting itself. So whilst *The General* doesn't entirely lack the flecks of surrealism in his earlier films as inanimate objects do strange and unexpected things and quirks of chance and fate unspool with teasing wit, Keaton nonetheless insists on a precise sense of how his jokes connect with the necessarily rolling logic of the situation. Keaton was making a movie for a cinema age that was evolving, becoming more technically and aesthetically engaged with its own nature: whilst radically different in form from what the Soviet realists were doing, Keaton nonetheless explores his awareness of cinema as a system of images.



At the same time *The General* also nudges the melodramatic style of early silent film in a manner that suggests Keaton was already feeling and playing upon a certain tide of nostalgia. When Anderson ties up Annabelle, the film recalls the straightforward suspense scenarios of the days of Pearl White, whilst the storyline as a whole nods back to Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1906). Keaton makes sport of the melodrama elements, of course. Once Anderson is knocked out during Johnnie's recapture of the *General*, he starts reviving at one point, potentially threatening a fight or hostage-taking, only for Anderson to be accidentally knocked out again, and he doesn't stir again until the very end. Nostalgia is indeed a powerful impulse throughout *The General* with its blend of dreaminess and immediacy in looking back to days of yore. The storyline pastiches the romantic mythology of the era with Annabelle the curly-tressed maiden of good white Southern stock who must be rescued, but Keaton teases it in ways D.W. Griffith never would have. Annabelle's name pays heed to Edgar Allan Poe's lost heroine. Keaton had poured over photos by Matthew Brady and Alexander Gardner to absorb the period look, and the influence is plain, both in the crisp approximation of the old daguerreotype image and the sensitivity to light and shade in the moments of scenic beauty he allows, glimpses of flood-flooded forests and glistening hills of grass.





Indeed it's easy to see Keaton lampooning Griffith, making sport of one of Griffith's famous "iris" shots when Johnnie spots the captive Annabelle through a hole in a tablecloth, and in the finale when Johnnie advances with a flag like Ben Cameron in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) only to accidentally take up a heroic pose on what he thinks is a rock but proves to be an officer bent double. Keaton's take on Johnnie's loyalty is hardly antiheroic – actually Johnnie is one of the great screen heroes, almost casual in his acts of astounding bravery once properly motivated. But he does incidentally deflate any sense of grand and noble motives beyond wanting badly to be perceived as worthy by Annabelle and to do a good turn for people he knows and bewildered by everything outside that frame of reference: Johnnie is utterly ordinary in this regard. In the motif of Johnnie being ostracised for not becoming a soldier Keaton seems to have been more thinking of the schisms over such things that gripped all sides during the decade-past Great War, offering implicit sympathy for anyone who couldn't serve as they might have liked. In the climax Johnnie reverts to a childlike state as he playacts a leader of importance whilst a proper Confederate General (Frederick Vroom) rides a white horse behind him, men gesticulating in imperious manner, the real manipulator of life and death on a mass scale and his impish, accidentally satirical mirror.



Johnnie's distraction is at a zenith when he keeps laboriously chopping wood for fuel whilst the *General* and the *Texas* barrel past the Confederate and Union armies, breaking the handle on his axe and leaving him still trying to chop with the head. If as Talleyrand said treason is a matter of dates Keaton offers it more as a matter of place: Anderson hurriedly changes out of the Confederate uniform he's donned as they enter the Union zone, and later Johnnie has to reverse the procedure, casting aside the Union uniform he puts on to rescue Annabelle. The Union raiders think the pursuing train is packed with avengers on their trail, and so throw everything they have in Johnnie's path to hinder him. They only, finally realise their pursuer is a single man when they halt the *General* atop a trestle bridge and rain down firewood on him. Johnnie stops the *Texas* and runs off into the woods as a driving rain starts. Soon he happens upon a farmhouse which the Union soldiers are using as a headquarters Johnnie sneaks into the house and finished up hiding under a dining table the Union men gather around to discuss the next part of their campaign, alerting Johnnie to the army's planned sneak advance across a railway bridge at Rock River. Keaton's delight in discursive twists in the scenes he sets up extends here as the scene seems set up for Johnnie to be exposed and chased out, but even getting burnt by a cigar and almost sneezing, not to mention beholding the captive Annabelle, don't manage to overwhelm his composure.



Johnnie's rescue of Annabelle is a more subtle example of Keaton's gift for deadpan staging – a club clutched by a disembodied hand reaching out of a doorway knocking out a sentry; Johnnie dresses in his uniform and then wallops another guard with his rifle butt with the same cool sufficiency. A toppled vase during Johnnie's plucking Annabelle from her room doesn't attract attention, but when she's caught in a bear trap Johnnie extracts her only to get himself caught three times. The pair sleep out the dark and stormy night and find the next day what seemed like the middle of nowhere is adjacent a Union army camp. Johnnie and Annabelle prove an able team as Johnnie proposes to sneak Annabelle onto the train by stuffing her in a sack that was filled with boots and getting close enough so that she can pull a pun detaching the engine from the train being formed behind it, before Johnnie stows her in a boxcar. Johnnie then springs into the cockpit, knocks out Anderson as he oversees the operation and pushes out a couple of other men, before gunning the engine and tearing out of the camp. Union soldiers immediately give chase in the *Texas*. This time the reverse chase is faster, more urgent affair, as Johnnie tries for most part to maintain his lead on the chasers, but faces a lack of fuel.



The wry spectacle of Johnnie and Annabelle working to keep their escape going in their different ways helps elucidate another dimension to the film, as Keaton's musing on coupling as the natural and unnatural consequence of love. In this regard Keaton might have been taking a little inspiration from Arbuckle, whose comedies often revolved around trying to settle into domestication only to be faced with mounting chaos. Keaton had built his film persona around the disparity between his own wiry, hangdog appearance and his physical dynamism, and the constant motif being underestimated. This motif is linked here to the way Johnnie proves simply doing his job is heroic and worthy of mythic valorisation, where it's initially read as a moral failure by those who require more exalted proofs, insufficient to win Annabelle's hand. Their intuitive partnering whilst on the run sees Annabelle as inspired in helping foil their pursuers: at one point she ties a rope between trees on the trackside, a device Johnnie doesn't think will work, but it proves to slow and stop the chasers: the couple are already married in essence as a working partnership. At one point Johnnie gets left behind when he jumps from the train to work a switch, so he runs down the slope to where the railway doubles back, only for Annabelle to manage to throw the train into reverse, returning the way it's come and forcing Johnnie to dash back up the slope again.



But Annabelle also tries to domesticate Johnnie's work space, cleaning up the cockpit with a broom and carefully selecting pieces of wood worthy of fuelling his engine. Johnnie sarcastically hands her a twig to add to the fire which she happily does, whereupon he starts throttling her, before suddenly kissing her, and turning with equal suddenness back to his tasks. It's both a funny and faintly shocking moment, then and now, capturing something violently bipolar about love, both delighted and infuriated by the cost of surrendering personal realm to another. Finally Johnnie and Annabelle reach the Rock River bridge and set it on fire. When the Union commanders try to send the *Texas* through after it as they launch their assault, the bridge collapses as the *Texas* passes over, dumping it into the river below. This amazing shot – the one that cost all that money – is the climax not just of the railroad action but of Keaton's entire, life-sized aesthetic, and one that counteracts the absurdist pull of his jokes. Here, finally, the laws of gravity and probability assert their usual, implacable prerogative – on Johnnie's enemies.



Johnnie and Annabelle deliver warning to the Confederates about the attack, and the battle sees the Confederates managing to beat back the Union soldiers. Johnnie is an amusing spectacle acting like a commander whilst waving a captured sword, the blade constantly flying out of the hilt, but he becomes more engaged as the General sends him down to instruct an artillery battery as the Union soldiers are creeping their way across the river using boulders as cover. As Johnnie tries to explain himself to the gunners, a Union sniper keeps shooting them down one by one, Johnnie increasingly bewildered by why soldiers keep dropping dead as he speaks to them. This is probably as dark a piece of humour as Keaton ever offered, punctuated when he draws his sword and the blade flies off again, only to land right in the sniper's back. As he tries to fire off the cannon himself, Johnnie misfires the cannon, but his wild shot knocks out a weir holding back river water that crashes down upon the Union soldiers and drives them back, helping end the battle. This finale offers a key change from the structure of the rest of the film, and Keaton was criticised at the time for mixing in straight warfare with comedy. It nonetheless a brilliantly filmed sequence that contains some of Keaton's most gorgeously crafted shots and elegantly sarcastic humour.



Johnnie finally becomes not just a hero but a soldier, the trade he happily declares his profession as he's enlisted into the army. This comes after the Confederate General commands him to take off Anderson's false uniform in what seems to be a moment of punishment and reckoning, only for the General to then procure him a Lieutenant's uniform, donning it before the delighted gaze of Annabelle and her wounded father. The film's very last joke revisits the sitting-on-the-piston gag but now with Johnnie settling down to kiss Annabelle, adjusting their position so he can rapidly salute the enlisted men passing by. If the first version of this moment contains an extremely coded masturbation joke, this one is about getting properly down to business. It's also poking fun at the natural next stage of Johnnie's journey, negotiating the perversities of a different kind of machine: the military. *The General* was first screened on the last day of 1926 in Tokyo of all places, with the likes of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, Abel Gance's *Napoleon*, F.W. Murnau's *Sunrise*, Sergei Eisenstein's *October*, William A. Wellman's *Wings*, and a host of other films all released within the months on either side, a moment that marked the high-water mark of silent cinema's ambition and genius. But the form's apotheosis was also its sunset, and the transfer to sound would claim many victims, including Keaton. Either way, *The General* is one of the great films, silent or talking. It's also something better than great: it's actually, genuinely funny.

## **The Black Scorpion (1957)**



*The Black Scorpion* has a generally poor reputation even amongst aficionados of 1950s monster movie, and yet I have a fondness for it. Sporting special effects work by legendary *King Kong* (1933) stop-motion animation pioneer Willis O'Brien, *The Black Scorpion* also has a rarefied quality in being a Hollywood film set in Mexico, giving a different slant to the familiar motifs of embodied destructive forces in the monster movie subgenre. Commencing with a volcanic eruption that stirs chaos and destruction somewhere in the Mexican interior (utilising stock footage of the eruption of Paracutin), the story quickly zeroes in on two geologists, Gringo Dr Hank Scott (Richard Dennings) and Mexican colleague Dr Arturo Ramos (Carlos Rivas). The geologists are trying to find their way towards the town of San Lorenzo, which neighbours the exploding mountain, traversing a landscape violently reshaped by the eruption's force. Amidst the smoking and desolate landscape they find a homestead seemingly damaged and abandoned, with a badly damaged police car parked nearby, policeman mysteriously missing. Searching the area, they soon find a baby left inside the house, as well as the cop, who seemingly died from fright after shooting off all his bullets.





When they arrive in San Lorenzo, the two scientists find themselves at a loss to explicate their discoveries to the local priest Father Delgado (Pedro Galván) and the soldiers sent to keep order in the battered town, who explain in turn that something has been assaulting and decimating local cattle herds, and the local folklore about a “demon bull” that haunts the locale seems as good as any other explanation. The two men meet with a local scientist, Dr Delacruz (Pascual García Peña), who discerns the policeman was killed by some kind of venom. As they try to get closer to the volcano, Scott and Ramos encounter Teresa Alvarez (Mara Corday), a rancher they give gallant aid to after she falls from her horse, and Scott also befriends local waif Juanito (Mario Navarro), who fixes on Scott as a father figure. Ramos discovers a hunk of obsidian with what he thinks is a long-dead scorpion trapped inside, but when the stone is cut open the scorpion proves to be quite animated. Soon enough some colossal, prehistoric relatives turn up with properly primeval appetites. One giant scorpion attacks and kills telephone repairmen before turning on Teresa’s cattle, whilst another stalks the streets of San Lorenzo, driving the panicking population out and finishing what the earthquakes started.



*The Black Scorpion* has a mix-and-match aspect in combining elements from other recent successes in the sci-fi monster craze, borrowing Denning from *Creature From The Black Lagoon* (1954), Corday from *Tarantula* (1955), and the insectoid trilling sound effects from *Them!* (1954) to accompany the monsters' appearances. The script was written David Duncan and Robert Brees, two accomplished screenwriters – Duncan knew his way around horror and sci-fi and would later pen *The Time Machine* (1960) and *Fantastic Voyage* (1966), whilst Brees had previously written high-class melodrama for Douglas Sirk and Robert Aldrich. Lustig, a Russian-born director, had been making movies in Hollywood since the early 1920s, and *The Black Scorpion*, which proved to be his second-last feature, has the same strongly atmospheric and well-made aspect as his *Wake of the Red Witch* (1949): both films sustain a sense, at least at the outset, of being thrust out into the protean edges of the world where dragons await. The nicely moody and suggestive opening as the two scientists uncover evidence of something truly strange and frightening at loose. The sound what they presume to be a rattlesnake proves to be the baby's rattle inside a damaged house, whilst the cop's body is found still upright and huddled into a corner hidden behind some debris: these touches weave a sense of dark threat for *The Black Scorpion* that its more prosaic and clumsy aspects don't entirely dispel.



Said elements include Dennings' grating, depthless lead performance. Where he was good playing the aggressive and egotistical foil in *Creature From The Black Lagoon*, he's much less interesting playing a straightforward hero. "I've found something a lot more interesting," he crows when he catches sight of Teresa riding the range, sounding like a bad travelogue voiceover trying to make Juarez sound sexy. Juanito might well test some patience too, one of those hero-worshipping ethnic kids who followed the Yankee heroes around in '50s movies, but he's oddly believable as a proto-Spielbergian youngster whose desperate desire to get in on the action leads him into danger: Spielberg notably offered homage with Ian Malcolm's daughter in *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* (1996). Corday comes off well on the other hand as a fairly unusual type of heroine in a movie of this kind, suggesting Brees was carrying over some fixations from his earlier project *Cattle Queen of Montana* (1954) as well as the heroine types out of the Women's Picture melodramas he'd worked on, offering her equally at ease commanding ranch hands, stepping out in Mexico City nightlife in furs and black silk, and contending with a monstrous arachnid. Scott is so unflinchingly enthusiastic about romancing Teresa that Ramos eventually warns him: "This is Mexico, and when a man shows as much attention to a girl as you have, all of a sudden he's in a cathedral and wondering how he got there."



With O'Brien's work limited certainly by the budget, a puppet is used for close-ups of the scorpions, and whilst it's not too bad a creation, it doesn't look much like O'Brien's models, and the film cuts to its drooling, beady-eyed, serrated-mawed visage far too often. Elsewhere Lustig utilises silhouetted scorpion figures stalking across the screen in unconvincing manner. Such lapses are a pity because O'Brien's stop-motion work, when showcased properly, helps elevate the monster scenes above the usual run of '50s sci-fi fare. The monsters are vivid and threatening, animated with a remarkable level of smoothness even O'Brien's protégé Ray Harryhausen wasn't approaching yet. O'Brien and Lustig generate minatory creepiness during the attack on the linesmen, the scorpion appearing from the shadows under a bridge in a dry arroyo and launching an assault on one man as he tries to flee in a truck: Teresa hears the sounds of terror over the telephone line as one of the repairmen was calling her to check the line repair when the attack began. Lionel Lindon's surprisingly lush photography is both strongly noirish in the monster menace scenes whilst also grasping for a sense of weathered splendour in the Mexican locales, like Teresa's ranch with its vaulted rooms and opulent paraphernalia, as if the film slipped sideways into one of Buñuel's Mexican fantasies.



Most '50s monster movies dealt implicitly with the threat of modernity, manifested through the atomic bomb, other weapons of war, or unfettered scientific tinkering, crashing down upon civilisation, threatening to disrupt it with the same forces that had given rise to the new security and stability of that civilisation. *The Black Scorpion* occupies different territory in this regard, because the giant scorpions are defined as primordial monsters that hatch out thanks to the volcanic eruption to assault the landscape of Mexico, a place the film sees as hovering in another socio-historical zone. Mexico City, with its grand public art murals laying rhetorical claim to the future, is at an evident remove from the classical way of life persisting out in the backcountry. There Teresa holds court in her grand, old-world hacienda, and the village with its church is churned to chaos by the twin disasters of the volcano and the emerging monsters. *The Black Scorpion* then holds its monsters up not as avatars for the dark side of modernity but as embodiments of ancient and pernicious forces, the vulnerability of communities before natural disasters and calamities, the primeval world red in tooth and claw. That the scorpions first attack policeman and the telephone repairmen trying to reconnect San Lorenzo with the outside world elucidates this idea.



Despite the generally forced tone of the acting there are some flashes of intelligence in the human drama, like the army commander who begs Scott and Ramos not to leave San Lorenzo in case they get in trouble and he has to waste men and time bailing them out, and a dash of wry if stereotyped humour as Delacruz readies test tubes containing reactive agents for experiments and a shot of tequila for recreation. The scientists, teaming up with reputed entomologist Dr Velasco (Carlos Múzquiz) and the Mexican army, soon deduce the scorpions are emerging from a colossal pit they discover near the volcano, the blasts having opened up the pit and the prehistoric monsters revived by the return of air. Scott and Ramos descend into the pit in a crane-fed lift and discover a nest of the huge scorpions, including one twice the size of the others coloured black, which maintains a brutal and murderous rivalry with the others, killing one in a fight over food. Meanwhile young Juanito, who snuck down hidden amongst oxygen cylinders in his boyish desire to help Scott, finds himself chased by a spider-like creature, whilst a huge, wriggling, worm-like creature provides a fight for one of the scorpions, and then a meal.



O'Brien's work in this scene is tremendous, and the worm and spider have long tantalised fans of his work with the possibility they might have been leftover props from the cut canyon scene from *King Kong*. The sequence ends with a nicely tense bit as one of the scorpions wrecks the lift so the two heroes and Juanito have to be lifted out of the abyss clinging onto the cable. The scientists eventually elect to have the army seal up the pit with explosives and trap the scorpions again, and for a time it seems this works, only for Scott and Ramos to be called by Velasco to Mexico City to be confronted with evidence the creatures might have escaped their tomb through a natural system of tunnels. This proves all too true in another excellently-done set-piece as the scorpions attack an express train heading to Mexico City, reminiscent of Kong's train attack including a point-of-view shot as the train races towards one of the monsters astride the tracks like something out of deep phobic nightmare.



The scorpions begin eagerly devouring all the passengers trying to flee the wreck, until the big black scorpion arrives and, in a frenzy, kills the rest of its rivals, picking them up and slamming them down on the ground to deliver the coup-de-grace to their one vulnerable spot under the jaw. This scene is something of a zenith of O'Brien's labours, even if the black-eyed, tough-shelled scorpions don't allow him the kind of witty sense of liveliness O'Brien invested in his dinosaurs and giant apes in earlier films. There's still a sense of relished technical challenge in bringing the scorpions to life and the sense of detail for things like the train's headlamp reflecting off the scorpion's body. Having the "granddaddy of them all" wipe out the other scorpions was probably a cost and labour-saving twist but it robs the end of the film of some zest as we're left with just the one big monster. The climax is familiar as the scientists quickly whip up an electrified harpoon to try and plant it in the scorpion's throat after luring it into a soccer stadium, although the excellent effects continue as the scorpion battles helicopters and tanks as the scientists try to line up their shot. Of course Scott lands the killing blow and heads off with Teresa towards the marital bed, having done their part to foster better US-Mexican relations and lay to rest the fiends of a third-world past.





## **Mikey and Nicky (1976)**



**Director / Screenwriter: Elaine May**

***In memoriam: Ned Beatty 1937-2021***

It's both excruciating and exalting to note that Elaine May was only the third woman to be a member of the Directors Guild of America, after Dorothy Arzner and Ida Lupino. Born Elaine Iva Berlin, May was the daughter of a travelling Yiddish theatre producer. When her father died when she was 11, her family moved to Los Angeles. May finished up dropping out of high school at 14, and later hitchhiked to attend the University of Chicago because it took students without high school diplomas, by which time she had already married her first husband, whose name she took. Quickly gaining a reputation for sparking arguments with teachers and students with outrageous and original statements, May found a simpatico mind in fellow student Mike Nichols. The two of them joined an off-campus theatrical group and began stirring attention, with May's childhood theatre experience giving her a head start in confidence and authority. After Nichols was asked to leave the group for having too much talent, he and May formed a partnership in a comedy act that was soon generally hailed as groundbreaking and quickly gathered popularity, but their working technique proved to impossible to sustain and they called it quits in 1961. Both started on a path to becoming filmmakers as Nichols concentrated on directing theatre and May started writing for stage and screen and acting in movies.



Whilst Nichols achieved success as a director with *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966) and *The Graduate* (1967), May had to wait until 1971's *A New Leaf* until she arrived as a moviemaker. Despite gaining some cult attention, May's debut effort wasn't a good experience, as her initial vision for the film was brutally edited by the studio. Obsessive filming practices, arduous and exacting editing process, and clashes with cast and studios became something of a hallmark of May's productions as well as their odd and spiky brilliance. Her second film, *The Heartbreak Kid* (1972), was written by Neil Simon and proved her only real hit. *Mikey and Nicky* had a long and troubled shoot despite being initially slated as a fairly modest, low-budget drama, with May gaining industry infamy for the amount of film shot on set in her quest to get the best out of her actors. She finished up hiding two reels of the movie to keep the studio from sacking her and re-cutting the film again, but she finally lost a court case over control of the footage and the studio patched together a version to release that ultimately flopped. This, on top of all the squabbling, meant May didn't get to make another movie until Warren Beatty, believing she still had unfulfilled potential as a filmmaker after she had written his *Heaven Can Wait* (1978) and parts of *Reds* (1981), hired her to make 1987's *Ishtar*. But that experience proved another debacle as *Ishtar* became synonymous with egotistical on-set clashes and messy production resulting in a violently uneven if excessively criticized film. Her directing career finished, May nonetheless had success writing scripts for Nichols' *The Birdcage* (1996) and *Primary Colors* (1997).



*Mikey and Nicky* is certainly a highpoint and quintessential example of a celebrated strain of 1970s American cinema with emphasis on a raw, urban, unruly texture, as well as Hollywood's uneasy and ultimately brief turn to auteurist cinema at the time, willing to give much rope to directors on the off-chance they might come back with a hit. Because May, who originally wanted Charles Grodin to play Nicky, finished up hiring John Cassavetes and Peter Falk to play the title characters, *Mikey and Nicky* is often seen as an extension-cum-assimilation of Cassavetes' heavily improvised, off-kilter brand of independent filmmaking and narratives often revolving around stressed-out menopausal males. But whilst like Martin Scorsese's early films and others on the '70s film scene May was assimilating Cassavetes' influence, *Mikey and Nicky* is subtly distinct from Cassavetes' films in form and style. It represents amongst other things May's carboic portrait of relationships between characters whose surface amity contains aspects of parasitism and destructive intent, sometimes mutual. To a certain extent May's second two films reflect a meditation on her own artistic method over and above their immediate subjects, fumbling with deliberately errant process towards synthesis and insight in a manner reminiscent of the way she and Nichols made comedy: the shambolic texture, actually, carefully achieved, is the entire point.



If the dopey songwriters of *Ishtar* presented a tellingly non-talented meditation on the concept of creative partnership, *Mikey and Nicky* is quietly vicious as well as wryly melancholic in portraying the hallowed, in pop culture terms, pair of pals from the old neighbourhood who know each-other inside out, resentments and failures of support turning gangrenous. *Mikey and Nicky* begins with Nicky (Cassavetes) locked in a hotel room in downtown Philadelphia, unshaven, filthy, stewing in a zone of fetid fear and paranoia. Having called his friend Mikey (Falk) and begged him to come but arranging a rendezvous down in the street, he sees Mikey down below wandering around in confusion, and gets his attention by tossing down a towel wrapped around an empty bottle. Mikey ascends to his room and quickly gets annoyed and frustrated as Nicky insists on grilling him timorously through the locked door. Once he finally does gain entrance, Mikey learns that Nicky expects he's a target to be killed by mob assassins, for reasons hinted at throughout: Mikey and Nicky both work for gangster Dave Reznick (Sanford Meisner). Nicky and another employee, Ed Lipsky, who were in charge of the syndicate's bank, started pilfering funds. Now Lipsky's turned up dead, and Nicky expects to follow him soon. Mikey's best advice to Nicky is to get out of town while he has the chance. What Nicky doesn't know is that Mikey is trying to lead Reznick's hired killer Kinney (Ned Beatty) to him.



May's perverse and sandpappy sense of humour manifests in the opening scene of Mikey's attempts to follow the signs literally dropping from the sky that lead him to Nicky, before attempting to mollify the pathetic man within with gentle, increasingly irked entreaties through the hotel room door. "I don't want you to see me like this!" Nicky insists. "Will you stop being a horse's ass?" Nicky retorts: "How'm I gonna see you I haven't seen you before?" Mikey tries breaking the door down and fails, but Nicky finally lets him in. Nicky is at his most desperately needy, embraced by Mikey and sobbing, and Mikey is soon making like a parent trying to feed an errant baby in trying to give Nicky a pill for his stomach ulcer, a sign of just how well the two men know each-other in all their physical and mental sore points. The latent ferocity and edginess within Mikey contrasts Nicky's dishevelled paranoia, as Mikey quickly swerves from softly patient appeals to sudden ruptures, first when trying to access Nicky's room and later when he goes to get coffee for him, an expedition that takes much reassurance and negotiation to undertake. Watched by the frantic Nicky from on high, Mikey enters a diner where the counter man (Peter Scoppa, who was also the assistant director) refuses his request of two coffees with separate milk and cream because that's not how their orders work: Mikey tries playing along but suddenly leaps over the counter and manhandles the waiter until he surrenders the cream.



Part of the reason for the film's long and expensive filming was May's delight in Cassavetes and Falk's well-oiled and expert improvisatory energy and underlying friendship. But May wasn't being merely indulgent, as the film evolves less as a portrait of a couple of mob-connected schmucks than an investigation of what friendship, particularly the male variety, actually means. May covers similar ground in a way to what Scorsese tackled in *Mean Streets* (1973), in the deep affection and mutual frustration of Harvey Keitel and Robert De Niro's characters, but more mature, more deeply ingrained and spoiled. The official topic is the complexity and sometimes downright strangeness of male friendship, whilst at the same time, May's fascination with people locked together in a blend of expedience and needfulness is a connecting thread in the three films she wrote as well as directed, particularly the marriage in *A New Leaf* where one of the partners is intent on murdering the oblivious other, but here gets its most complete examination. As Mikey and Nicky leave the hotel room once Nicky shaves and regains a modicum of his former savoir faire, they wander around town (May had to shift the shoot from Philadelphia to Los Angeles mid-film because of the budget overrun) and winnow through their lives and keep getting into randomly combative encounters. Nicky constantly seems to sense, however inchoately, the trap Mikey is leading him into, whilst Mikey often seems barely aware of his role in this lurking danger, even at one point deciding to leave town with Nicky to make sure he's okay, even though he also reports back to Reznick on the phone, who then passes along the mission details to Kinney.



*Mikey and Nicky* was a highly personal project for May. She reportedly drew on memories of members of her family connected with the mob, and had been kicking around variations on the material since the 1950s, perhaps with an eye initially to realising it is a theatrical project. The relationship of the two men has a more than faint echo of a classical kind of comedy duo, not perhaps May and Nichols themselves, but with distinct conceptual roots in the same kind of theatrical diptych. A schlemiel Vladimir and Estragon with all the shaggy, disparate energy that can well ironically from mental and moral exhaustion preserved. Once freed from the cage of his room and also set up on the open range that are the city streets, Nicky keeps wanting to go see a movie at his favourite theatre: a true movie lover will defy death to get their fix. This proves a curveball for Mikey's efforts to rendezvous with Kinney, as he initially manages to get Nicky to settle down with him in a seedy bar to drink beer and milk: Kinney however gets lost when trying to find the bar, having to ask directions, and gets there too late. Mikey this time uses his oblivious wife Annie (Rose Arric) as interlocutor with Kinney by leaving word with her about the movie theatre they're heading to. But as they ride the bus to the theatre Nicky suddenly decides he wants to visit his mother's grave as they pass by the cemetery where she's buried, and the two manage to get off after a fight with the driver (M. Emmett Walsh).





Nicky's unique capacity to keep pushing the envelope mixed with an edge of compelling charm, contrasts Mikey's initially more disarming but also blindsiding blend of the gentle and the eruptive. When the two men go into a bar filled mostly with black patrons, Nicky get into an altercation with a man (Eugene Hobgood) after paying attention to a woman who proves to be his wife (Marilyn Randall). Rather than act apologetic or otherwise back down, Nicky responds with racist provocations, both infuriating but also unbalancing the other men, seeming just feckless enough to make them unsure as to what secret reserves of power or mere masochism he has. When another patron (Reuben Greene) tries to intervene and prevent a fight, he squares off against Nicky and comments, "We might be black, but we ain't stupid," to which Nicky retorts, "Then how come you're black?" Later he insists on smoking on the bus and draws Mikey into helping him wrestle with the driver when he won't let them get off the bus by the front exit. It's a wonder he lives as long as he does. Nicky's displays of crazy-brave truculence and his ever-ticking metre of macho investment in power relationships are given a rare edge by his fatalistic paranoia and efforts to prove he still has some remnant potency in the world with his refusal to be intimidated, but are also seemingly distinct aspects of his character, only more circumspectly worked.



Mikey and Nicky roam through an insomniac world of intractable service workers, hostile gun-wielding storekeepers, edgy drinkers, exasperated hit men, sanguine but increasingly annoyed gang bosses, frayed and exhausted wives and mistresses, and all the other flotsam of the great American city at night. Their own messy and random shows of will and wont, incarnating the spasmodic spirit of people adrift on such a night even if they are technically renegades from the daylight world, contrast the people who need rigid lines of demarcation to keep up defences between them and the general craziness at loose. Meanwhile Kinney, who has the demeanour of a travelling salesman and about the same level of passion for his job – at one points he grumbles that with all the expenses he’s occurring the pay for the hit will hardly be worth it – is led on a merry dance through the same nocturnal world looking entirely out of place and sighing his way wearily through trying to find them in the movie theatre and driving around in circles in a haphazard search pattern. It’s hard to believe Kinney is a killer, but as the finale finally demonstrates, he’s good enough at it. Once he and Mikey are thrust into each-other’s orbit they form a duet of mutual aggravation as Mikey tries to guide him to where he last saw Nicky, before they’re forced to go to Reznick and argue over whose fault it is they couldn’t find him.



“You won’t like ‘em,” ran Paramount’s resolutely uncommercial tagline for the film’s poster, and it is perhaps truth in advertising, as Mikey and Nicky are not particularly lovable or admirable or interesting guys, even as May and the actors makes them so palpable it’s impossible not to identify with them on some level. Nicky’s clammy, heart-galloping awareness of danger loans him a veneer of relevance as a representative of mundanity on the edge, all the voracity, conceit, pathos, and sheer balls of a natural-born shyster amplified and given glamour by proximity to death. Part of May’s fascination with the two, as avatars of the male of the species in general, seems to stem from a queasy amusement and desire to grasp at how they’re essentially a married couple, and have certainly sustained a more profound relationship with each-other than the women in their lives. One portion of Nicky’s seething lode of angst lies in his recent break-up with his wife Jan (Joyce Van Patten), who’s taken their baby to live with her mother after finally wearying of his general bullshit. Mikey by contrast plays at maintaining a stable suburban life with a wife who seems to barely know him but who insists he maintains a respectful and adult relationship with: “I don’t treat my wife the way you do,” he tells Nicky reproachfully, “If I’m gonna be late, or if I’m gonna be out all night, I call.” Mikey’s way with putting people on the spot with peculiar shows of honesty is both fascinatingly unguarded and also explains why he tends to put people on edge.



Despite their closeness however there are vast gaps in what Mikey and Nicky know of each-other. Their fumbling search through the darkened cemetery in search of the grave of Nicky's mother becomes a vaguely philosophical and metaphysical quandary couched in resolutely regular guy terms. Mikey bats off Nicky's questions about his feeling about the possibility of an afterlife, which Nicky confesses he's feeling keenly with his life under threat, before stating he doesn't believe in it: "That mishigas I leave to the Catholics." Mikey notes with a certain remnant resentment how much his late father liked Nicky because he always used to kid him. The two men are just about the only people they remember from their shared youth still alive, and Nicky himself confesses to wishing everyone from their youth was still alive, trying to articulate the feeling of being adrift in a world that has lost all its old markers of insularity and recognition, the gravity of identity that provided some illusion that the world at large had coherence: now there's only the night world. Eventually it's revealed Mikey gave Nicky his introduction to Reznick's crew only for Nicky to quickly take root and become a bigger and flashier success, whereas Mikey learns that he makes Reznick uncomfortable. Mikey's playing along with the attempt to set up the hit on Nicky is partly motivated through self-preservation instincts, knowing well his proximity to Nicky could make him suspect.



The apotheosis for Nicky's brinkmanship tendencies comes when he finally decides to visit his current girlfriend, Nellie (Carol Grace), a lonely woman willing to do just about anything for company. Mikey tries to strike up conversation with her as she explains her liking for keeping up to date by listening to the radio news, but it eventually forced to sit in her kitchen whilst Nicky seduces her and screws her on the living room floor. May shoots much of the scene in one, long, deadpan long shot from the corner of the room, encompassing both the carnal act in the foreground and with Mikey shrunken to his outpost in the adjoining kitchen at the back of the frame: May eventually moves to a shot of Mikey sitting and listening with a queasy look of wonder at how he's finished up at such a point in life. Nicky however needs to twist the knife in both his companions a little more by convincing Mikey all he needs to do is make a play and he can have sex with Nellie too, but when he tries Nellie bites him and Mikey slaps her back before storming out. Nicky chases him, but Mikey furiously repudiates any remaining friendship with Nicky in recognising this as just the latest in many acts of wilful humiliation and bastardry, and the two men begin a fumbling brawl in the street.



This entire sequence is remarkable in the fine-tuned inflicting of discomfort on both characters and audience, exposing the cruelly casual misogyny wound into Nicky's worldview and which Mikey buys into until it literally bites him back, along with the signals of perversity that make all three of act the way they do, their mixture of need and pain and old-fashioned lust that must be worked through in a series of false guises. The encounter also rips the scab off all the wounds suffered by Mikey and Nicky's supposedly umbilical relationship. Every slight, every piece of Nicky's macho showmanship and one-upmanship, becomes a seed of grievance, whilst Nicky insists on further provocation and retaliation by smashing Mikey's watch, which he loaned him earlier, Mikey's only keepsake of his father, sparking their tussle. May gives away the fact that Mikey is betraying Nicky and leading him to his death so early in the film it removes any hint of suspense or mystery, and instead demands the viewer ponder why Mikey is doing this. During their fight Mikey confirms his belief Nicky sabotaged him with Reznick by "Making me out to be a joke." Nicky defends himself by claiming he brought Mikey into the bank and also reminds him of the time he loaned him \$200 when he needed it. Mikey response is to take \$200 from his wallet, throw it on the ground, and tell Nicky, "You're a piece of nothing," the gesture that finally drives Nicky to attack him.



The foreboding, which never really feels like such until the axe drops, invests Mikey and Nicky's vignettes with implicit irony often intensified by Mikey's split mind, as when Mikey, offended by Nicky's suspicious questions, tells him, "I suggest you find somebody you can trust." Once they split apart, the film changes gear subtly, as Nicky's peregrinations become a series of encounters that underline how completely he's managed to destroy his life and alienate anyone who might help him, in a manner that both fulfils the character study aspect of the tale and also its echoes of classic poetic realist and film noir works where a man out of time and luck searches for safe harbour. Meanwhile Mikey, in a manner quietly similar to the way Walter Matthau's antihero of *A New Leaf* finds himself trapped within matrimony, is obliged to suffer his way through the rest of the night in the company first of Kinney, and then Annie, who reflect back only incomprehension and pettiness. Mikey finds Kinney in his car still waiting outside the movie theatre and drives with him around the streets where he left Nicky, at one point seeming to finally spot him and chasing him down, only to find it's the wrong guy. The pair's low-level bickering and frustration at not being able to find Nicky leads them to both go to Reznick and explain their failure.



May used two different cinematographers in the course of shooting the bulk of a third and then had Lucien Ballard film the finale. The film's ragged aural and visual language stemmed in part from the long shoot and the studio's ultimately dismissive approach to getting it finally finished (at various points in the release version you can see film equipment and crew members hiding in bushes, flaws May cleaned up in her director's cut), and the technical problems May had in making sense of the footage she had shot, often ending up with sound and vision forcibly patched together, particularly noticeable during the fight with the bus driver. But it also feels entirely appropriate for a portrayal of such flailing straits and exploring the fringes of big city life. May's vision of her characters' nocturnal odyssey pungent and authentic in its evocation of dive bars and dirty phone booths, rain-sodden streets and blearily bright shops backed up by the woozily intense and intimate camerawork, very often using hand-held camerawork. Beatty's Kinney is the most conspicuously lost figure in this world, sometimes threatening to dissolve into the haze of mist and neon. The role deftly exploits Beatty's excellence at playing superficially bland characters harbouring hidden strata of weirdness, sharpened to a wicked point when the man's true nature emerges in the climax. Safe harbours beckon but a gauntlet has to be run with so many: the succession of encounters with taciturn workers in boles of commercial life ends with Nicky entering a candy store where he seeks out ice cream and comic books as if he's reverting to childhood whilst the elderly owner packs a pistol and curtly tells his customer not to get the comic books sticky.





Mikey and Nicky's relationship to power, the dynamo of their city's underworld life however cutely it's hidden behind the dreary frontage of Reznick's perfectly ordinary house, is the force that keeps them in an orbit, each allowing them to put up Potemkin villages in their lives to maintain some basic semblance of purpose and prosperity, something Mikey seems better equipped at maintaining than Nicky. May's simultaneously sarcastic and realistic approach to depicting authority was to cast Meisner and William Hickey as Reznick and his lieutenant Sid Fine as both men were hugely influential and respected as acting teachers more than as performers at that point. Supposedly she originally wanted to cast a Paramount executive as one of the gangsters, only for the studio's owner to nix the idea, but the mischievous attempt confirms the film is in part a sardonic meditation on May's own relationship with money men. Meisner is particularly good as the stony, terse mob boss who is nonetheless as much prisoner of his employees' quirks and incompetency as they are of his power, worn to quiet exasperation by the comedy of errors reported to him throughout the night and then grunting uncomfortably as Mikey insists on apologising for Reznick not liking him before laughing and sending him home. Reznick proves why he's the man at the top of the totem pole at least by realising Nicky will probably turn up at Mikey's house at some point and he insists Kinney wait outside for him, obliging Mikey to explain patiently that his neighbourhood has its own patrol service that will swoop down on anyone loitering like that.



Nicky is at least canny enough to keep dashing into the shadows anytime a car passes by, in between attempts to take refuge first with Jan and then with Nellie. Jan is charged with hissing rage at him, at first barely interested in his protestations that he's being hunted: "They're gonna kill me." "Well, I'm not interested...people get angry when you steal their money." Nicky's desperately clingy attempts to wring some iota of affection from her earns her smouldering anger, telling him to instruct her how his girlfriends and Reznick treat him so she can copy them. Nicky's rejection is compounded as his infant daughter starts crying when he tries to play with her. There's a final show of something like compassion from Jan as she asks of Nicky before embracing him, "What do you want from me, to die for you?" Nicky's final scenes have grace-notes of self-awareness, as when he comments to Jan about his fight with Mikey, "I did too much to him." There's similarity in May's simultaneously acerbic and empathetic portrayal of Nicky's unmoored neediness to what Lupino offered the more officially sympathetic title character in *The Bigamist* (1953), viewing masculinity in its troubled, exposed, love-needing state. At the same time May and Jan and Nellie share a trait of sensing the limits of such empathy.



Nicky's return to Nellie's apartment is an even more telling seen as he busts her door chain and swaps slaps with her, before wearily settling on her bed and confessing he set up the scene earlier because he was angry she slept with two other guys he knows, only for Nellie to retort that he sent them to her, well aware of the games Nicky likes to play and was happy to go along with their subterranean logic, but finally rebelled when it became too obvious, too clumsy, too much about Nicky's ego rather than some kind of naughty conspiracy. Mikey meanwhile keeps a vigil looking out his living room windows, groaning as Kinney keeps circling the house and attracting the patrol's attention, whilst Annie insists on staying awake with him, leading to the pair to begin a fumbling conversation as the insecure Mikey asks his wife whether he repeats himself when he talks as Nicky accused him of, and when she says, "I never notice it," he commands, "From now on when I do something, notice it."



May evokes her own character in *A New Leaf* as Annie is defined as a woman blankly grateful for the semblance of suburban normality Mikey has given her even, half-singing “You walked into my life!” in her gratitude for being delivered from solitude and pining, even if the cost is living with someone she barely knows in the real sense, scarcely aware of what he seems to do for a living or the meaning of all the signs and portents accumulating through the night until the final gunshots. And yet she doesn’t know things that have cemented him and Nicky together in their shared reality. Mikey eventually mentions to Annie his younger brother Izzy who died of a fever when he was a teenager, one of the tales of the past mentioned briefly between Mikey and Nicky earlier. Mikey begins recounting the pathetic story relating to the smashed watch, which his father, who he describes as “a sour man,” gave to Izzy as he was dying, then reclaimed it after he passed and gave it to Mikey. The one totem of Mikey’s father he has had and lost was actually a kind of cursed object reminding him of the paternal love he was never granted, whereas Nicky and Izzy were able to illicit it.



Annie’s bewildered, empty reactions reveal a total incapacity to process her husband suddenly revealing the void in himself. May here seems to be clawing at some common, barely acknowledged sense of trauma connecting the bodies of American life, ensconced now in prosperity but with feet in the muck of a past that’s still raw in memory. This sets the scene for the devastating climax as Nicky arrives, demanding entry, with Mikey pretending to not be home and getting Annie to fend him off instead. When Nicky spots Kinney approaching in his car, his demands become more frantic and desperate, slamming the wood and crying out “Get me a doctor Mikey!” over and over. Mikey starts pushing furniture up against the door to keep him out, barricading himself against the looming chaos with the stuff of his bourgeois life. Finally Nicky’s cries are silenced as Kinney fills him bullets and drives off with a look of satisfaction. May fades out on Mikey’s haggard expression as he rasps a final request for Annie to go to bed. As May started regarded Nicky’s face in the first seconds of the film, so she ends it regarding Mikey’s look of glazed, haggard fatigue and dumbfounding, as if Mikey is not so much shocked and sad that he finally did such a thing to a friend as he is amazed he had the capacity to do it, that in the end self-preservation was the strongest and most authentic of instincts. Now Mikey is alone

in the most profound sense, the last keeper of profound memory, full of stories boring and irrelevant to anyone else. One of the great endings, for one of the great American films.

## **Around The World In Eighty Days (1956)**



Despite winning 1956's Best Picture Oscar, *Around The World In Eighty Days* doesn't get that much love these days. A brash, expensive exercise in showmanship from theatrical entrepreneur turned Hollywood conquistador Michael Todd, *Around The World In Eighty Days* represented the school of big-budget spectacle the Academy seesawed back to after the black-and-white earnestness of Elia Kazan's *On The Waterfront* (1954) and Delbert Mann's *Marty* (1955), and itself surprisingly beat out some serious rivals in the big movie stakes in George Stevens' *Giant* and Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*. Why? Perhaps because the film courted a sense of being something larger and bolder than an ordinary movie. It's part travelogue or visual exotica album, part portable comedy of manners, and perhaps most crucially, part self-reverential exercise in Hollywood gravitas, as Todd endeavoured to pack the film with a roster of stars to demonstrate his faith in the imperial might of Hollywood cinema, which is correlated within the film with the British Empire, as opposed to the upstarts of television. Todd sold his interest in the widescreen filming process dubbed Todd-AO to produce the film, which was still shot in that process. He hired the sturdy British director Michael Anderson, who had recently scored a hit with *The Dam Busters* (1955), to bash it all into shape, after firing initial director and co-screenwriter John Farrow a week in.



*Around The World In Eighty Days* is no auteurist relic unless you count the controlling Todd, although I'd willingly go to bat for Anderson as an underrated filmmaker who, much like his protagonists in the film, matched a very British intelligent poise to an industry scrapper's dexterity as he tackled just about every genre going, from moody thrillers like *Shake Hands With The Devil* and *The Wreck of the Mary Deare* (both 1959) to a sci-fi variation on the transformative quest saga *Logan's Run* (1976) as well, as the oddball *Jaws* rip-off *Orca* (1977). But this film feels rather like some carnivalesque gesture from the innermost spirit of Hollywood. The basis, Jules Verne's more gently humorous 1872 novel, was technically speculative fiction when it was published, but the thrill it caused inspired some to demonstrate the titular feat could be managed, including journalist Nellie Bly who did it in 72 days in 1889. Todd had produced a flop stage musical based on the novel with Orson Welles in 1946, but he kept faith in the material. Verne's habit of deploying heroes of various nationalities in his books as expressions of his sense of universality and admiration for enterprise came touched with sardonic meditation on a certain mystique of English gentlemanliness when he created Phileas Fogg. Fogg is an enigmatically moneyed layabout of London who accepts a bet from the fellows of his favoured haunt, the Reform Club, that he can travel around the world in the allotted time thanks to the latest developments in technology and infrastructure. Anderson takes the figure of Fogg with his obsessive exactitude and insufferable demands of the same from everyone and everything else and makes him automatically likeable by casting David Niven. Playing Passepartout, the recently hired manservant who finds himself whisked off on adventure, is Mexican comedian Mario 'Cantinflas' Moreno, whose dextrous physicality offsets Niven's incarnation of apparently serene stability.



Passepartout, a currently unemployed man of great dexterity, leaps at a chance to pit himself against Fogg's pitilessly unshakeable daily regimen after overhearing one former manservant (John Gielgud) recount his tale of woe. Meanwhile Fogg accepts the bet from fellow grandees of the Reform Club (a cabal including Trevor Howard, Finlay Currie, Basil Sydney, and Robert Morley) and embarks immediately after completing their whist game. Fogg strips his household safe of his fortune to fund the journey. But his sudden departure from England and his blurry personal history spark the interest of Scotland Yard Inspector Fix (Robert Newton) who begins following their trail, as someone has recently robbed the Bank of England, of which Morley's Gauthier Ralph is the governor. Fogg and Passepartout attempt to use a balloon to circumvent a blocked railway line in the Alps but it eventually deposits them in Spain, where Passepartout has to satisfy a challenge from a bullfight-loving sheikh (Gilbert Roland) to do a few rounds in the corrida before the sheikh will loan Fogg his fast steam ship to reach Italy. Whilst passing through India, where the supposedly completed train line stops somewhat short of its destination, they encounter a funeral procession being held for a rajah by a gang of Kali worshippers who intend to force the dead man's young, British-educated bride to be burned up in the verboten rite of sati: at Fogg's behest Passepartout snatches the princess away, and the lady, Aouda (Shirley MacLaine), becomes their charge for the rest of the trip. After surviving a fraught train journey through the American west, they face a final dash back to England.





The film kicks off with an introduction by Edward R. Murrow who presents clips from Georges Méliès' *A Trip to the Moon* (1902). Méliès' slapstick-tinted, self-referentially ballyhooed take on Vernian motifs is thus offered as the style guide for Todd and Anderson's approach, blending the ironically civilised with the rough-and-tumble, the punctilious with the absurdist. Todd's desire to make a supra-cinematic event still charges *Around The World In Eighty Days* with that special energy of event movie legend. Such a quality is most obvious in the constant flow of cameos, but also persists thanks to Victor Young's gorgeous score, Lionel Lindon's colourful photography, and Saul Bass's lengthy animated end title sequence. The latter seems to have birthed almost singlehanded the pop art cinema motifs of the 1960s and was certainly the template for the similar opening titles of *Catch Me If You Can* (2002). The film itself, perhaps inevitably, has nonetheless a narrative that wobbles on the fine line between picaresque and spotty, as it whisks its heroes from one setting to the next, not always with some ingenious hijinks to unfold. Long passages of the movie are devoted to simply watching travel footage filmed from trains, admiring elegant windjammers, seeing Jose Greco and his troupe of Flamenco dancers get down, and sitting out an overlong comic bullfight sequence, contributing to an occasional sense of three-ring shapelessness, although all of these aspects are in their way fascinating and entertaining.



But there's a genuine core of wit in the script, concocted by Farrow, James Poe, and legendary comedy writer S.J. Perelman, that amply explains why it also won an Oscar and which keeps things sustained. The general élan is powered by the tension between Fogg's unruffled savoir faire and the romantic promise of his venture: the spirit of his bet initially is the faith that modernity, rather than allowing interaction with the world, instead promises allowing one to remain within a bubble in all circumstances. But even as he cycles back to where he starts Fogg cannot go home again. The basic joke is most famously and hilariously visualised when Fogg and Passepartout balloon over the Alps and the servant scoops up a handful of snow from a mountain peak to fill the ice bucket for his master's evening bottle. Rather than try to offer any revisionist, psychologising, or modernising inflections to the adaptation, the film pushes Fogg as the embodiment of a mythical old-fashioned English gentleman, a sort of mobile embassy of imperturbable rectitude whose incredibly boring life and attendant values belies his readiness to help a damsel in distress or fight a duel of honour with a loudmouth. Eventually, almost incidentally, he finds himself a rebel against the ethic of polite boredom that birthed him, bringing the winds of shocking change with him into the stuffy halls of the Reform Club, a place where men recline and refuse to read used newspapers and don't necessarily consider everyone in the club nonetheless of the same class.



Meanwhile Cantinflas' Passepartout, who rolls into the film astride a colossal penny farthing, is presented as an omniscient man of resources, his performance providing a link with silent film comedy as promised by the opening Melies quotes. His invaluable capacity as lode-bearer is itself illustrated in another great joke when Passepartout, separated from his boss thanks to Fix's connivings, becomes an acrobat in a Japanese circus troupe only, when he spies Fogg and Aouda and dashes to them, leaving the human pyramid he was part of to hover in defiance of gravity for a moment before crashing to the ground. The silent movie link is made more direct when Buster Keaton turns up playing a beset train conductor in the film's Americana portion, and returned to often in the various burlesques of melodrama narratives, like Fogg and Passepartout's rescue of Aouda and the Western pastiche, and the situation of Passepartout being forced to fight the bull, a comic situation Keaton or Chaplin or Lloyd would have eagerly exploited but here just goes on forever, preceded thankfully by a great piece of foot and cape work as he dances a *paso doble* with a senorita. Cantinflas was never able to find another role in Hollywood so well suited to his talents, but he's perfect here.



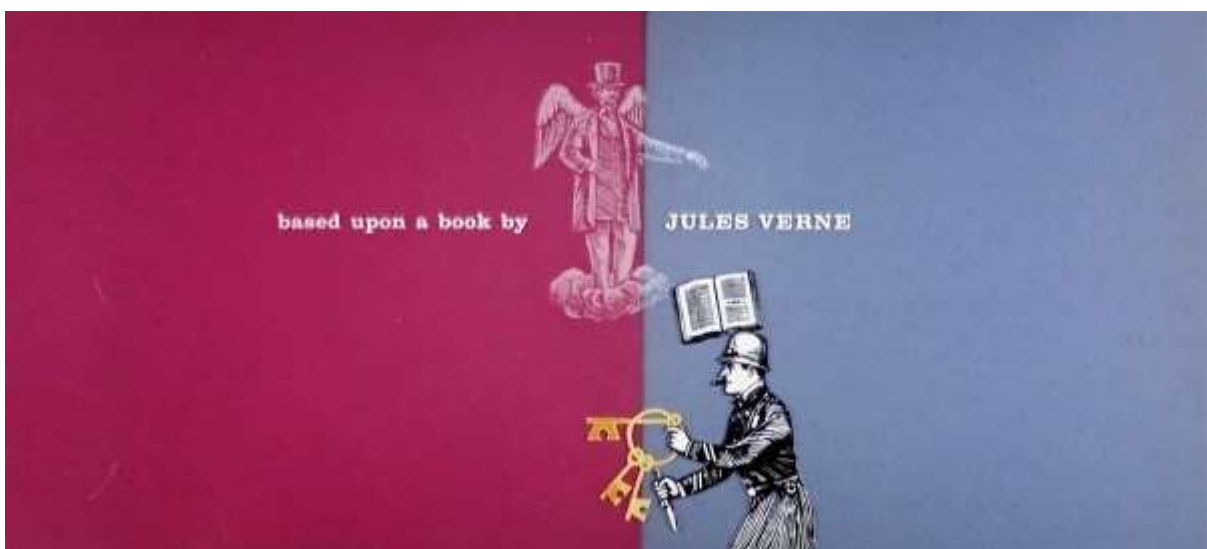
The cavalcade of faces in roles range from joke blink-and-miss shots like Frank Sinatra as a barroom piano player to fragmentary riffs on star personas, like Marlene Dietrich as a lusty moll and George Raft as her glowering fancy man, to some more sustained comic cameos, like John Mills as a hiccupping cabbie, John Carradine as a Yankee blowhard, and Cedric Hardwick as the old soljer thrown into Fogg's company during their Indian trek. The cameos gather their own kind of contiguity as they offer a world populated with familiar faces, adding to the plot's ironic portrait of a shrinking world as well as offering what could be called the human version of sightseeing in circumnavigation. Newton gives fun support in his final movie role as the no-class representative of the law whose surface motivations in chasing a man he thinks a nefarious mastermind mesh with his subtextual role as authority hounding the dreamer, punishing Fogg's insolent lack of care for the more stolid matters of life and willingness to risk what he has on a whim.



Meanwhile the story is livened up by brief spurts of genre pastiche that mimic a satirical tour through classic movie situations as old as Melies, touched with ridiculousness. Passepartout affects the rescue of Aouda not with derring-do but by pretending to be the suddenly reanimated and terrifying corpse of the rajah. The battle with attacking Sioux on the train through the American West leads to Passepartout being tied to a totem pole about to be burned, only for the Cavalry including the top-hatted Fogg to ride to the rescue. Emergent American democracy is a nocturnal bacchanal where floozies in multi-coloured tights make the case for voting. Nobody could ever take seriously the young MacLaine as an Indian princess but that too is part of the joke, the exotic foundling who proves to have total and utter admiration for Fogg's ethos, enthralled by his tales of well-judged card hands. Even so, by journey's end she offers something to jolt Fogg off his trajectory even as it seems to finally gain its heroic consummation, allowing Fogg to transcend even as he exemplifies. The travel itself is often visualised with the urgency of movement undercut by visions of poetic gracefulness and a slightly surreal edge, like the balloon floating over Paris and the quickly-rigged wind-driven land schooner the heroes use to cross the prairies after missing their train.



This dreaminess is inverted in the frenetic climax where Fogg buys the cargo ship he's taking across the Atlantic and has the crew chop up all the woodwork as fuel, leaving the vessel a denuded husk barely gaining the English coast. This sequence is faithful to the book but played with an edge of Marx Brothers-like embrace of destruction as fruitful virtue, given the final touch when Fogg tosses his hat and cane into the boiler as the final sacrifice of his urbane façade to his quest. Divestment brings riches, of course, as Fogg returns home to be arrested by the constantly affixed Fix and think he's lost the bet, but is rewarded by Aouda's love – apparently the twain shall meet after all – before the famous twist ending. The spindly gentleman enters the club to claim his due, but so does the Indian princess and the beaming manservant, causing paintings to fall and servants to faint. "It could mean the end of the British Empire," Fogg warns Aouda, but Ralph assures "This is the end," setting the sun on both Empire and movie. *Around The World In Eighty Days* is such a big tent it's bound to get baggy in places, but there is a real movie inside, and one that's still often hugely entertaining. The film's spirit lurks within just about every all-star and spectacle-driven blockbuster made since, although a specific remake in 2004 was a general calamity.



## **The Traveller (1974)**

*Mosāfer*



**Director / Screenwriter: Abbas Kiarostami**

Tehran-born Abbas Kiarostami first dabbled in painting as a teenager in the 1950s, won a competition that got him to his home town's School of Fine Arts, and supported himself during his studies by working as a traffic cop. Kiarostami soon vaulted into a successful career in advertising in the 1960s, gaining filmmaking experience shooting TV commercials and creating titles for movies. Iranian cinema grew rapidly in terms of films produced in the 1960s, and a New Wave movement began to gather steam, sparked by films like Davoud Mollapour's *Shohare Aho Khanoom* (1968), Masoud Kimiai's *Qeysar*, and Dariush Mehrjui's *The Cow* (both 1969), with a stringently realistic, neorealist-influenced approach and resolutely earthy and immediate subject matter. The Ayatollah Khomeini was reportedly so impressed by *The Cow* that it convinced him not to ban cinema in Iran after the Revolution of 1979. Inspired by the burgeoning New Wave, Kiarostami and some other new directors set up the Kanoon Institute for Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults, to make movies for and about young people, and it soon became a notable production outfit for a string of important films. Kiarostami made his first film for it with the 12-minute short *The Bread and Alley*, leaving behind

his schooling in the slickness of commercials for a more boldly original and experimental approach as he infuriated his crew by insisting on shooting a key scene without cuts, testing out his early conviction that he could generate greater intensity and conviction by reducing shots and edits to a minimum.



Kiarostami officially made his feature-length debut with 1973's *The Experience*, but he considered his true debut film to be his follow-up *The Traveller*. In the late 1980s Kiarostami rose to international prominence, cemented when he captured the 1997 Palme d'Or winner *Taste of Cherry*, and helped other Iranian directors like Jafar Panahi, Majid Majidi, and Mohsen Makhmalbaf present a vanguard reintroducing the country's culture to the world at large. Unlike many other Iranian filmmakers, Kiarostami weathered the Revolution, in part because his sense of parochial identity was a deep vein in his art, even liking to weave classical Persian poetry into his films, although his two late masterpieces released before his death in 2016, *Certified Copy* (2010) and *Like Someone In Love* (2012), were made outside the country. Kiarostami's mature cinema was equally acclaimed and derided for his peculiar approach to narrative cinema, often eliding seemingly crucial details and dialogue, utilising stringent long takes and a minimalist but beguilingly flexible visual style. *The Traveller*, an adaptation of a story by Hassan Rafi'i, has many hallmarks of a debut feature, emerging from the earnest zeitgeist of the era's emergent national and regional film movements, counting the likes of Vittorio De Sica's *Shoeshine* (1946) and *The Bicycle Thieves* (1948), François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* (1959), and Ken Loach's *Kes* (1969) as immediate ancestors, and looks forward to subsequent independent films like Eliza Hittman's *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* (2020), in making a truthful-feeling study of the theme of a young person on an odyssey negotiating a world filled with indifferent if not actively hostile adults.



Yet *The Traveller* is also something quite individual, a brief (73 minute) but vigorously expressive statement of intent from a director soon to become a major creative force. Wrought in the starkest production fashion with its lingering shots and cheap, black-and-white cinema vérité-style photography, it's also touched throughout with qualities of humour and flashes of dreamlike wistfulness. Kiarostami opens with images of boys playing street soccer in an alley in of some well-weathered corner of the town of Malayer. The passion of the boys for the game soon becomes quite apparent. There's not much else for them to do in this place where a lot of them drop out of school and get into trades, and the older boys are already holding down jobs like bicycle repairmen. Kiarostami's renegade antihero is Qassem Julayi (Hassan Darabi), a scallywag whose obsession with the sport, and the Persepolis football team in particular, is clearly linked with a sense of frustration and ambition he cannot otherwise articulate. The son of a carpenter, Lar, Qassem is becoming increasingly alienated from his family and schooling and pouring himself into his soccer obsession. After playing in the street match witnessed at the outset, he turns up to school with a bandage around his head and jaw claiming to have been delayed by a toothache and a trip to the dentist when he was actually playing, much to a teacher's deeply sceptical response: "I hope it rots."



Qassem spends what little money he has buying a magazine for a photo of one of his player heroes, managing to use his father's name to get a little credit to make up the shortfall, but he's later sprung reading the magazine in class, the teacher prowling around behind the class and launching his sneak attack, and it's clearly the most exciting thing that's happened all day. His English teacher seems just as distracted by the outside world as his students, like Qassem silently doing sums over costs during class, as Qassem tries to work out how much money he'll need to catch a bus to Tehran and see a big match live. Meanwhile at home Qassem faces constant pestering from his unceasingly critical and complaining mother (Pare Gol Atashjameh) who berates him for failing to study and pushes for him to quit school and get into a trade too. There's a note of deadpan humour as her complaints continue all during dinner whilst his father doesn't speak a word, seemingly having resigned himself both to her talk and Qassem's errant nature: "It's all in one ear and out the other," she decries his lack of attention before asking for money to attend a mourning ceremony. Meanwhile Qassem seems to have trouble doing his studies by the dim lamplight in his house.





Qassem irritably criticises his friends for playing badly during one of their street matches, but then admits that he didn't play so well either, because he was too distracted by thoughts of going to Tehran to catch a big league game. His mother comes to school soon after and whinges to the school principal (Mostafa Tari), repeatedly commenting that she doesn't know how to read and write whilst asking what should be done about Qassem's bad behaviour, which has taken a new turn as she believes, correctly, Qassem has stolen five tomans she had squirrelled away. "You come once a year to see if the little vagrant is coming to school?" the principal demands, and declares: "He is not a child, he is a monster." After a continuing dialogue of theatrically desperate appeal and contempt, as the principal sighs that he can't punish the students without risking parental complaints, the mother gives him permission to do what he sees fit, so the principal calls Qassem in and begins caning his hands, the increasingly distressed Qassem nonetheless insisting all the while that he did not steal the money. Kiarostami cuts, with a sense of both dark humour and pathos, to one of the neighbouring classrooms, where the teacher is instructing his class on the workings of the heart whilst trying to ignore the sounds of Qassem's punishment.



In keeping with the Kanoon project's avowed purpose, *The Traveller* is a film relevant to the kind of young person it's about, but lacking any kind of pandering or patronising glaze. It's a rigorously unsentimental, entirely convincing portrait of a boy, doing things many a boy has done regardless of cultural background, allowing the brat to be a brat whilst also understanding him. Whilst the film regards many of the adults around Qassem as vaguely absurd, there's still a touch of sympathy for his mother, who really does work constantly whilst she complains about his bad attitude. Many films about childhood and adolescence take on a similar shape to *The Traveller* in depicting a youth engaged in an obsessive quest to realise a personal dream, often taking tentative steps towards adulthood in the process. It's the sort of storyline that can generally be relied upon to touch a fond chord of memory in grown-ups, if also perhaps one of aggravation in parents. But where many stories of that type are nostalgic in cast, *The Traveller* is the very opposite, charged with anxious energy as it contemplates a budding antihero whose immediate future is bearing down upon him. Making Qassem a soccer fanatic roots him securely in his world, signalling his desire to join a crowd rather than follow some esoteric path, although his desires and impulses mark him as an outsider.



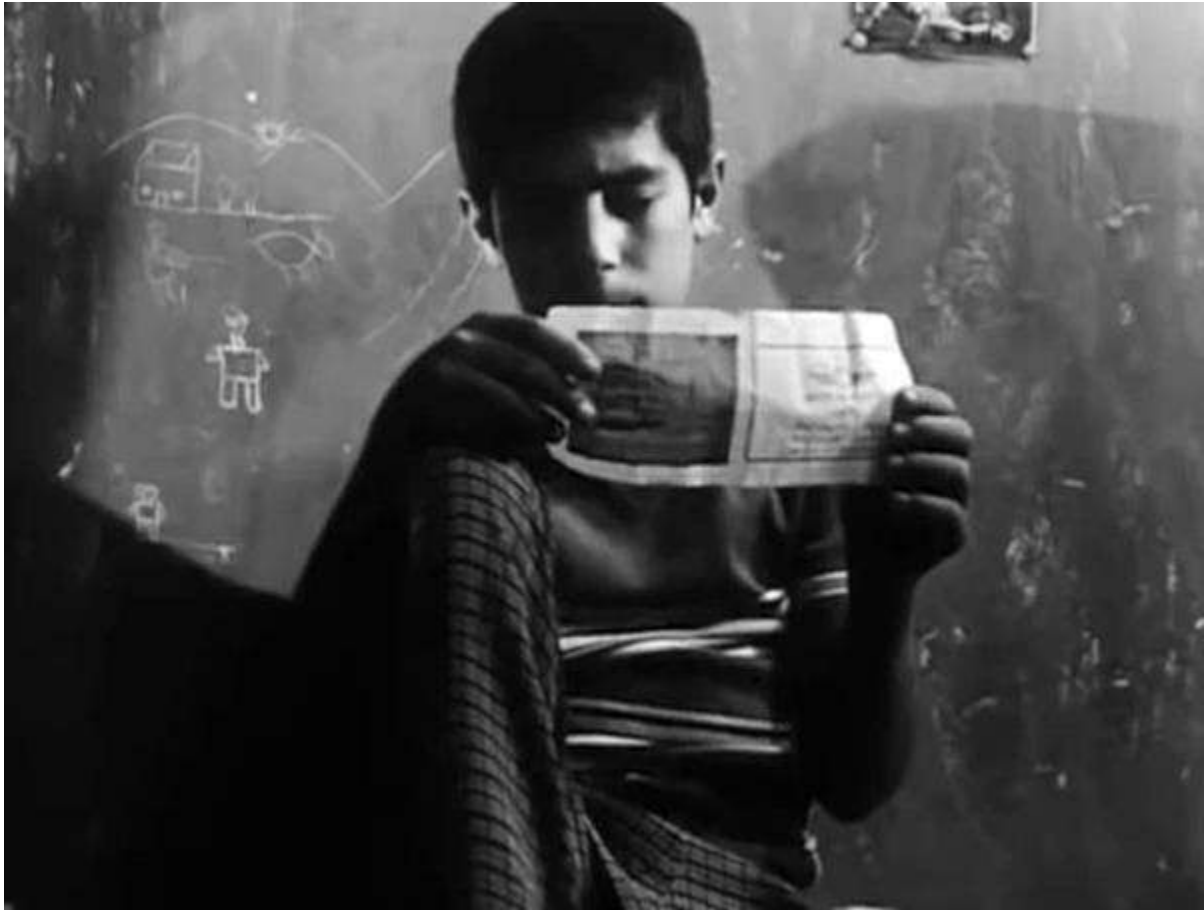
Early in the film one boy leads his fellow students at Qassem's school in a group prayer, a brief spasm of rhapsodic communal inclusion, although of course in their midst Qassem shows to Akbar the pilfered five toman note, his own private religion something rather distinct. The subtle joke about football being something like a secular religion in Iran seems not to have dated, as the theme of trying to attend a soccer match as an expression of both individual will and communal engagement would later be taken up, with obvious shifts in emphasis, by Panahi's *Offside* (2006). The attitude of institutional cynicism displayed by the teachers is one of Kiarostami's targets here, perceiving school in mid-1970s Iran as something like a prison for teachers and students alike, all sharing a penurious, demoralised distaste for their lot. Kiarostami is bitingly sceptical about the efficacy of the corporal punishment constantly turned on the kids, which he sees more as an outlet for adult frustration and aggression than as a cure for bad behaviour. "He will just hit us - forget about Math," Qassem comments when debating whether to go to class or get down to his more pressing business.



As unscrupulous as Qassem's behaviour becomes at points, the clarity and direction of his passion is singularly lacking in everyone else he knows. With his friend Akbar, Qassem begins looking for ways to add to the five purloined tomans, figuring he'll need about forty to make the journey. He tries to sell his fountain pen to a storekeeper who coolly rebuffs Qassem's forceful sales tactics ("You sell to kids but you won't buy them from them?" Akbar queries incredulously) and calmly explains whilst never breaking from his menial tasks how buying from a wholesaler works to the pushy lads, who then moves on to trying to offload a stamp collection. Akbar steals a broken camera from his grandfather's shed and the duo try to sell that: one potential buyer notices the camera is missing parts, but offers five tomans for it, but Qassem is angered by such a low offer. Instead, he comes up with a scheme: he and Akbar start pretending to take photos of their schoolmates, affecting a vaguely official mandate to charge them five rials apiece.



The imprint of neorealism is vital with *The Traveller*, in the way Kiarostami shoots locations in artful but unpretty fashion and elicits immediate performances from a mostly non-professional cast, and some anticipation of the way he would regularly blur the boundaries between fiction and documentary. Qassem and Akbar run through the streets and bazaars of Malayer, a place that seems perched somewhere between ancient and modern worlds, pungent and ghost-ridden at the same time. Historic town architecture is recorded for posterity by Kiarostami's camera along with oddities of the moment like the wall in a shop festooned with professionally modelled photos. But there are hints throughout of the unusual blend of impulses that would eventually define Kiarostami's cinema. The visual texture and language changes during Qassem's fake photography session, taking on a lyrical quality reminiscent of Truffaut in moving into montage, wielding rhythmic editing with some sprightly music now on the soundtrack, as Kiarostami matches Qassem's cheeky wit with his own cinematic variety. He notes Qassem tucking his accumulating cash in his back pocket whilst lining up his shots of the other kids, and moves in from regarding the kids in distant poses to close studies that capture the children in all their alternate individuality, some fierce, some friendly, some humorous, some bovine.



This allows Kiarostami to use Qassem's eyes in capturing his generational fellows in all their collective and individual qualities, whilst Qassem play-acts something like a movie director as he instructs his subjects in their poses. The first hint here of the kind of meta-narrative play Kiarostami would often return to his movies, like the revelation of the moviemakers at the end of *Taste of Cherry* and the choose-your-own-narrative-truth of *Certified Copy*. Where in his later films Kiarostami would often feature loquacious and intelligent adult characters who work to verbalise their worldviews or play games with them in long, rolling conversations, *The Traveller* is more familiar to a certain extent as a social realist study in dealing with a boy whose age precludes him being able to articulate his problems. His actions are his expressions, but Qassem nonetheless has a certain quick-witted pugnacity in his interactions when he's trying to gain something, cajoling insistently in his attempts to sell things of no value whilst insisting they do. "I've taken thousands of pictures with it," he protests to the man he tries to sell the camera to, and, when he offers too little, "I passed up a better off last week." Qassem definitely seems to have the stuff of a businessman in him.



The problem with the inspired con trick at the school is it just doesn't bring in anything like enough money. Depressed, Qassem and Akbar try to study for a vocabulary test, filmed in a tableau that becomes for the boys an unconscious lampoon of their school experience: Qassem testily waves a stick whilst Akbar stumbles through an array of thematically appropriate words: "Outlaw – it means a rebel...Discipline, obedience...Ambition, the desire to make progress." Qassem suddenly has another brainwave to save his project, and sells his street team's nets and gear, despite the whole team having pooled money to buy them. Qassem justifies himself because as the captain he's always stuck with the job of lugging it around, and nimbly talks a member of another team into buying them, netting 25 tomans. Finally able to buy his bus ticket, Qassem hitches a ride back towards home from the station on the back of a horse-drawn buggy, perched with dangling feet above the road. This sequence presents Qassem at his height, having actually proven he can, by hook and by crook, affect his own destiny with the gift of the gab and unscrupulous manipulation if with little thought of inevitable consequences, now rejoicing in bumpy manner in a sense of liberating motion, Kambiz Roshanravan's sprightly traditional score matched to the whirling wheels of the buggy.



The very title of *The Traveller* establishes Kiarostami's preoccupation with characters whose physical wanderings, their incessant seeking, are matched to their attempts to understand themselves, to strain at the limits of their personal universes with all their small insults and frictions, whether seeking to enter others or even nullify themselves to end the questioning. Kiarostami's film would later become famously preoccupied by characters driving and the things they do when nominally going someplace, culminating notably in the suicidal central character and his argumentative passenger of *Taste of Cherry*, their fierce verbal arguments matched to restless voyaging. Qassem is defined specifically as a boy in motion, shark-like in his need for constant forward movement, driven on by a specific motive to try and get something done before a looming psychological hammer, one he doesn't quite understand, drops. Upon returning home and hiding his ticket in a schoolbook, Qassem faces a long, anxious wait and can't risk falling asleep and missing the bus which comes through at near midnight. Akbar tosses stones at his window and keeps calling pathetically from the street, his loyal helpmate now unable to follow any further on his grand odyssey. Finally, when the appointed hour comes, Qassem sneaks out of his house. Where earlier in the film Kiarostami noted the streets of Malayer busy with merchants and artisans, now Qassem runs through a silent and deserted labyrinth. He only just manages to catch up with the bus and get aboard, and rides off into the great Iranian night.





As Qassem's bus arrives in Tehran, Kiarostami lingers on a shot of a man walking along the roadside as bus after bus arrives, each one presumably packed with travellers who, like Qassem, have their own little odysseys to enact, whilst connecting the heart of Tehran to the body that is the rest of the nation. Kiarostami avoids passing any overt judgement on Qassem's amorality, perceiving his spurs and his neediness shading into desperation, which registers all the more plainly on his face as the film unfolds: the closer Qassem comes to his goal, the greater the ease and risk of losing it, a principal Kiarostami illustrates with bittersweet clarity. Of course, it's tempting to link Kiarostami's sidelong sociological observations and recording with the transformation that would come upon the country a few years later. Even with the pervasive gentle humour, it's not hard at all to register a miasma of frustration and simmering disquiet, an air of recessive and backward testiness where the illiterate and entrenched incompetently rear the sort-of educated who confront a lack of outlets for their raised expectations. When Qassem does finally reach the football stadium, militaristic-looking policemen maintain a heavy-handed presence to stop any shows of wrath when the tickets sell out, which, of course, they do just as Qassem reaches the vendor.



As the cops urge away the luckless, Qassem manages to still procure a ticket from a scalper and enters the stadium. Sitting in the bleachers with the adults attending the game, he gets into conversation with a weaver. After all his seemingly selfish and unscrupulous actions throughout the film Qassem is nonetheless generous, even insistent, in offering to share his food with the weaver, and the older man seems to embody something appealing to Qassem, who notes that as an independent worker he's relatively free in his life. When Qassem furtively asks the weaver if he thinks Tehran kids would be his friends, the weaver replies that he does, but Qassem then recounts how he tried to befriend some who moved to Mayafer only to be rebuffed, and he irritably describes them as snobs: the weaver can only silently muse on this anecdote. When he learns the game isn't going to start for three hours yet – sitting and waiting and chatting with other fans is something the weaver and everyone else takes to be part of the ritual – Qassem eventually decides to roam around for a while, exploring the environs near the stadium.



The climactic scenes wield stinging irony as Qassem's restlessness, having brought him this far, leads him away from his cherished goal, clambering over scaffolding in an arena being renovated and gazing in through the window of an indoor swimming pool. He knocks on the glass to attract the attention of a kid within, and tries to ask him how deep the water is, but the other kid can't hear him and irritably turns away. This brief vignette that's perfectly naturalistic and yet contains symbolic force, crystallising something deeper about Qassem and his journey, his solitude, unable to make himself heard, cut off from the world he seeks and his luckier doppelganger within, the infrastructure of that world a window and also a wall. Tired because he didn't sleep at all the night before, Qassem sees a number of men sprawled on a grass verge under trees taking a nap before the game, and he lies down to join them.



Qassem sleeps as the other men awaken and head off, and has disturbing dreams of being hounded and punished, of being caught cheating in class. His school fellows chase him down and take him captive, and then he's suspended upside down and beaten on the soles of his feet, the other kids and his mother looming around him as sentries of judgement whilst he wails in pain, but without sound. Here Kiarostami confirms at least on a subconscious level Qassem knows he's going to pay for everything he's done, and it might even be said to finally offer a degree of imminent moral satisfaction. But Kiarostami maintains sympathy for the lad, inverting a usual method in showing us his dreamscape is no place of escape but rather where the things he quells during the day hatch out, with awareness of how all too often people elect to proceed in spite of physical threats with transgressive behaviour because otherwise they'll kill some part of themselves, and the imagery of punishment is distressing.



There's a hint of the underlying influence of Luis Bunuel's *Los Olvidados* (1950), another classic about needy youth with its patina of surrealism mixed in with the harsh realism. Qassem lying down to sleep with the grown men contains a hint of political as well as personal parable, as if he's performing an act of surrender. The punchline, of course, is that Qassem finally awakens late in the day, and runs up into the stadium only to find the match over and the crowd gone, leaving behind only their rubbish flitting on the breeze as if he's the sole survivor of a slovenly apocalypse. Qassem, the boy in motion, lost in finally surrendering to immobility what he tried so hard to obtain, cheated by his own weak flesh. A lovely tragicomic ending, one that also sees Kiarostami perhaps deliberately reversing the cinematic device at the climax of *The 400 Blows*. Where Truffaut arrested his young runaway in an eternal frieze, poised between past and present, youth and adulthood, Kiarostami's lingering long shot watches as Qassem starts running again, arcing away out of sight along the rim of the stadium. Qassem can only dash on to meet his fate, at loose and trapped, travelling without moving. For a film as short and straightforward as *The Traveller* seems at first to be, it's a work entirely alive with promise.

## The Boys From Brazil (1978)



Ira Levin's novel *The Boys From Brazil* came out amidst a brace of bestseller list fodder festooned with swastikas on the cover as an explosion of popular interest in the history of the Nazis and the Holocaust occurred in the mid-1970s. Levin's novel was at least a fitting follow-up to his *Rosemary's Baby* in that it dealt again with a conspiratorial cabal under a satanic overlord linked to perverted birth, although this time Levin's figurations were more literal: he proposed that Josef Mengele, the infamous Nazi doctor who performed grotesque experiments on prisoners at Auschwitz and successfully vanished at the war's end, had in his years hiding out from authorities in South America managed to concoct a strain of clones. When Levin's novel came to be filmed it was graced with all the solemn virtues of a big-budget Hollywood film, directed by an Oscar-winning filmmaker, Franklin J. Schaffner, and sporting two legendary stars in the lead roles. Gregory Peck tackled one of his few villain roles as Mengele, who in this film is portrayed as an absolute idoliser of Hitler feverishly trying to give birth to a Fourth Reich. Laurence Olivier, who had won plaudits playing a Nazi creep in John Schlesinger's *Marathon Man* (1976), now played Mengele's nemesis, the aging but dogged Nazi hunter Ezra Lieberman, based broadly on Simon Wiesenthal.



Lieberman, who lives with his sister Esther (Lili Palmer) and runs his fugitive-hunting agency out of a crumbling Vienna apartment, is drawn into the mystery when a young Jewish-American investigator, Barry Kohler (Steve Guttenberg), contacts him with news Mengele and other Nazi bigwigs are convening in Paraguay, and intends finding out what they're up to. Ignoring Lieberman's stringent advice to flee before attracting the Nazis' attention, Barry manages to bug the mansion they meet in and overhears Mengele ordering 94 assassinations of seemingly random men, all aged in their mid-60s with government jobs and married to younger women. Barry's bug is detected and he's quickly chased down and murdered, but not before managing to pass on the gist of Mengele's project. Lieberman uses a journalist friend, Benyon (Denholm Elliot), to keep track of deaths of men who meet Mengele's criteria, and as he visits some of the families of the dead men begins to notice the astonishing similarity of some of the sons of the dead men. Eventually, driven to visit a genetic researcher, Dr Bruckner (Bruno Ganz), to puzzle out the proliferating coincidences, he begins to realise the terrifying truth the audience worked out an hour ago: Mengele's clones are of Adolf Hitler, and his project is to try and recreate exactly as possible the right family conditions to make sure at least one clone will emerge as the perfect Fuhrer reascent.



*The Boys From Brazil* is one of those movies that manages to be entertaining at every viewing, but part of its interest lies in why it fails to live up to all of its considerable promise. Heywood Gould's script stuck exceedingly close to the book, and that might be part of the problem. Much of the middle act of the film is devoted to sporadic vignettes involving assorted killings and Lieberman's investigating, with Mengele getting increasingly irritated by his superiors and their worried reports of Lieberman's investigations. The production values were serious – they ran to dressing up what's supposed to be Mengele's Amazonian jungle hideaway, actually somewhere in Spain, with hundreds of imported palm trees and yet still looks about as remote as Central Park – and yet the way the storyline unfolds is cool, procedural, and intimate, sporting an action climax that unfolds in a living room. Chances for blockbuster showmanship were limited, with Schaffner trying the occasional flourish of vaguely Hitchcockian effect as when a victim of the plot is hurled off a colossal dam in a snow-cruled Swedish valley. Then there's a vicious sex murder scene that feels like it stumbled in from some early '70s *giallo* thriller, with where one of the young Nazi operatives, Hessen (Sky du Mont), murders a girl he beds (Linda Hayden) and then strangles his actual target, her landlord (Michael Gough), to make it appear he killed her and then himself.





Schaffner had been a major Hollywood player thanks to films like *Planet of the Apes* (1968), *Patton* (1970), and *Papillon* (1973), where he applied a strong visual and aural imagination to big-budget movies and gave unwieldy prestige films a vibrant touch of then-hip technique. There is one good vignette reminiscent of Schaffner's earlier work when Mengele visits the ruin of the hospital in the heart of darkness where he and his underlings bred the clones. Mengele's nocturnal reminiscing in the dank and rubbish-filled space is intercut with recalled visions of him performing his fertilising operations, and a strident Aryan nurse waking a ward filled with rows of beds, each occupied by interchangeable young blonde women, a neat visual encapsulation of the dark fantasy of homogeneity and forced order lurking behind Mengele's plot, all set to Jerry Goldsmith's swooningly malefic score. Elsewhere though the film lacks imagination: we get one of the cloned boys glimpsed in hallway mirrors creating endless reflections – symbolism! – and one murder scene is given a baroque lilt with menacing puppetry. Goldsmith's scoring, with his loud Strauss pastiche theme tune and thunderous incidental music matched to shots of Guttenberg driving about in a VW van, seems to be trying to will high drama at times, but the deeper brass motif that runs ominously through movie is very apt.



The best thing about *The Boys From Brazil* is rather obviously Olivier. If, when he was younger, Olivier in spite of his talent often seemed just a hair too Olympian for movies, he was by this time a perfect acting engine, honed by age to a raw but vital stem. He brilliantly makes Lieberman a palpable protagonist, by turns gently comic, slightly pathetic, and scathingly sarcastic, with a spine of moral and intellectual force that emerges only when it suits him, with a believable veil of humanistic feeling draped over his still-burning anger and resolve. He's as deft in funny moments as he is in the most dramatic stretches, like the slightly embarrassed and dreading expression he takes on when a woman insists on bearing her legs flirtatiously to him, or commenting, when Benyon asks if he has any idea how many men in the mid-60s die every day, "I try not think about it." James Mason is comparatively wasted as Colonel Seibert, Mengele's handler and overseer from the alliance of Nazi holdouts who plainly doesn't give two shits for his plan and very happily tries to call time on it when it attracts Lieberman's attention. But Mason manages inject his own shots of wry humour as he patiently waits through Mengele's rants and demands and then slyly satirises his megalomania: "One day all of this will be a shrine visited by millions of schoolchildren," he proposes to Mengele's total credulity.



Lieberman's investigation gives openings for some effective character turns, including from Rosemary Harris as one murdered man's widow who believes her abusive husband's death was an act engineered by a merciful god, and John Dehner, strikingly convincing as Wheelock, a taciturn New Englander and father to one of the clones, who shrugs at warnings about Nazi assassins – "Niggers we've gotta be worried about" – but quivers in subtle terror as he realises Mengele intends to shoot him. The film's best scene sees Olivier not opposite Peck but Uta Hagen's Frieda Maloney, a war criminal he tracked down in the US and finds was a cog in the clone adoption scheme, and so visits her in prison, wrangling the interview by promising to give depositions to her lawyer (Joachim Hansen). Lieberman is patient and methodical with a woman he knows to be a loathsome psychopath, matched by her shows of superficial bonhomie touched with flicks of the asp's tongue in her occasional racist jabs. When finally the bilious Nazi shows her face at Lieberman's deft provocation, he suddenly reveals the authority of his deepest, angriest self for the first time in the movie and reminds her with skewering force that she is now a prisoner, not a guard. An electrifying vignette also contributed to by Hansen, when the lawyer's breezy poise falters queasily as he reads one of the depositions Lieberman gives him relating to Maloney's crimes.



Peck, on the other hand, gives one of his worst performances and yet still manages to be oddly enjoyable as Mengele. Clearly he was cast because the film required another star of the highest order with physical stature and hard charisma, and he does bring both to the table: compared to Olivier's frail Lieberman, Peck's Mengele seems an ageless golem, mercilessly committed to his obscene projects as a new-age alchemist birthing his homunculi. Given how rarely Peck played bad guys and attempted accents it's fascinating watching him struggle with a halting German lisp and labouring to convey fanatical fury, as when he assaults one of his assassins, Mundt (Walter Gotell), at a ball thrown for Nazis and their progeny, and declaims with jutting gesticulations to the shocked guests, "He betrayed...the whole Aryan race!" Very late in the film, when Mengele exultantly recounts his achievement to Lieberman when he has him at bay, Peck manages to work up some effectively deranged power, but his characterisation never convinces.



Another, subtler problem with the film is that you keep seeing different avenues it might have taken and become something truly galvanising. Schaffner nudges truly sinister, Dr Moreau-esque territory in Mengele's experiments, surveying the Amazon natives he's subjected to his Aryanising experiments, young native boys with dyed blue eyes and women with unnaturally blonde hair. But horror, like the suspense, remains mostly theoretical, swapped out for lots of scenes talking in living rooms. There are also flashes of very morbid comedy, present in Mundt's sudden murder of an old comrade (Wolfgang Preiss) who is also one of the targets on the list, in the aforementioned throwing-off-the-dam scene, after the man assures Mundt when he expresses doubts about his mission he must do his duty no matter what. This streak is particularly strong in the fatuous Nazi shindig where Mengele gladhands with the devolving master race before attacking Mundt, whose ancient wife (Monica Gearson) Mengele insults in most ungentlemanly fashion. But these flashes likewise float adrift, as black comedy was the forte of no-one involved here. The finale evolves as Mengele, forced to go out and do his own dirty work after Seibert shuts down his operation and burns the "shrine" to the ground, travels to Pennsylvania to kill Wheelock. He poses as Lieberman to put him off guard, managing to get the man's formidable posse of trained Dobermans locked away before drawing a gun, doing away with him, and settling down to wait for his son Bobby (Black again). But first he gets the unexpected pleasure of a visit from Lieberman, who followed the breadcrumb trail.



Trouble here is that the two antagonists, defined by their intelligence, never really get to do battle in an intelligent way: instead the two men wrestle, or as much as two sixty-somethings can, before Lieberman manages, after taking gunshot wounds, to open a door and let in the ferocious dogs to force Mengele at bay. The climactic scenes finally arrive at what should be the meat of the story, its most provocative and tantalising concept, in combining a nature-versus-nurture debate and the old canard of would you kill baby Hitler. Mengele's faith is that the nature of the Fuhrer, and by extension the whole Nazi-Aryan ideal, only requires some effective cultivation and pruning to re-emerge as a world-spirit, versus Lieberman's rock-ribbed humanism. Earlier in the film Lieberman is helped by David Bennett (John Rubinstein), a member of a group dubbed the Young Jewish Defenders, a group Lieberman nonetheless warily dismisses as a "bunch of fanatics." When Bennett gets wind of the clones he wants to exterminate them, a course of action Lieberman explicitly forbids and hinders in his certainty that everyone is innocent until they aren't, watching against the temptation to simply swap places with the monsters because it feels good and reassuring. Mengele tries to hatch the baby crocodile from its egg by appealing to young Bobby's supposed need for adulation and empowerment, only to be met, in a great deflating joke, by '70s teen insouciance: "Oh man, you're weird." Mengele meets his end when at Lieberman's encouragement Bobby finds his dead father and then in distraught vengeance sets the Dobermans on the mad doctor, letting them rip bloody chunks out of him.



Whilst there's a touch of absurdity in the two old men fighting and the situation is like the rest of the film frustratingly static, there's an interesting double bind at work in this climax. Mengele gets a truly fitting comeuppance in a nicely contrived revenge fantasy. But the film also suggests it's Mengele being hoist on his own petard by the traits he fostered, and leaves off with hints Bobby is indeed a budding monster, gleefully gawking at his photos of the mutilated Mengele and holding on to a jaguar claw bracelet that was Mengele's, rough beasts in the cradle and all that. But this comes across more like a standard horror movie stinger than any kind of fulfilment of a well-posed theme, and was apparently cut from many prints (it's been in every version I've seen, that said). The vignette with Dehner's racist patriarch suggests Mengele found fertile soil in this case and points to the narrative's ultimate inner meaning as an *It Can't Happen Here*-like commentary on the eternally festering forces of racism, intolerance, and demagoguery. As such it had a potential wealth of thematic power, but apart from that one stinging moment never truly focuses in on the notion because its basic precepts are at war. The film's similarities to *The Omen* series, which also featured Peck, are notable, and the same year's *Damien: Omen II* did a more effective job with the idea of a young inheritor of evil legacy wrestling with his identity, a struggle *The Boys From Brazil* avoids. It keeps at a safe distance from the darkest fantasies it engages, content to let plot stand in for story. At least it can be said that Lieberman's salutary final act of burning Mengele's list of the boys signals he comes to the same conclusion as the average audience member: Mengele's plan was far too ridiculous to be worried about.





## Beach of the War Gods (1973)

*Zhan zhen tan*



A labour of auteurist fever by the biggest star of martial arts film before the rise of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan, Jimmy Wang Yu, who wrote, directed, and starred, *Beach of the War Gods* can be readily and easily described as a cross between *Seven Samurai* (1954) and *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), combining the motif of building a team of accomplished warriors with a narrative offering a folk-tale like story of resistance to foreign invasion. Wang casts himself as hero Hsia Feng, who seems at first glance to be one of those wandering do-gooders so popular in the *wu xia* style, first glimpsed crossing the great sand expanse of the title, in the 1550s. Wang immediately evinces a great eye as he offers a long shot of Feng walking the beach where the only other solid shape is a rectangular shrine, whilst the sun blazes down above and white foam shivers on the rocks at the sea's edge: with the minimum of shots he creates a historical zone at once palpable and mythic, swapping the interior spaces of Westerns for the fringe of sea and earth where countries and cultures will do battle for sovereignty. Feng enters Li Town, a walled city at the fringe of the titular beach, and finds many of the inhabitants packing up to leave in haste, whilst others are urgently conversing in the taverns and eateries. Feng soon discovers that a powerful force of Japanese pirates has landed on the coast, capturing the large town of Hangchow, and their raiding parties are spreading out to capture the surrounds.



When some of the pirates enter Li Town and begin bullying and marauding, Feng confronts them. In a display of great warrior prowess, he takes on seven katana-wielding henchmen and their commander, killing all but the leader, who manages to flee. Equally stunned and inspired, the citizens of Li Town beg Feng to lead them in the battle that will surely result in reprisal. Feng accepts the responsibility as a matter of course: "I started this, I'll finish it." He soon realises that if he can assemble a force strong enough to take on the pirates they might stand a chance not only of defeating the invaders but also make it easier for the Imperial authorities to take on the larger pirate bands northwards. Finding local patriots eager to take on the Japanese proves quite easy, but Feng realises he needs seasoned talents, and sets out to find those he can in the week until the pirates return. He soon attracts Chow, a sword vendor who knows how to use his wares, and wins over two constantly feuding clans run by Li and Hou to the cause. A brilliant knife-throwing mercenary, Ling (Yeh Tien), proves harder to bring aboard, as he initially wants to be paid for his services, and the patriots angrily disdain his motives, but Ling soon enough joins the team purely for the pleasure of killing invaders. Meanwhile Feng is given a personal motive in the fight, as he learns his father, the governor of Hangchow, has been executed by the leader of the pirate band for refusing to bend to their will.



The notoriously eccentric, volatile, sometimes violent Wang had become a major star with *The One-Armed Swordsman* (1967). He made his directorial debut with *The Chinese Boxer* (1971) for Raymond Chow's Golden Harvest company, despite being under contract to Shaw Brothers. That film's colossal success, giving rise to the popularity of unarmed forms of combat in movies Lee would soon become synonymous with, cost Wang dearly in other ways. He was all but banned from shooting films in Hong Kong for a time and so teamed up regularly with Golden Harvest to make films in Taiwan. Wang's screen persona had been forged through *The One-Armed Swordsman* with his talent for playing tough but tortured, physically and psychologically battered protagonists, but he could also play a cool, suave Bond-type, as in Brian Trenchard-Smith's *The Man From Hong Kong* (1976). In *Beach of the War Gods* he casts himself as a very old-fashioned kind of hero, aristocratic but not exclusive, patriotic, decent, "always fair," keen in all his actions to a sense of moral gravity, as well as a god-tier pain-bringer. It feels as if Wang's search for a kind of gallant simplicity on screen reflects the wilful tumult of his private life, and the desire to transcend it.



On a dramatic level, *Beach of the War Gods* is similarly straightforward in its essentials, in a manner that might strike one as blessedly basic or exceedingly simplistic depending on your mood, as the good Chinese go up against the wicked Japanese, without much room for characterisation or complication. There's no attempt to mediate the tale of war and resistance with any kind of ambivalence or hopes for peacemaking: the Chinese characters, pushed too far by the Japanese pirates' violence, simply decide to kill them all once their blood is up. The title, with its intimations of some ghostly collective-memory of a clash of titans memorialised through the shrine Feng passes that of course also foreshadows the one about to happen, exists entirely in the realm of folklore and the pre-psychological starkness of epic poetry. The heroes quickly described as types: Ling, for instance, is the kind of tarnished penny with a deadly streak whose perfectly-honed gifts offer the only element of the film that seems fairly generic as far as *wu xia* fare goes, introduced slaying some rude gangsters in a teahouse.



The rest of the film generally aims for a more realistic kind of action than a lot of *wu xia*, although there's plenty of that absurdly good jumping so common in the mode. Wang's nationalistic streak is certainly unabashed, but he sneaks in some interesting little jabs: early on, as Feng arrives in Li Town, a tavern waiter notes that the people fleeing are the rich, and it's the poor and rootless who must do the job of warding off massacre and tyranny. The attempts to forge unity amongst the resistance force Feng builds demands locating balance between diverse personalities and equally diverse motives, the fiercely one-dimensional wannabe heroes, like the Li Town man who unleashes contempt on a fellow who didn't fight although he himself fled from the battle leaving it to Feng to handle, contrasting Ling, whose scarred face and gruff, sourly humorous demeanour bespeak a life lived in tension with the society Feng now asks him to fight for.



All that is mere justification, of course, for the action scenes, but *Beach of the War Gods* resists becoming just a string of fights, insisting instead on a classical structure and a slow-burn towards the inevitable. There's little of the gamut-running comic relief that would soon invade the genre too. Feng's first street battle with the pirates is a little masterpiece of staging and choreography, making deft use of the multiple plains of action presented by the street and porches and his careful set dressing to offer physical punctuation to the violence. This sets the scene for the climactic show-down which takes up

the last forty minutes of the film. Whatever Wang's problems off-screen, his confidence and sense of purpose as both a screen star and a directorial eye are undeniable, and *Beach of the War Gods* is one of the best-directed films I've seen in the genre. Wang is as keen to a quiet vignette, as when Feng and one of the Li Town elders play a game of Go whilst awaiting battle, as he is to the spectacle. Amidst the inevitable montage of preparations to meet the attackers, he notes the warriors entering their own private spaces of psychological and physical tuning Ling rubs his arms in oil with ritualistic thoroughness.



Throughout the film Wang displays an excellent eye for framing and staging. He films the crucial sequence of the allies forging their alliance and making plans in a mill, shooting faces through the whirling spokes of the water wheels. This is one example of Wang's evident visual fascination for playing games with foreground elements and masking effects, which are present throughout, but also a visual device to depict the wheels of mind and character in motion, as well as foreshadowing the very end when Feng goes up against his great enemy, the former samurai and famed swordsman Hashimoto (Fei Lung), each making use of wheels and other whirling impediments as part of their battle tactics. The first glimpse of Hashimoto is filmed in a space decorated with Japanese-style paintings of warriors and walls covered in Chinese calligraphy, suggesting Wang wanted to emulate Cheh Chang and some of his similarly lush touches on *Golden Swallow* (1968), one of the films that cemented Wang's stardom.



The start of the great battle sees the Japanese force appear as a rippling wave of firelight in the darkness as they advance along the beach carrying torches, before they form up in frightening fashion. Wang intensifies the malefic atmosphere by having the pirates marching to the peal of drummers wearing multi-coloured demon masks, but the Chinese meet this with their own creepy if more satirical totems, painted female caricatures painted on melons planted on stakes as sarcastic come-ons that prove to the pirates' great discomfort to mark out buried explosives and dug pits filled with sharp stakes. The subsequent battle is one of the great movie set-pieces, as the pirates, battered by the traps they've had to negotiate to enter Li Town, face attempts to divide their numbers and ambushes. At one point they find a coffin left in the middle of the street and assume it to be another potential booby-trap, but this proves to be what the defenders are counting on, leaping down onto the pirates as they crowd against the sides of the lane. The coffin inevitably gets filled when Feng takes out one of Hashimoto's lieutenants amidst the whirling carnage on the street, in Wang's most elegant visual joke.



There are other touches of humour that amplify the dynamic action, as when Chow gets cornered by a foe against a cart only for one of the Chinese fighters to leap off a roof and land on the cart, catapulting Chow to safety, and Hashimoto crossing a warrior-clogged plaza by leap-frogging his way off the shoulders of the fighters. one of the heroes, his enemy's samurai sword flying up into the air in their

tussle, manages to swat it like a tennis ball and plant it in his foe's belly. Wang breaks up the battle into stages, including one visually dramatic moment when the two sides square off and some of the Chinese warriors appear, matching the machine-like drill of the Japanese with their own show of tight choreography with shields. Wang also deploys some Sam Peckinpah-esque slow motion to capture some of the best and most dramatic feats of arms and stunt work. As the Chinese get the upper hand Hashimoto, until now carried around in a chair whilst leading his men, enters the fray and immediately proves deadly, killing several of the heroes including Ling after Ling saves Chow from him with a knife throw that knocks Hashimoto's crown off. Finally the pirates retreat from the town and the two sides converge on the beach after sundown, where Feng and Hashimoto duel before their bands, contending with rolling gear wheels and the blades of a windmill as they fight it out, in one of the best fight scenes ever committed to film. The Chinese hero is dazzled by Hashimoto's cunning use of light reflecting off his swords, but eventually turns the tables.



Feng is nonetheless mortally wounded in the duel because one of the Japanese pirates tries to intervene to save his commander, although Feng doesn't expire before he manages to kill Hashimoto. Wang might be emulating the kind of antiheroic fatalism common in early '70s movies in the west here, ending the film with the Feng, already seemingly forgotten as the Chinese chase after the Japanese to slaughter them, collapsing dead: Wang films his end in a forlorn long shot, before Wang zooms in on the windmill's churning blade, the previous meaning of the spiralling motion now taking on ironic historical and even spiritual dimensions, the wheel of life and death turning remorselessly onwards. Brief as this final vignette is, it's an interesting signal nonetheless that Wang had a queasy sense of the relationship between authentic cultural heroism and the screen version, the first all too swiftly lost to the waves of time only to gain unshakeable long life in collective memory, the latter prized for its vividness and permanency as captured imagery and yet ultimately so hollow. *Beach of the War Gods* doesn't have the same obvious, grand ambition as King Hu's later films and certainly never aims for the complexity of Kurosawa's samurai movies. But it does succeed as a purely elemental tale illustrated with the pure fervour of a compulsive artist, a masterpiece of its genre. By all reports the original non-English dubbed version is markedly superior, but the dubbed version is at least easier to find.





## **Black Widow (2021)**



**Director: Cate Shortland**  
**Screenwriter: Eric Pearson**

It's odd at this point that a Disney-Marvel superhero blockbuster could seem like an underdog, but *Black Widow* feels like one. The so-called Marvel Cinematic Universe series' domination of pop movie culture grew wearisome for many well before the clumsy and disappointing but historically successful *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), and the enforced cessation of it during the COVID-19 pandemic threatened to drain the steam from the juggernaut. *Black Widow*, the chief victim of the hiatus in being pushed back a year, has then become an ideal target for a takedown. Making a solo outing for Scarlett Johansson's lithe engine of destruction is fraught with ambiguities. Marvel was long weak at the knees when it came to female superheroes fronting their own movies, having previously only dared it with *Captain Marvel* (2018), a film with an utter nonentity for a protagonist, and might as well have simply been delivered as the succession of internet memes it so patently wanted to spawn. Natasha 'Black Widow' Romanoff was by contrast the most genuinely interesting of the classic line-up of heroes in the film franchise, a warrior whose gifts were more those of enormous precision and skill rather than force and magic powers, with an enigmatic background involving lodes of trauma and guilt, allowing her to seem more than just another Smurfette in a crowd of fast and bulbous pals. The character, introduced impressively in the otherwise awful *Iron Man 2* (2010), was presented as a professional femme fatale, enticing with a passively sexy veneer only to reveal by degrees the hard-as-nails and omniscient combatant beneath.



After numerous stand-out roles as a child actor, Johansson hit stardom with her performance in Sofia Coppola's *Lost In Translation* (2003), where she surprised everyone with her display of intelligence and soulful maturity despite still being a teenager, successfully playing a character older than she actually was. Perhaps not since Lauren Bacall had a female star come along who seemed to worldly wise beyond her years, and that aura certainly informed her casting as Natasha, a woman who's lived ages before her 30th birthday. But Johansson struggled to make good on her promise with lacklustre performances in films like Brian De Palma's *The Black Dahlia* (2004), and she skidded around in the next few years, mostly in middlebrow award-bait movies. It wasn't until she played Black Widow and embraced a more populist appeal that her screen persona finally resolved, playing deftly off her clammily hailed sex appeal but also giving the perfect vehicle for her to assume a cagey kind of sovereignty, creating an image she parleyed into vehicles as different yet commonly rooted in her persona as *Under The Skin* (2014) and *Ghost In The Shell* (2017). Meanwhile Natasha provided a great foil for her co-stars in the Marvel films, particularly Chris Evans' Captain America in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014) where the two shared what Natasha wryly noted was his first kiss since 1945.



Cate Shortland's *Black Widow* faces a special challenge, in being both a star vehicle reliant on Johansson in the role – she's billed as one of the executive producers – and also a salutary farewell to her and a potential set-up to posit her replacement. The character was killed off in *Avengers: Endgame*, sacrificing

herself to obtain one of the super-MacGuffin Infinity Stones to save half the universe. On paper it was a gutsy, nobly selfless end for a character driven by a stinging awareness of her moral compromise, in practice an odd and clumsy outro for a figure who never quite got her due and then suffered from being identified as the expendable one not required for the big punch-up finale where she was ridiculously supplanted by an array of suddenly inducted female superheroes. *Black Widow* is set in the series continuity between *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) and *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), avoiding revising Natasha's death, a weirdly deflating move, but also one the film turns to its own advantage in exploring its own fin-de-siecle mood, trying to give her fate some new meaning. The film begins in suburban Ohio in 1990, depicting young Natasha (Ever Anderson) and her sister Yelena (Violet McGraw) playing and strolling with their mother Melina (Rachel Weisz). Later they settle down for dinner as their father Alexei Shostakov (David Harbour) gets home, only for him to announce that the great adventure he once promised to take them on is now imminent.



Turns out the family isn't really a family, but a carefully planted group of sleeper agents sent to steal information by General Dreykov (Ray Winstone), a power-mad hold-out from the Communist era still running covert operations. Alexei is the closest thing the Soviet Union ever created to Captain America, a supersoldier codenamed Red Guardian, and he's seen casually managing feats of strength and agility, including clinging onto the wing of the aircraft they use to flee to Cuba after dodging American agents. Natasha has to fly the plane after Melina is clipped by a bullet. Once they arrive in Cuba, where they're met by Dreykov, the family is immediately disbanded, Melina spirited away for surgery, whilst Natasha snatches a pistol to ward off threatening soldiers from harming Yelena. But in imagery interpolated during the subsequent opening credits, Natasha and Yelena are glimpsed with a number of other frightened girls being shipped back Russia in a cargo container, deliberately reminiscent of human trafficking. We, or at least anyone familiar with the Marvel Cinematic Universe, know what happens to Natasha at least, as she's put through the ruthless training program for female assassins Dreykov runs called the Black Widows. The program is run out of a secret abode called the Red Room, the mere name of which sends a shiver up the spine of anyone who knows of it, but none of the Black Widows actually know where it is because of the elaborate security protocols.



Cut to twenty-odd years later, as Natasha is being hunted by former General, now Secretary Ross (William Hurt), the asshole-in-chief overseeing the implementation of the Sukovia Accords designed to put a check on superhero activity. Natasha easily keeps a step ahead of Ross, relying on her fixer pal Mason (O-T Fagbenle) to provide her with equipment and safe houses. He leaves her in a caravan in rural Norway along with a bundle of her belongings transferred from a safe house she used to keep in Budapest. What Natasha doesn't know yet is that the now-grown Yelena (Florence Pugh), also a Black Widow, has secreted something very important and very dangerous amongst her belongings. Yelena belongs to the subsequent generation of Widows who, after Natasha successfully defected, were subjected to chemical brainwashing that left them all completely unable to resist any orders from Dreykov. On a mission in Morocco to track down a renegade former comrade, Yelena caught a face full of a red gas that suddenly freed her will just as she fatally stabbed her quarry: an older Widow created an antidote to the enslaving treatment. Yelena is obliged with her new-found freedom to keep it out of Dreykov's hands, turning to Natasha who had no idea Yelena was still a Widow and thought Dreykov was dead, because she and Clint Barton blew up Dreykov's apartment in Budapest along with his young daughter.



On a plot level *Black Widow* is nothing special, a little bit Bourne, a little bit Bond (Shortland includes a scene of Natasha watching *Moonraker*, 1979, on TV, signalling which particular Bond template the film

will soon follow), a little bit Boris and Natasha from *The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show*. It stakes out similar territory to Andrew Dominik's *Red Sparrow* (2017), which dealt with the harsh training of Russian female agents and might as well stand in for the mostly off-stage experiences of Natasha, Yelena, and the other Widows, and David Leitch's *Atomic Blonde* (2017). Both of those, whilst not particularly good in their own right, went to places *Black Widow* might have gone and maybe should have in dealing more overtly with the guilty fantasy figure of the ass-kicking, hard-loving female spy, but *Black Widow* tries to stay wedged in the confluence of family adventure flick and dark-and-gritty genre film. Hard action aficionados and those who love the Marvel movies for their flashy special effects and generally bouncy tone will likely find it a frustrating watch because the nominal storyline is often placed aside for long tracts engaging in interaction and hard reckoning. Deep down it's a character drama wrapped in the glitz and glamour of a tent-pole epic, studying the obverse of the usual driving power fantasies of superhero movies, in depicting people who are despite their abilities all human wreckage, stymied by circumstance and conspiracy, trying desperately to hang on to what few fragments of grace and worth they have left.



Shortland, who emerged with the excellent debut feature *Somersault* (2004) and eventually followed it up with *Lore* (2014) and *Berlin Syndrome* (2017), has been until now associated with quietly intense art house dramas that double as dark fairytales, with a fascination for young and naïve female adventurers abroad, often thrown into situations with complex and duplicitous men who may or may not mean them harm. What's surprising is the degree to which *Black Widow* feels of a unit with her earlier work, down to retaining a toned-down version of her trademark jittery visual style utilising handheld cameras and shallow-focus, ever-so-slightly disorientating camerawork. Of her three films *Berlin Syndrome*, a complex and discomfiting work about a young woman held captive by a man she's had a one-night stand with, probably landed Shortland the job of directing *Black Widow*, as both her most recent and one concerned with enslavement and coercion, although the opening scene with Natasha and Yelena playing feels closer to *Somersault*'s portrayal of hapless innocence and a blithe attitude to a world hiding cruel fates. Shortland's approach is most effective in the early scenes which smartly establish the fake family as nonetheless inhabiting a working simulacrum of normality and functioning, as Melina schools the two girls with her vast knowledge of biology, before returning home to a family dinner where the chemistry of the family members feels genuine, no matter how many secrets everyone is keeping. The escape plays out as a mostly realistic thriller-action scene only punctuated by Alexei's feats of strength. It all has a down-to-earth quality that worked well in the first MCU entry, *Iron Man* (2008), before the fantasy and sci-fi aspects trucked in from the source comics took over, and was revisited to a degree in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, the entry in the series *Black Widow* most closely resembles.



Of course, that kind of approach isn't going to last forever in a movie that nods to *Moonraker* as a style guide, but *Black Widow* sustains it for a surprisingly long time. Indeed, there's a surprising level of mostly implied but sometimes quite immediate meditation on cruelty and suffering, stated unnecessarily in the Nietzschean catchphrase Natasha and Yelena learn from Melina: "Pain only makes you stronger." From the nightmarish tint of the opening credits vignettes *Black Widow* does its best to consider the process that made Natasha and Yelena so damn tough and capable as involving much pain indeed, including the previously-mentioned but still discomforting detail of their having received forced hysterectomies, which proves to be almost an aside compared to the level of control imposed over the newer Widows, who can be forced to blow themselves up. Young Yelena cries over a scraped knee; the older one uses a knife to cut out the tracking chip implanted in her thigh once she gains her autonomy. Returning to confront the institution that pulled her apart and refashioned her into something both more and less than human, Natasha is obliged to face up to the crimes she committed not only for Dreykov but in her campaign to escape his clutches, which claimed, as Natasha puts it, collateral damage. Natasha is genuinely shocked when she tracks down Yelena and her sister tells her Dreykov is still alive, so the sisters break Alexei out of the Siberian prison he's been cast into for years hoping he knows the truth. He in turn leads them to Melina, who has remained Dreykov's thrall and collaborator, having played a vital part in developing his mind-control methods, which Melina demonstrates on one of her pet pigs in a queasy moment.



There's an interesting edge of the Sadean to all this, communicated through Shortland's obsessive use of red as a totem, symbolising, natch, the lingering influence of the Soviet Union but also associated with blood, suffering, plundering, and the loss of (and regaining of via the red gas) autonomy. Background trauma is a fairly compulsory aspect of modern heroic identity in fiction, particularly for superheroes, but *Black Widow* digs into something more rarefied and disturbing, conscious as it is that everything that makes Natasha a potent figure is also sourced in a history of anguish, down to the eventual, brutal revelation that Dreykov had her birth mother, who Natasha thought abandoned her, killed when she kept searching for her daughter. Shortland's images, which often manage to escape the blandness of contemporary digi-cinema, feel more attuned to bodies, presences, putting muscle behind Johansson's cumulatively palpable performance. Winstone's Dreykov is a comparatively weak villain, but for a purpose. The career soldier and master of puppets is rather than someone actually brave and tough himself someone accomplished at using them: he's less like an octopus with his tentacles reaching into everything and more like a lobster, safe and strong as long as his shell holds. The organisation he runs is one of the few ever presented in pop culture that feels as insidious and perverting as Fritz Lang offered in his Weimar thriller films, more so even than any of Bond's antagonists, with Dreykov inhabiting his sky castle, plotting to quietly control the world and army of mind control victims, boasting that he can with one command cause financial chaos and cause mass starvation.



Not, of course, that *Black Widow* makes as much of any of this as might have: despite offering something grittier than any other MCU film, it's still trapped within that universe and all attendant commercial necessity. But it keeps its focus on the characters and the story infrastructure around them provides a blueprint describing their emotional landscape. The film's best choice is almost entirely excising the rest of the MCU from proceedings, with Yelena making a quip about Dreykov not looking for revenge against Natasha lest he bring down "one of the big ones" from the Avengers on his head, and Alexei waxing nostalgic about battling Captain America in his glory days, only for one fellow prisoner to note that Cap was still in the Arctic ice when Alexei claims to have fought him. Yelena makes an acid comment at one point about Natasha posturing as a hero figure to little girls despite her history of bloodshed and the lack of choice afforded Yelena and the other Widows. It's a nice line that makes a gesture towards dismantling the much-repeated pieties about superheroes, particularly the few female ones on the Marvel and DC movie rosters, serving as presumed role-models for their young audience when Natasha herself is not an easy identification figure. The film is then reasonably courageous in not trying to remake Natasha as some kind of straightforward character, but letting her inhabit a story with some nasty barbs. Only the character of Mason feels superfluous for someone as

skilled in taking care of herself as Natasha, seemingly only really present in the movie to provide a kind of drone male all the better to show off Natasha's dominant stature.



The pivotal scene in the film comes once the “family” is reunited, observed in all their mismatched yet oddly bonded identities, cueing a dinner table scene with alternations of grievance, fury, affection, snarky élan, and personal chemistry: it’s a more interesting breakdown of the concept of a gang of would-be heroes as a family than the several others littering the current movie scene because the characters all have pretty good reasons to hate and mistrust each-other on top of sharing a relationship that was only ever a nominal ruse. And yet they find themselves inheriting all the urges and instincts of reality, as when Alexei tries in his oafish yet well-meaning way to comfort the injured and betrayed-feeling Yelena. Harbour’s Alexei is called upon to provide most of the film’s comic relief as the battered faux-paterfamilias, and yet even he’s stricken with an even worse dose of the same crippling melancholia. The once-proud representative of his nation, degraded and imprisoned through treachery, trapped in aging impotence boasting about opponents he never got to face before struggling to squeeze himself into his old costume, is finally given a moment to shine in the climax as he goes up against Dreykov’s secret weapon, the masked monstrosity codenamed Taskmaster.





Taskmaster makes several attempts to catch up with Natasha and Yelena, almost killing Natasha when tracking down the cure shipped to her in Norway and then chasing the sisters through the streets of Budapest in an armoured car, two strong action sequences that thankfully don't overstay their welcome. Taskmaster as antagonist has one intriguing specific ability, to match and exactly mimic an opponent's fighting style. Taskmaster's true identity would only be difficult to guess for anyone who's never seen a movie: it's actually the now-adult Antonia (a wasted Olga Kurylenko), left badly disfigured and paralysed by Natasha's bomb rather than killed, and allowed to move by a computer chip installed in her spine that's made her exponentially more strong and agile, at the price of being reduced to her father's pure servant of will. This revelation is a bit rich given Taskmaster's distinctly masculine build when masked, but then again a few dozen horror movies have pulled the same trick. More to the point, Antonia personifies Natasha's sense of spurring guilt, and her turning out to still be alive helps finally mollify that guilt, whilst also providing her with a Frankensteinian doppelganger, the damaged emblem of what the other Widows only exhibit psychologically.



*Black Widow*, as movies of this kind have to at the moment, must walk the middle path between the two most annoying factions in the online world: those policing it for any hint of sexuality that might give a teenage boy even the slightest pretext for a boner, and those policing it for any signs of unwanted “woke” messaging. For the former, well, there's a coterie of fit women in catsuits, if never lingered on. Despite it being an inherent part of their function and training, the Widows seem to have had their sexual cunning and power removed along with their reproductive organs. As far as the latter goes, the Cold War redux themes are entirely facetious – Dreykov's project is simply the accruing of power with only a veneer of Soviet nostalgia. The metaphors for villainous misogyny are rather more barbed and tightly wound into the story, but never belaboured through speechifying: they're allowed to speak for themselves on the essential dramatic level. There's been controversy recently as it's emerged that the Marvel production house has been hiring directors from the indie film world to provide a veneer of creative cool and an injection of diversity but not letting them handle their own action scenes. Such a practice was once pretty de rigeur in Hollywood – Michael Curtiz and William Wyler amongst many had practiced action staging hands sub for them – but it does explain why the action sequences in the Marvel films tend to all feel interchangeable. I can't complain here though: the mostly down-to-earth style of thrills in the early action scenes, and the final eruption of big, Bond-style chaos at the end, are exceptionally well-done, even if noting that a crashing car in the Budapest scene is infuriatingly CGI-rendered. I understand the temptation to take such short-cuts but it hurts the very essence of this kind of movie.



The scene where Natasha and Yelena break Alexei out of jail, hovering over the prison with a helicopter and trying to scoop the old Red Guardian up before an avalanche hits, is good fun and at its best when the stunts look real and dangerous, like Natasha ducking the choppers's sweeping tail rotor, but again is hampered by recourse to too many obvious special effects. The reality and film-texture-distorting impact of such effects might be said however to help such movies keep a foot planted in their drawn source material. The crucial dynamic in the film is most obviously between Johansson's Natasha and Pugh's Yelena, offering decent chemistry in their alternations of spiky attitude and quiescent affection. Their relationship is also informed by the women playing them, Johansson the still relatively young but by now weathered professional and familiar face pitted against Pugh, emerging as a star of potential after gaining attention with performances in films like *Lady Macbeth* (2017) and *Midsommar* (2019) where she played characters who meet evolve into fiends in the course of purging their own torments. Pugh's still-young yet leonine face provides a great counterpoint to Johansson's sleek features. Whilst she doesn't yet have anything like the same following, Pugh offers real potential as a nominal replacement, partly because Yelena is a less sanguine creature partly defined by her edge of disdain, teasing her sister for being nearly as ludicrous as she is heroic, mocking her as a poser for her signature superhero landing in the film's best running joke.



But it's Johansson's film and she helps put it over the line with Natasha's climactic meeting with Dreykov, after she and the rest of her "family" are ambushed and captured by Dreykov's men thanks to Melina secretly calling them in. Dreykov is eager to reclaim Natasha not just for revenge but because she can help him subvert the Avengers and finally emerge from the shadows to become world dictator. Dreykov's fail-safes include a mental block preventing Natasha from attacking him, triggered by his pheromones. Thankfully, Natasha's long-established capacity to use her opponents' overconfidence and arrogance, seen before to best advantage in *The Avengers* (2012), here resurges in a piece of narrative three-card-monte as it emerges Melina told her what to expect and how to circumvent it. Natasha gains access to Dreykov by wearing a mask disguising her as her mother, whilst Melina, Yelena, and Alexei escape from captivity and set about destroying the Red Room, which is actually a huge flying techno-fort hovering above the clouds.



The confrontation between Natasha and Dreykov, which nods to *RoboCop's* (1987) Directive 4 as Natasha finds herself unable to stab the man who perverted her life and murdered her mother, takes on a real edge of pathology as Natasha provokes Dreykov into punching her repeatedly, grinning all the time as he takes his best, meanest shots with a mocking pleasure bordering on masochism, a willingness to take punishment for her cause usually only reserved to male heroes. It's a moment that highlights Johansson's overqualified but definite affinity for the part, and gains its self-mutilating climax when Natasha, disappointed by Dreykov's blows, instead smashes her nose against his desk to sever her olfactory nerve, freeing her to wail on him with impunity. Intervention by the other Widows saves Dreykov, as Natasha is despite her prowess overwhelmed and brought to the brink of ruin, only to be saved Yelena's quick-thinking intervention. This leads to a fitting moment as Natasha releases Antonia, trapped by Alexei and Melina after a fight, from a prison cell as the Red Room begins to disintegrate, willing to face Antonia's augmented wrath rather than leave her to die.



Yelena finishes up killing Dreykov by thrusting an explosive into the rotor of his hovercraft before it can take off, exploding the craft and hurling Yelena out into a freefall towards earth. Natasha, in a spectacular nod to the famous opening of *Moonraker*, leaps from the Red Room and plunges after her whilst trying to pull on a parachute amidst falling hunks of flaming debris. Everything ends well, with Antonia and the other Widows successfully freed from the mind control yoke, Dreykov's network open to dismantling, and the wayward family surviving and making their peace. Natasha heads off to her ultimate fate with her past thoroughly laid to rest. A brief post-credits coda in the usual MCU fashion provides the gambit for a new looming conflict as Yelena visits her grave and some shadowy government screwball (Julia Louis-Dreyfus) hiring her to go after the man supposedly responsible for her death, handing her a picture of Clint. *Black Widow* isn't a transcendently great entry in the current superhero cycle, mostly hamstrung by its inability through obeisance to its franchise setting to go as far as it should have in embracing a more grown-up and gruelling type of story. But I still liked *Black Widow* more than I've liked most blockbusters in several years, and it cured some of my sourness towards the MCU, because it goes as far as it does.

## Cruella (2021)



Cruella De Vil is one of the more cheerfully loathsome villains in the pop culture canon. Created by Dodie Smith for her book *The Hundred and One Dalmatians*, voiced by Betty Lou Gerson in the 1961 animated Disney adaptation, and later incarnated by Glenn Close in the 1996 live-action version, the character is defined as a vicious, entitled, aristocratic bully whose sole object is to skin a bunch of puppies for the sake of fashion. She's an ideal stand-in for a child's view of the most unfeeling side of adulthood and the creepy, musty side of what was the devolving English upper crust when Smith wrote the book. But since Gregory Maguire's Wicked Witch-redeeming novel *Wicked* and its stage adaptation, plus Disney's adventures along the revisionist trail with *Frozen* (2012) and *Maleficent* (2014), the idea of presenting more sympathetic takes on iconic villains (if only the female ones) from works of children's fiction has been popular. Cruella De Vil offers a special challenge as a figure previously presented without a real redeeming quality. So to work up a relative rooting interest in the character, Craig Gillespie's film has to stretch its neck out a long way. Before its release *Cruella* had, in abstract, more the quality of a marketing strategy than a movie, revolving chiefly around the image of its aged, batty title character remade in the young and comely form of Emma Stone, dolled up in goth-punk bitch-queen attire.



*Cruella* nonetheless introduces its antiheroine as a victim of misunderstanding and snobbery in a storyline that leaps from the mid-1960s to a decade later. Raised by her good-natured single mother Catherine (Emily Beecham), young Estella (Tipper Seifert-Cleveland) has a rampant streak, one her mother tries to keep under control, to the point where she designates it an alternate personality she nicknames Cruella. Estella is eventually booted out of her fancy school for the constant tussles she gets into with snooty bullies, having only made friends with the only black kid at the school, Anita (Florisa Kamana). Soon after her mother dies, pushed over a cliff by some Dalmatian guard dogs during an enigmatic visit to the owner of a seaside mansion called Hellman Hall. Estella, left alone and penniless, falls in with two orphaned pickpockets, Jasper (Ziggy Gardner) and Horace (Joseph MacDonald). As she grows up to look like Emma Stone, Estella becomes accomplished in thievery and plotting, as well as giving her a stage to apply her gifts for designing and making clothes in a most effective manner. Eventually, the adult Jasper (Joel Fry) and Horace (Paul Walter Hauser) elect to help their talented confederate escape criminal life and contrive to land her a job at a high-end fashion store, but she finds herself stuck as a menial cleaner and ignored in her appeals for a chance working on alterations.



Estella gets her break when she vandalises a dreary window display showcasing a dress made by the grande dame designer simply called the Baroness (Emma Thompson). The Baroness, visiting the store the following day, is impressed and hires Estella as one of her variably abused and exploited squad of designers. Estella is drawn closer to the Baroness who likes her ideas so much she doesn't mind stealing them, but when Estella discovers that the Baroness is actually the owner of Hellman Hall and deliberately contrived her mother's death, Estella is driven to plot a campaign of revenge and ruination whilst also unleashing her own, best, anarchic abilities. She takes on the persona of Cruella, a strident provocateur and new-wave designer who constantly gate-crashes the Baroness's events and steals her thunder, whilst Jasper, Horace, and a new pal, the Bowie-esque gender-bender fashionista Artie (John McCrae), help sabotage her new collection. The Baroness doesn't take kindly to this and once she discovers who Cruella really is, has her goons arrange Estella's murder, intending to set up Jasper and Horace for the crime. Estella escapes, thanks to the Baroness's decent valet John (Mark Strong), who also tells her the dread secret that binds her and the Baroness, being as they are in truth mother and daughter.



*Cruella's* director Craig Gillespie emerged with the 2008 indie hit *Lars and the Real Girl* and then became a semi-regular Disney director, making the lovingly old-fashioned shipwreck drama *The Finest Hours* (2016). But he probably landed this gig for another sympathy-for-the-devil-woman story, having recounted Tonya Harding's story according to her in the pseudo-Scorsesean but cumulatively effective drama *I, Tonya* (2017). Where the variably daft and pathetic characters in that film were dangerous in their plots and predations but ineffectual in their methods, *Cruella* presents a fantasy vision of the driven outsider embracing her nefarious, lawless, immodest side and being rewarded for it. As many commented upon the film's release, the wave of revisionist takes *Cruella* belongs to has come at the cost of neutering and reducing some magnificent villainesses, characters who had stature and nightmarish intensity in their original editions, but now can't be simply wicked because, well, feminism, maybe? *Maleficent*, for instant, induced more cringing than sentiment as it presented the titular sepulchral fairy as an aggrieved and empathetic figure but bought a happy ending for and her victimward Aurora at the price of ignoring Maleficent's part in killing Aurora's actual mother, as well as the attendant spectre of moral complexity. *Cruella* seems to be playing the same game in fashioning such an elaborate genesis for its protagonist, but ultimately there's something more interesting going on.





Fittingly for a film obsessed with fashion, legacies, lineage, and generational war, *Cruella* is basically a maternal melodrama dressed up in gaudy franchise drag, close to a big-budget take on William Castle's *Strait-Jacket* (1964), although swapping out the selflessly suffering mother for the implacable progeny as focal point. The film cornily encodes Estella/Cruella's duality by making the character's signature white-streaked black hair a congenital feature connected with her schismatic psyche, one she hides by dyeing her hair dark red when she tries to play the striving young go-getter, only to let it show when she finds "Cruella gets things done." Cruella claims the mantle of "The Future" for herself – she literally paints this on her face at one point – whilst the Baroness tries to turn the full weight of the establishment she embodies against her plucky young daughter-foe. The film's fuzzy period setting casts Cruella as surrogate Vivienne Westwood, inventing punkish fashions in the course of her war with her nemesis-mother, combating her with calculated acts not only of disruption and destruction but her own *coups-de-theatre*, like having herself dumped out a garbage truck onto the street at one of the Baroness's events, the garbage proving to actually be a huge dress that swims behind her as she rides away in laughing glory.



This campaign climaxes in a fun, gaudy sequence where Cruella appears as the swaggering heroine of her own fashion show, whilst Artie bawls out The Stooges' "I Wanna Be Your Dog" and models gyrate whilst bathed in infernal shades. The deployment of "I Wanna Be Your Dog" plants an obvious joke in regards to the story's canine basis, but also suitably takes the song as the inception point of for punk's trash-art aesthetics. What's different here is that whilst the film remains behind Cruella until the end, and it does play humorous games with her image as a dog-killing loony (she taunts the Baroness at one point by kidnapping her three prize Dalmatians and then wearing an ensemble sporting Dalmatian spots), it never tries to remake her into an unqualifiedly admirable figure. Cruella's drives, aims, and eventual success are all double-edged things, mixing justifiable anger, authentic talent, continent-sized ego, and a vicious streak that often threatens to take her over, particularly once her true lineage is divulged and Cruella is obliged to recognise that a certain lunatic grandeur is part of her inheritance as well as talent and ambition. The main difference between her and the Baroness by the end is that Cruella hasn't yet killed anyone in her way, yet.



Jasper and Horace, once her pals and collaborators, find themselves chafing increasingly under her dictatorial way, and when she finally tries to make amends it comes only half-heartedly by out-competing them in declared grievance. Cruella herself, as she processes the news she's the offspring of a woman she knows to be a psychopath, embraces this by evoking Caroline Lamb's famous comment about Lord Byron and applying it to herself. The film assiduously dismantles the girl-boss clichés it ostensibly coasts on: the Baroness tells her in no uncertain terms that success as a woman and a tycoon demands the utter focus and the complete removal of all impeding emotions and attachments, a choice in life that Estella/Cruella eventually learns is entirely responsible for her ending up a lonely, starving, rejected wretch. Nonetheless it's advice Cruella essentially follows to the letter, to the point where her eventual triumph is also a form of self-mortification, Estella entirely replaced by the strange, malevolent, white-painted ghoul she's remade herself as. That's a fascinating and perturbing theme for a movie with mainstream family blockbuster ambitions, something of a female-centric, fashion-forward take on George Lucas' *Star Wars* prequels.



There's an off-hand stab at closing the loop with the source material involving the adult Anita (Kirby Howell-Baptiste), now a fashion journalist Cruella enlists in her guerrilla publicity campaign, and her eventual husband Roger (Kayvan Novak), working as the Baroness's put-upon lawyer but harbouring dreams of being a songwriter: the two eventually, separately inherit the pups of the Baroness's Dalmatians, long since subordinated to Cruella's will. *Cruella* is an odd work because it straddles genres without quite committing to any. Sometimes it's a slapstick comedy, a larkish heist movie, a bitchy *The Devil Wears Prada*-style workplace satire, and ultimately an intergenerational psychodrama not that far from something Robert Aldrich might once have directed. Gillespie has an elegant if derivative eye, and *Cruella* comes on in a sprawl of lush retro-fetishist surfaces and choreographed action, like a lengthy *Goodfellas*-esque tracking shot that sarcastically explores all the nooks and crannies of the fashion store until it finally locates our heroine scrubbing a toilet. *Cruella* is at its best when fascinated in a low-key erotic fashion with Stone's effectively arch performance, swanning about swathed in make-up and glistening black, armed with a cane for swatting pests in the face, exploding her bombs of disdain in fashionable soirees. The climax sees Cruella pulling off the ultimate coup for a fashion artist-entrepreneur and entirely making over a room full of party guests in her own image.



Stone gets strong support from Thompson's suitably venomous performance, and Hauser who manages to wring a good laugh from something as casual as swanning about in haute couture. Strong is largely wasted in his role and yet his air of cagey authority matched to a dose of mysterious compassion is a valuable resource. The plotting, despite involving media manipulation and the period pop culture zeitgeist, is nonetheless pitched on a fairy-tale level – the Baroness is as lawless as any wicked witch or evil queen – and if accepted that way works. The faults of *Cruella* aren't minor, however: it's absurdly overlong and loses a lot of steam in its second half. The soundtrack, crammed with '60s and '70s hits, often feels slapdash in its usage, sprawling wall-to-wall it feels largely because the filmmakers could, with only a couple of numbers really feeling well-used. McCrae's signposted queer character is brought in to give Cruella the veneer of ally-ship in the great world club of rebel weirdos, but essentially does for the film what he does in it: window dressing. The most disappointing part is the finale, which urgently needs to embrace the Grand Guignol Gillespie's been accruing throughout in an explosion of breathless melodrama befitting the fairy tale motif – it deserves something as mad and dark as the climax of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1938), but it's been a long time since Disney dared to be so fearsome and enthusiastic. Here we have to settle for a contrived piece of trickery enabled through some awful CGI. Nonetheless, I half-reluctantly liked *Cruella*, because like its namesake it manages to look good whilst being agreeably nasty.



## Army of the Dead (2021)



Zack Snyder's second release of 2021 after his reedit of *Justice League*, *Army of the Dead* sees Snyder revisiting the territory of his feature debut, the 2004 remake of *Dawn of the Dead*. He opens with a potent sequence in which a pair of newlyweds in car, performing a sex act whilst roaring down the highway out of Las Vegas, collides with an army convoy transporting a mysterious container. A fast, strong, gnarled-looking man, in fact a zombie of mysterious origin, breaks out of the toppled container and immediately slays all the soldiers save two who, infected by his bite, become zombies like him and head down towards the bright lights of the desert city. The opening credits, as is something of a trademark for Snyder, come flashing over a dynamic sprawl of encapsulating world-building as we see the zombie plague infecting Vegas which dissolves into utter chaos with a few special, rough-and-ready individuals rising to the moment and fighting their way out, whilst the smouldering ruins of the city are walled off with piled-up shipping containers. Several years later, one of the heroes, Scott Ward (Dave Bautista), is stuck working flipping burgers in a grimy diner when he's approached by Bly Tanaka (Hiroyuki Sanada), owner of a hotel-casino in Vegas, who wants Scott to lead a team into the city and remove \$200 million stashed in the vault ahead of the city's imminent nuclear destruction to exterminate the last of the plague.



The squad Scott assembles includes major badassess: there are Scott's trusted former comrades-in-arms Maria Cruz (Ana de la Reguera) and Vanderohé (Omari Hardwick), the waste-laying Chambers (Samantha Win), the YouTube star zombie killer Mikey Guzman (Raúl Castillo), and the truculent helicopter pilot and wiz mechanic Marianne Peters (Tig Notaro), as well as the non-badass Dieter (Matthias Schweighöfer), a talkative German safecracker needed to actually access the casino vault. As they enter Vegas via a quarantine camp where the people displaced by the invasion are held, nominally to ensure none are zombie-infected, the team gathers some more members. Tanaka insists they take along his own man, Martin (Garret Dillahunt). They need Lilly 'The Coyote' (Nora Arnezeder), who makes her living from showing less ambitious raiders the way into the city, to be their guide, and she in turn insists they need one more person, enticing the sleazy, bullying camp guard Burt Cummings (Theo Rossi) with the promise of a cut. Scott's estranged daughter Kate (Ella Purnell), a volunteer worker in the campy, forces her father to take her along when she finds one of her friend, Geeta (Huma Qureshi), has gone into the city along with some others in the hunt for cash before the camp is emptied out.





*Army of the Dead* is the first original, unfettered, non-franchise work Snyder's made since *Sucker Punch* (2011), but it doesn't return to that film's strange and bravura multimedia experiential flux which allowed him to toggle through genres in digi-surreal fashion. *Army of the Dead* seems more straightforward as a flashy, pop-movie take on grindhouse genre stuff, and yet manages to pay nods to video gaming, deploying an array of designated tough-guy-and-gal avatars into a phased quest mission, and is just as jarringly unstable as *Sucker Punch* in tone, shifting from high farce to bloody mayhem to deadly seriousness on a dime. Snyder mixes in satire, taking aim at the Trump administration (complete with a cameo by Trump's former Press Secretary Sean Spicer) and western migrant policy in general in portraying the displaced persons camp full of desperate people forced to try and stay on the good side of exploitative guards and hoping to escape their borderland limbo. Las Vegas, its ruins festooned with garish recreations of popular landmarks like the Statue of Liberty, becomes the profit-motive world in miniature, littered with glittering prizes inspiring the variably desperate and unscrupulous to make their dangerous ventures, and emphasises the financial motives of his heroes in taking on the job, like Peters, who doesn't even ask what she's being hired for because "I hate my life so deeply."



Snyder's sideswiping commentary is subordinated to the more general business of following his collective of mercenaries as they head into enemy territory and inevitably find things more complicated than expected. Snyder has some fun playing about with zombie lore, splitting the difference between the old-school George Romero-like undead and the aggressive, quick-moving monsters he employed in *Dawn of the Dead* as he establishes disparity between the 'alpha' zombies including the first and most powerful, 'Zeus', and the zombies he creates himself, who are fast and retain a kind of barbarian intelligence, and the 'shamblers' his subordinates create who only move slowly and mindlessly. By the time the team enter Vegas most of the latter have withered up in the sun, occasionally reanimated by rainfall. Later in the film he establishes that Zeus reigns over the other alphas in a kind of court and even has a mate, a former showgirl turned hellacious zombie queen (Athena Perample), and even has impregnated her with a blue undead baby, a la Peter Jackson's *Brain Dead* (1992). The plot is particularly beholden to John Carpenter's *Escape From New York* (1981) and *Ghosts of Mars* (2001), whilst Snyder makes unsubtle nods to *An American Werewolf In London* (1981), *Planet of the Apes* (1968), *Die Hard* (1986), and *Aliens* (1986) amongst others. Richard Cetrone's presence as Zeus most immediately recalls *Ghosts of Mars*, but Snyder badly lacks Carpenter's sense of both storytelling nimbleness and gift for off-hand drollery.



*Army of the Dead* seems primed then to be a bodacious ride through a B-movie hell laced with puckish cruelty and absurdist mayhem. And it delivers all that, I suppose, but something along the line goes badly wrong. For one thing, Snyder's attempts to pepper the film with smart-mouthed black comedy are deeply laborious. Snyder's never exactly been known for a light touch or tone, let alone being funny, and his script, co-written with Shay Hatten and Joby Harold, never effectively meshes with his restless, almost arrhythmic direction here. The parts of *Army of the Dead* that work best are the more serious ones. There's a meaningful undercurrent in the film that seems to explore and mediate Snyder's emotional landscape after his daughter's death, portraying fatherly rage and impotence in losing loved-ones and allowing his hero Scott to perform a successful self-sacrifice on the behalf of Kate. Snyder nods to a religious-mythical subtext as Bly's hotel has towers called Sodom and Gomorrah, and the city is, as in the Biblical story and indeed in John Huston's take on it in *The Bible...In The Beginning* (1966), eventually annihilated by wrath of god correlated to the atomic bomb. The most tense and discomfiting scene comes when Lilly reveals the reason for bringing Burt along, trussing him up and presenting him as a mollifying sacrifice to the alphas who allow the rest of the interlopers to pass on unharmed. There's no doubt Burt is a real creep but Snyder prolongs his fear to the point of inspiring empathy, and registers the disquiet of the others in being oblige to gun along with it. Here Snyder pulls off the kind of scene a good zombie movie is best at, provoking questions about humanity and the lack of it.



But *Army of the Dead*, like the zombie tiger and horse roaming its Las Vegas, is a lumbering beast with ribs and sinew showing. Snyder tries to play games with some of the familiar tropes and characterisations he presents, but the development is so half-hearted I wished he'd stop. He sets up the cause for Scott and Kate's estrangement, for instance, with a flashback to Scott having to kill his zombie wife in front of Kate, only to try to deflate this, with Kate reporting that she's angry not because of that event, but because he was "never there" for her afterwards. Vanderohe and Dieter are posited as the essential stern badass and talkative neophyte duo although the opening notes that Vanderohe is actually an MA in Philosophy and has a loquacious streak when stirred, whilst Dieter eventually sacrifices himself to save Vanderohe because, well, they shared a couple of quips. Snyder's attempts to be mischievously cynical are counterproductive, bleeding steam from his own attempts to ratchet up the tension precisely because he's too eager to despoil his narrative to the point where it becomes a new cliché. When he has Maria confess her love for Scott, I started counting down to the moment when she'll get "shockingly" killed. Bautista has emerged over the past few years as an effortlessly charismatic and engaging performer, and he's marvellous in mediating Scott's physical presence, all bulbous, brawny force, and his actual, rather gentle and thoughtful personality. But the film barely gives him anything to work with, except for the most clichéd kind of guilty dad stuff: "Every time I looked at you, I just saw her," he tells Kate when they have the compulsory time out talk to bury their issues, one of many occasions where the characters behave in an awfully indulgent manner considering their predicament.



*Army of the Dead* is also the second new film I'd watched in three days (the other was Jonathan Hensleigh's less technically impressive but more properly entertaining *The Ice Road*) where the core team of pros is saddled with a company man with nefarious motives, in this cast Dillahunt's Martin, the kind of character inserted to make plot happen. Martin proves a general-purpose asshole who deliberately gets Chambers killed because she spoke rudely to him by laying a false trail through a mob of still-standing but hibernating zombies, sparking a desperate fight. He then more purposefully breaks the ceasefire with the alphas by deliberately targeting the queen and sawing off her head to take back to Tanaka, who wants a sample of the alpha blood: the raid on the casino vault, he reports, is just a sideshow by comparison, which makes you wonder why they're bothering. Kate has to leave the robber band to go search for Geeta to help provoke third-act stakes. For the same reason, Snyder suddenly has the countdown to the nuclear devastation brought forward a day, apparently to avoid letting it off on July 4, a possibility that must surely have been mooted for a while and yet no-one mentioned during the preparations for both the thieves' incursion or the camp's evacuation, not to mention the team's lackadaisical response to the news and reliance on a broken-down helicopter to get away from an atomic bomb blast. Snyder can't just have Peters struggle with mechanical troubles, but must illustrate her dealing with an engine that spurts flames when she tries to start it up to the point where the chopper should not reasonably be able to fly again.



Too much of *Army of the Dead* comes across like it was tossed together despite a script still on its first draft. It's also the first film Snyder's made where I struggled to take any aesthetic pleasure in what he was doing. Snyder served as his own cinematographer here, but the film totally lacks the fluid, colourful texture of *300* (2007), *Watchmen* (2009) and *Sucker Punch*, his camerawork often jammed in tight and employing a lot of annoying focal length tricks to a degree that almost gave me a headache. *Army of the Dead* reminded me often of Michael Bay's *6 Underground* (2019), another film from a major-league booyah director delivered for Netflix, who allow the filmmakers to indulge their most adolescent streaks where a real movie studio might have, dare I say, made sure they remembered the audience. The film takes a reasonably long time to set up its plot, perhaps a bit too long given how basic the story and characterisations are, and the action is oddly spasmodic: Chambers' battle, whilst well-done in and of itself, seems inserted to give the sagging middle act a shot in the arm. I didn't entirely dislike *Army of the Dead*, all that said. The pre-credits scene with bewildered soldiers facing off against something utterly malevolent and ferocious breaking loose, is a strong unit of filmmaking particularly in the use of dusky light, resolving with the memorable image of Zeus and his new minions standing on a vantage above Vegas, about to unleash hell.



Just as good is the opening credits sequence, which sports vignettes like zombie showgirls eating a high roller alive in his hot tub and a paratrooper descending helplessly into a sea of hungry shamblers, all set to Richard Cheese and Allison Crowe's sauntering cover of "Viva Las Vegas," suggesting a level of evil comic cheek the rest of the film never comes close to touching. Snyder also manages to recover a little bit in the frantic climax, as Peters tries desperately to fly the chopper beyond the incoming bomb's range whilst Scott and Kate struggle to fend off Zeus, who manages to leap aboard. Amongst the admirable array of tough women in the film, Arnezeder is the most striking and interesting, effectively playing a tensile survivor who tries to maintain her own kind of moral calculus in a borderline nihilistic situation. Her ultimate confrontation with Zeus in the finale is naggingly memorable as she tries to hold the monster at bay with the one ghost of human affection left to him in a perverse new take on Perseus with the Medusa's head at the end of *Clash of the Titans* (1981), only to pay a terrible price, saved only from perhaps finding herself a suitable replacement for the beheaded zombie queen by the annihilating kiss of nuclear fission. The final shot of Kate with the atomic bomb's mushroom cloud behind her is a lovely depiction of emotional desolation. But Snyder's sloppy tendencies extend to not properly communicating whether Geeta survives for all Kate's selfless efforts to save her, and an appended coda resolving Vanderohé's fate is, sadly, a limp stab at Carpenter-esque cyclical irony. *Army of the Dead* is a big, odd, off-kilter lump of movie that might well please as many people as it turns off. It's good to see Snyder making original work again, but *Army of the Dead* has the quality of a rictus grin, as if Snyder's trying to will himself to make the kind of movie he just doesn't feel anymore.





**The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring (2001) / The Two Towers (2002) / The Return of the King (2003)**



**Director: Peter Jackson**

**Screenwriters: Philippa Boyens, Peter Jackson, Stephen Sinclair (*The Two Towers* only), Fran Walsh**

For over forty years, John Ronald Ruel Tolkien's three-volume fantasy novel *The Lord of the Rings* defied all efforts to adapt it as live-action cinema. The requirements of such an adaptation, including a large budget, advanced special effects, and an intelligent filmmaker with a feel for the fantasy genre, put it beyond the scope and interest of movie studios, although a fascinating array of directorial talents, particularly John Boorman, confirmed a desire to try. Stanley Kubrick, an admirer of the novels, turned down an offer to film them because he thought it impossible at the time. There was even an aborted attempt to make a version starring The Beatles. Tolkien, a philologist, Oxford don, and First World War veteran, spent most of his adult life creating his beloved and endlessly influential legendarium, drawing on the classical and medieval myths that were the marrow of his intellectual interests along with the languages they were told in. Tolkien's stated aim was to synthesise a specifically British equivalent to the tales of Homer and the Norse sagas as he felt the cultural core of the ancient land had been erased by the Romans and subsequent invaders.



Tolkien's earliest forays on this project were scribbled out when he was serving in the trenches during World War I, at first for private amusement and then with increasing purpose that crystallised when he wrote a short novel for young readers, 1937's *The Hobbit*, rooting it in his invented world. That book's success spurred him to start work on *The Lord of the Rings*, which took nearly twenty years. An immediate hit as the three volumes were published, the work only grew in popularity, particularly as its themes and imagery concurred with the emerging counterculture in the 1960s. Tolkien gave new and powerful life to the fantasy genre, which had its roots in the backwards-looking wistfulness of late Victoriana and branched off into the arcane macho fantasies of pulp magazines. Tolkien was dismayed by the first BBC radio adaptation in the mid-1950s, a version that no longer exists: it took time for the lexicon of high fantasy which Tolkien had all but birthed to permeate pop culture enough to be used to retranslate his imaginings into other forms. Maverick animation director Ralph Bakshi bypassed many of the difficulties by making an animated version, but the result, released in 1978, told only half the story of the novel and its indifferent reception meant the project was left unfinished. The BBC's second radio adaptation, broadcast in 1981, was on the other hand richly detailed and much admired.



The man who finally talked a studio into backing a multi-episode adaptation produced on the most lavish of scales was as unlikely in his way as Tolkien's diminutive, world-defying heroes. Peter Jackson had made his name in low-budget, freakish punk-gore comedy-horror films in his native New Zealand,

beginning with 1987's incredibly cheap and patchy but ingenious *Bad Taste* and pushed to an extreme with 1992's *Brain Dead* (aka *Dead Alive*), strongly influenced by fellow no-budget provocateur Sam Raimi but with new, baroque dimensions and a gift for blockbuster-like narrative intensity and spectacle. *Heavenly Creatures* (1994) marked Jackson's sudden swivel towards international respectability in tackling a notorious and deeply tragic true crime tale, whilst still drawing on a fabulously fecund and bizarre imagination, as well as the new realm of digital special effects through the burgeoning Weta Workshop, to illustrate the hothouse bond of two young women who committed a murder in 1950s Christchurch.



Jackson's first film made for Hollywood, if still shot in his homeland, was *The Frighteners* (1997), a return to his earlier gore-comedy fare, only slightly toned down for a wider audience. It proved a flop, but Jackson, undaunted, gained the approval of rights holder Saul Zaentz and got Miramax and New Line Films to fund his grandiose Tolkien venture. Some of Jackson's value for money would still have been obvious. He was a hot young property despite a commercial stumble, he proposed making the films back to back in New Zealand to save costs and exploit its variety of locations, and knew how to ride the cutting edge of digital special effects. The novel's popularity also promised a ready-made audience. To a certain extent. *The Lord of the Rings* had to win over the ordinary moviegoer as well, something fantasy film had long had a hard time doing, without a major hit in the genre since John Milius' take on its gamier, pulpier wing, *Conan the Barbarian* (1982). But 2001 was an auspicious year, also seeing the release of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, and for a while at least pure fantasy became a popular movie genre. Jackson, his partner and collaborator Fran Walsh, and writer and fellow arch Tolkien fan Philippa Boyens, approached their adaptation with wise scruples.



The challenge, and the films' subsequent success, can be summarised with one key word: balance. Jackson and company had to even the scales between the many frames of reference that had become part of the mystique of *The Lord of the Rings* as well as the intricacies of its writing and story. Jackson avoided either becoming mired too deeply in the esoteric aspect of Tolkien's tales or trying to revise them into something more contemporary, finding more room for creativity in extrapolating and amplifying the action aspect of Tolkien. The books had become signal works for fans in their preoccupation with a fictional world where everything has multiple dimensions of history, language, and symbolic portent, and the protective concept of nature as an interconnected system matched to a hostility towards industrialism. This also lurked behind the material's popular perception as something beloved by asocial nerds and patchouli-soaked collegians, an association Jackson played up with unobtrusive mirth in making the Hobbits' tobacco-like "leaf" rather more suggestively pot-like. In any events, the three films' success made them an immediate pop cultural standard, the third instalment netting the Best Picture Oscar for 2003 and the trilogy more or less defining for the last generation or so what people think of as epic cinema. *The Lord of the Rings* incidentally created instant visual clichés of the new digital effects era, like the opening shots of CGI armies marching across the screen.



*The Fellowship of the Ring*, the first instalment, grabs attention nimbly from its opening moments, utilising Cate Blanchett's sinuous narration in playing the lovely, ageless Elf lady Galadriel, to narrate

and with Howard Shore's tingling, elegant, gently foreboding string scoring lacing around the images like the curlicues of medieval penmanship. The quasi-mythic background of the ensuing drama is sketched in a few brief, spectacular scenes, as the Dark Lord Sauron, a fallen angel-like being who served the Legendarium's great Satanic figure Melkor until his defeat, and then tried to gain control of the world called Middle-earth by sharing out magical rings of influence to the lords of Men, Elves, and Dwarves, all bound secretly to his own ring which can subjugate others to his will. The kings of Men given the rings became the Nazgûl, undead, completely enslaved beings, but the various races of Middle-earth formed an alliance to take on Sauron and his army of brutish beings called Orcs in their hellish wasteland home of Mordor. In the final battle Sauron seemed completely unstoppable thanks to the ring, until the human king Isildur (Harry Sinclair) managed to slice off Sauron's fingers along with the ring. Sauron's physical form exploded and the armies of darkness were pushed back, but Isildur, ignoring the pleas of the Elf Lord Elrond (Hugo Weaving) to throw the ring into the volcanic pits of Mount Doom where it was forged, decided to keep it. But the ring, an object inculcated with the pure malice and treacherous wit of Sauron as well as his life-essence, contrived eventually to bring about Isildur's death and be lost, eventually claimed by Sméagol (Andy Serkis), a being so susceptible to the ring's consuming power he is taken over by a rival personality calling itself Gollum, and becomes its perfect protector in the long wait for Sauron's power to re-emerge.



The theme of the cursed ring, based on several mythic objects including Andvaranaut from the *Völsunga Saga* which also supplied Wagner with the chief basis for his version of the Nibelung legend, is used in Tolkien's story rather differently to its source, where it was an object hazily symbolising greed, misused authority, and grave legacy. Tolkien reformed it into a catch-all symbol of demonic corruption, working insidiously on every psyche it encounters. The abstract power of the ring was one of the more difficult ideas to communicate cinematically, with Jackson pulling every trick in the book to give it a menacing gravitas, from shots using forced perspective lensing to capture its mysterious and subordinating charisma, to menacing, simmering voices heard on the soundtrack when its power is stirred, as well as dramatically stylised visions when people don the ring and behold the shadowy world of spiritual energy usually cloaked to mortal eyes. The ring eventually came into the possession of a Hobbit – a race of very short and stocky people who like to live prosaic lives on the fringe of the great world of Middle-earth – named Bilbo Baggins (Ian Holm), who found it during an encounter with Gollum. But the story only truly starts when the ring is passed on to his nephew and ward Frodo (Elijah Wood), a gambolling innocent who proves, thanks in part to his native Hobbit qualities and his own character, the only being capable of resisting the ring's influence long enough to stand a chance of taking it back to Mount Doom and destroying it.



Sauron, still only a spiritual entity after losing his body, has nonetheless regained enough power and dread purpose to manifest as a cloud of fire shaped like an eye atop his grim fortress in Mordor, and it's time for him to send out his minions in search of the ring and unleash his new project to enslave the world. The ring's true nature is recognised by the wizard Gandalf (Ian McKellen) after Bilbo bequeaths it as well as his underground house Bag End to Frodo on his 111th birthday. Once certain of its identity he urges Bilbo to carry it out of The Shire to Elrond's home at the Elf city of Rivendell. Gandalf pressgangs Frodo's friend and gardener Samwise Gamgee (Sean Astin) into accompanying him after catching him eavesdropping on their conversation. Frodo gains more company when they run into his relatives, the perpetually hungry gadabouts Peregrin 'Pippin' Took (Dominic Monaghan) and Meriadoc 'Merry' Brandybuck (Billy Boyd), on the road. Eventually the foursome are taken under the wing of a friend of Gandalf's, an enigmatic warrior commonly called Strider but actually named Aragorn (Viggo Mortensen), who tries to lead them safely through the increasingly rugged and dangerous country east of The Shire. Meanwhile Gandalf, planning to rendezvous with the Hobbits, visits the most powerful and respected of Middle-earth's small clique of wizards, Saruman (Christopher Lee), at his tower in Isengard, to warn him of the portents of Sauron's return, only to find Saruman has already cast his lot with the Dark Lord, and Saruman uses his superior power to imprison Gandalf.



The central metaphor of Tolkien's story, that the little people – the figurative made literal here, in a touch at once faintly ribbing but also self-mythologising in its attitude to Englishness as a pure-sprung virtue – are the most truly heroic, was never meant to be subtle, and it's a deep-wound part of the story's universal appeal. *The Lord of the Rings* plays with the usual substance of warrior culture hero myths to place the usually unheroic at the heart of the tale whilst the emissaries of martial vainglory are more often than not held in suspicion until they prove worthy. Crucially, Jackson purveyed the twee existence of the Hobbits, with their idyllic version of a rural English lifestyle, and the mock-classical speech and concepts with dashes of good-humour but without any concessions to modern incredulity. Jackson himself swore off inserting any message of his own in tackling Tolkien, but there is, in the first film's quick portrait of The Shire and its denizens, dashes of the satirical eye Jackson turned so scathingly on the New Zealand bourgeoisie in his earlier films, in the glowering Hobbits who dislike any sign of disruption or peculiarity. For Tolkien the road out from The Shire was a fraught and half-dread one for a man who knew what marching off to and home from danger felt like; for Jackson, there's the squirming provincial creative person's suspicion the risky path is the only way out. Jackson's directing approach is quickly in evidence in the thrusting camerawork and wide-angle lensing to give the actions and objects a looming, overlarge force, giving the expensive blockbuster much the same visual energy as Jackson's marauding B-movies.



The sequence of Gandalf's return to Frodo's home after confirming what the ring is an excellent thumbnail of Jackson's technique. After creating the sense of looming and imminent danger with a vignette of one of the mounted Nazgûl questioning a hapless Shire farmer, Jackson depicts Frodo coming home after a night drinking with his friends. A lurking presence is suggested via hand-held camerawork peering through a grill. A long shot of Frodo entering the house dollies slightly to note papers flitting about in the breeze and then then forced-open window it blows through. Frodo pads into the darkened house, the camera moving hungrily from behind Frodo to before him: a hand reaches out of the shadow behind him, grasping his shoulder, with Gandalf suddenly looming out of the dark, his face lunging forward and the camera moving to meet him so his dishevelled, wild-eyed visage entirely fills the screen, before his totemic question – "Is it secret? Is it safe?" The actual revelation of the ring, performed by throwing it in fire so that the ancient words written on its surface are revealed, and Gandalf's grim news about how the Nazgûl know it's now in the hands of a Baggins, is then followed by a swift cut to one of the searching Nazgûl beheading a challenging watchman somewhere out in the Shire night, a jagged illustration of nightmarish danger moving inexorably closer: cut back to Frodo's panicked reaction and his plea for Gandalf to take the ring.



The visual and storytelling cues here are all straight from horror cinema, nodding to Dario Argento and John Carpenter's use of negative screen space as the place where threat lurks as well as Raimi's hypermobile camerawork. Expectation is raised only for what is suggested to be a lurking danger to prove a friend, but the danger is real and now feels omnipresent. Such a trick Jackson plies arguably once or twice too often but certainly as a consistent tactic to keep the narrative in agitation, playing games throughout with his style of set-up and follow-through, in contrast to traditional approaches of screen epics and fantasy. The style informs the sudden transformation of The Shire from a place of hermetic stability into one charged with threat, but doing so in a manner that emphasises the building menace as intimate: the colossal, world-resaping supernatural force lying out in the vast wilds in the east manifests locally to Frodo through troubling portents and roaming assassins. The actual trek for Frodo and Sam is momentarily halted when Sam notes they've reached what was previously the furthest point he'd ever travelled from The Shire's centre, the moment of leaving behind home and known things and venturing into the world identified as something crucial in the course of the quest and the heroes' concepts of themselves. Soon they're eluding the Nazgûl on the road, Frodo resisting the urge to put on the ring as they come close, and racing to beat them to the only ferry across the bordering river.



A heavy dose of jolly comic relief counterpoints the high drama, largely provided by Merry and Pippin, whose minds initially, scarcely rise above their stomachs and thirsts until they're immersed in the great



conflict, and even once they join battle they still know how to take time out for a puff of weed and a spot of carousing. The Hobbits hover on the border of the childlike in their personas and wide-eyed approach to life, an aspect Jackson emphasised by casting youngish actors in the roles in contrast to other envisionings that often made them lumpen. They're also in their provincialism ideal tourists in this world to discover everything for the first time, insular in the best sense in representing homey values almost undiluted, and good for speaking exposition to. As innocents abroad they need a protector and find one in Aragorn, introduced as a shadowy, knowing figure who embodies the promise of classical heroism but disdains the trappings of it, for very good reasons. Aragorn saves the Hobbits from an assault by the Nazgûl, but Frodo is stabbed with a cursed blade, beginning his slow transformation into another wraith. Luckily, the Elf princess Arwen (Liv Tyler), Aragorn's lady love and Elrond's daughter, intercepts them on the road and makes a gallop on horseback with Frodo to the safe harbour and healing arts at Rivendell.



Once Frodo recovers, and Gandalf joins them after escaping Saruman, they call a meeting of envoys from the various Middle-earth races, including the Elf Legolas (Orlando Bloom), Dwarf Gimli (John Rhys-Davies), and the human knight Boromir (Sean Bean), who represents his father Denethor (John Noble), steward of the Italianate human realm of Gondor. These three join Gandalf, Aragorn, and the four Hobbits in a Fellowship that sets out for Mordor. During an attempt to make passage through the Mines of Moria, a subterranean former Dwarf city now abandoned to Orcs and an enormous fire demon called a Balrog, Gandalf seems to die fending off the Balrog. The rest of the Fellowship find refuge briefly with another Elven commune ruled over by Galadriel, with her great arts as a seer and sorceress. After boating downriver, Frodo, with Sam in tow, is obliged to split from the Fellowship when Boromir, unbalanced by the ring's influence, tries to snatch it, and they trek off alone. The others in the Fellowship are attacked by a new breed of Orcs reared by Saruman called Uruk-hai: they kidnap Merry and Pippin, think them to be the Hobbits carrying the ring, and kill Boromir. Aragorn, Gimli, and Legolas set out to save the two captives, ending the first film. In *The Two Towers*, Frodo and Sam continue their arduous trek and form an uneasy partnership with Gollum, who's been tracking them across country. Stricken by the pathos of Gollum's state and feeling discomforting kinship with him, Frodo agrees to let him guide them to Mordor. They're briefly held captive by Boromir's brother Faramir (David Wenham), but eventually he is convinced of the necessity of letting them go.



Whilst Frodo is the linchpin of the narrative, he is bound through his general if tested decency and enforced passivity to be the least compelling figure, worn down to a husk by the weight of the burden and the effect of the ring: the challenge of his character is not his growth but his need to remain the same, to retain his essential goodness and optimism. The former child star Wood's innate likeability and large blue eyes go a long way, but it is nonetheless not an easy part to play, as Frodo's deterioration and increasing attitude of grim knowledge, in both his sense of impending personal doom and his battle with the ring, demands careful shading. Meanwhile Sam, his most stalwart companion, grows ever more valiant as the quest unfolds, until the dramatic crescendo when Sam, unable to carry the ring himself, decides instead to carry the exhausted Frodo on his back. By contrast, the humans are more fretful, complex creatures most vulnerable to the ring's predations because their best motives are often close kin to their worst, the temptation to try and wield its power to protect their communities the most devious potent of its manipulations, the one that ruins Boromir.



But the most heroic human characters like Aragorn, Faramir, Théoden (Bernard Hill), and Éowyn (Miranda Otto), are defined as such in overcoming their sense of inner frailty and unsureness in their identities, a process of becoming that makes the humans, by the tale's end, the inheritors of a world where the fixed and unchanging races are moving on to "undying lands," fading in their power and relevance. Aragorn is very much the central figure in this, a man who steadily resolves from a shadowy

outsider by choice to a nascent warrior-king as it emerges he is the descendent of Isildur, the line of kings having abandoned the throne of Gondor, but still retains a quiet fear he will ultimately prove as weak as his ancestor, a fear he must eventually quell when he faces situations requiring exactly his gifts. With Mortensen expertly depicting steely fighting pith balanced by a rather gentle, philosophical spirit, Aragorn represents the complex balance of forces required in being a civilised and civilising man, whilst possessing all the ancient virtues, the ideal fighter and eventual king because of, rather than in spite of, his complexity. He's also the only true romantic figure in the film, once who suffers as well as feels anointed through his apparently impossible love for Arwen.



Gandalf, based broadly on versions of Odin in his wanderer guise in Norse tales, is the chief engine of the storyline as the being who urges the others into the quest and who knows a deeper lore about the world, from his introduction where he seems little more than a gentle entertainer and old smoking pal of Bilbo's, through to his rebirth as a white-robed, priestly figure who barely remembers his old identity and represents a divine promise throughout the fearful onslaught. McKellen was cast with surprising astuteness (considering he had revived his movie star fortunes playing the relished villainy of *Richard III*, 1995) as the inscrutable but paternal wizard, a figure who much like the other characters must pass through his own trial forcing him to evolve into something else, but in his case treads somewhat closer to an outright act of transcendence. McKellen provides the three films with their backbone of gravitas and authority infused with a gruffly avuncular streak and a dash of plummy humour. Gandalf's travails as a large man in Bilbo's burrow as built for small people provides more than a dash of slapstick, as it helps underline his position as the figure providing a vivid connection between a world like our own and the larger fantastical zone.



There's a fascinating, likely coincidental similarity between Gandalf's confrontation with the Balrog and the scene in Michael Mann's *The Keep* (1984) where McKellen's character Cuza stands up to the demonic entity Molasar. Both scenes involve McKellen's aged, wizened, but uncorrupted character standing up to a monstrous avatar, wielding a totemic object – in Gandalf's case his staff, in Cuza's the cruciform talisman that keeps Molasar imprisoned – and rising to a titanic pitch of resistance in facing down all the evil in the world personified. Both scenes require McKellen's capacity to turn his voice from something soft and reassuring to a booming, powerful device. Gollum, a creation that broke ground in the mostly seamless fusion of digital effects and Serkis' brilliant performing, is by contrast one of the great screen grotesques, representing debased spirit. Gollum alternates shrieking, cringing pathos and crafty malevolence depending on which personality is in charge, delighting in his diet of raw insects and animal flesh, singing ditties to himself when happy, and speaking in mangled syntax often delivered in a sibilant purr. Serkis surely built upon Peter Woodthorpe's characterisation from the 1981 radio version but added his own, most insistent quality in emphasising Gollum's own, aggressively perverse childlike streak, often acting like a playground tyke, sometimes taking delight in petty cruelties and his peculiar appetites, other times viciously jealous of Frodo. Gollum counterbalances the Hobbits with a different brand of essentialised human nature, driven back into a kind of prelapsarian innocence except one that's cruel and driven by a singular elemental need that has displaced and combined all the others.



Gollum winnows the vast world and grand military, political, and spiritual crises down to one fixated urge, plotting to regain the ring and revenge himself on the “filthy, tricky Bagginses,” with Sam warning Frodo all the way and Frodo daring to take the chance because he knows the way but also because of Gandalf’s prediction that Gollum’s role in the drama might still be crucial, and indicative of Frodo’s own fate. Sméagol briefly resurges thanks to Frodo’s kindness, but when Frodo is obliged to betray him to Faramir’s men to save his life, Gollum returns more dominant than ever. Serkis’ genius in the role helped it do something that the *Star Wars* prequels failed notably to do with Jar-Jar Binks, in making a CGI character substantial and dramatically dominating. Jackson starts *The Return of the King* with a prologue flashback to Sméagol and his friend Déagol (Thomas Robins) first discovering the ring: the bauble’s immediate, deadly effect on Sméagol drives him to strangle Déagol and claim it. This scene turns the movie immediately towards a film noir-like underpinning in noting that obsessive jealousy and greed motivate one of its most crucial elements. It also lets Serkis appear on screen as the character.



Whilst Jackson and his co-writers reshuffled some events and employed a cross-cutting structure more reminiscent of the *Star Wars* films than Tolkien’s segmented narrative, and stealing some of the fire of those films with their heavy debt to Tolkien back, the three films correspond generally to the three volumes of the novel. *The Fellowship of the Ring* offers a pure, picaresque quest structure after its carefully laid story gambits. Jackson’s translation of Tolkien’s concept of an Anglocentric folklore presents its mythical, distorted prehistoric Europe as a place of untold ancient wonders and malignancies, monsters and spirits permeating taboo places, Elves lurking in woods and hills trying to maintain natural balance, and the industry of the Dwarves with their works remaining long after their builders have been wiped out by dark monstrosities. The beautifully blasted visions of arcane ruins, deserted chthonic cities, swamps littered with preserved corpses from long-ago battles, and volcanic wastelands, are always counterpointed with scenes of fecundity and splendour, particularly the Elven realms. Rivendell, pitched somewhere between storybook illustration and Chinese scroll painting in visions of jagged gables and hewn-wood decoration hovering weightlessly amidst soaring mountains, foaming waterfalls and delicate footbridges and shafts of soft light tickling gleaming bowers in the gloaming. The demesne of Galadriel with homes woven around and dug within the trunks of colossal trees. All filmed with unstinting excellence by the late Andrew Lesnie.



Another consequential choice Jackson and company made was to minimise the impact of the background lore on how the plot onscreen plays out. The film still retains constant hints of this extra dimension in the dialogue, so the random references to Melkor or Helm Hammerhand or Númenór mean something to people immersed in the books, but don't trip up entirely fresh viewers. Such streamlining is one of the trickiest of arts in adaptation for this sort of thing and one the filmmakers did exceptionally well from one point of view, compared to, say, David Lynch's zealously detailed yet corkscrewed approach to *Dune* (1984). Despite the general determination to stay true to the defiantly anti-modern lilt of the source material, they also sheared away some portions of the story, most particularly the puckish sprite Tom Bombadil, most likely to turn off a contemporary mass audience. The arguable unfortunate collateral cost of this is subtle: for Tolkien, the lore, the world that surrounds his characters and provides them with their legends and histories and reasons why things stand as they do in Middle-earth, was as much the point as the immediate melodrama, if not moreso. By stripping away Tolkien's songs and parables and hushed little reveries on the meaning of things the heroes witness, a crucial part of his work essence is minimised. It also, to a degree, makes Tolkien's world over in the image of some of its lesser imitators in the world of fantasy, where things simply are what they are in obedience to general generic dictum: Sauron is the Dark Lord, and that's that.



And yet Jackson, as a director in full command of his medium, is able to communicate much of this flavour through his imagery. Sights like the grand statues of the ancient Gondor kings called the Argonauth looming from cliffs in the midst of wilderness, or the decapitated head of a statue and other ruins littering the landscape, convey the impressions of this vast and layered history as well as a dozen pages of written lore, a world pitted with the scars of primeval wars between demons and archangels and the refuse of civilisations risen and fallen. This connects with Tolkien's obsessive refrain of damage and regeneration, sickening and healing, permeating both the storyline's preoccupation and its visual realisation, inculcated in very human incidents like Frodo's poisoning and revival and Théoden's recovery from his withered, enslaved state, through to entire socio-political structures, in Aragorn's coming presaging the recovery of Gondor. Just a little too often, Jackson uses bright glowing light to signal the presence of the ethereal, although it's certainly in keeping with Tolkien's imagery chains and Manichaeic conceptualism. The trilogy also constantly sees Frodo swooning and falling when he feels the ring's influence for little good reason except to amp up the drama, to the point where you wonder if he actually has an inner ear infection.



*The Two Towers* sees Merry and Pippin escape from their Orc captors when the raiding party is attacked by horsemen from Gondor's neighbouring human kingdom, Rohan. After encountering Gandalf, reborn as a higher order of wizard through defeating the Balrog in battle, the two Hobbits are taken in hand by Treebeard (voiced by Rhys Davies), a member of a species called Ents who look like walking, talking trees and consider themselves shepherds and protectors of the forests. Merry and Pippin set about trying to convince the lethargic but hulking Ents to attack Saruman's stronghold. Aragorn, Gimli, and Legolas also meet up with Gandalf, who leads them on a visit to the king of Rohan, Théoden, knowing that human realm lies in the path of Saruman's legions. They find Théoden has become decrepit and wizened, as Théoden's minister, the magnificently named Gríma Wormtongue (Brad Dourif), a minion of Saruman, has helped the evil wizard control Théoden as a puppet. Gandalf proves now powerful enough to break Saruman's hold over Théoden and he returns to his normal state, whilst Gríma is exiled. With an army of Uruk-hai marching their way and many of his best fighters exiled by Gríma including his heir apparent Éomer (Karl Urban), Théoden decides to hole up with his populace in a fortress called Helm's Deep, where they're reinforced by Elf warriors come to honour their old alliance, but thanks to Gríma's advice Saruman mixes up an explosive device to shatter its defensive wall. The defenders prevail thanks to the last-minute arrival of Gandalf with Éomer and a force of Rohan's mounted riders, the Rohirrim, whilst the Ents, stirred to wrath by Saruman's predations on their forest, assault Isengard and lay waste to the wizard's doings.



In *The Return of the King*, the Rohirrim move to help Gondor's capital Minas Tirith which comes under siege by Orcs out of Mordor led by the strongest and most evil of the Nazgûl, the Witch-King of Angmar. Gandalf's efforts to stir the city to defence are treated disdainfully by Denethor, who mourns Boromir's death and has heard about Aragorn. Pippin volunteers as a warrior of Gondor to pay the debt he feels he owes as Boromir died saving him. Consumed by a need to enact the world-ending sorrow he feels as a literal cataclysm, Denethor sends Faramir out to die in a suicidal assault on the advancing Orcs, and then arranges a funeral pyre for them both despite Faramir, as Pippin notices, not being dead. Meanwhile Sam and Frodo are led into a trap by Gollum, who promises to show them a pass over high, jagged mountains in Mordor, neglecting to mention it's inhabited by the huge, carnivorous spider-demon Shelob, as Gollum hopes Shelob will eat the two Hobbits so he can claim the ring out her spoor. Realising the Rohirrim aren't strong enough to defeat the Orc army, Aragorn, with Gimli and Legolas in tow, heads into a haunted cave inhabited by the men who broke their oaths to Isildur to fight for him only to be cursed and linger in an undead and abhorred spectral state. Wielding Isildur's reformed sword, gifted to him by Elrond as a totem of hope, whilst also testing the strength of the legitimacy of his claim on the throne, Aragorn obliges the dead men to follow him to help lift the siege of Minas Tirith.





Middle episodes of movie trilogies often represent a special challenge, and *The Two Towers* struggles with a disjointed narrative line including Gandalf's *deus ex machina* return, a relative lack of real drama for the two pairs of Hobbits to play out, and the introduction of many characters of consequence to the rest of the tale, particularly Théoden, Faramir, and Théoden's niece and ward Éowyn, who yearns to fight and falls for Aragorn. Jackson's desire to hit the ground running is made a little too literal as he opens with Aragorn, Gimli, and Legolas jogging endlessly in their pursuit of Uruk-hai with Merry and Pippin: where *Conan the Barbarian* made its montage of its heroes dashing across the steppes lyrical and ebullient, here it feels oddly laborious and overextended, like fantasy workout video, despite Gimli's comical complaining. The little dramas playing out in Théoden's realm have to be quickly sketched. The structure, unlike the open-road narrative of the previous movie, demands more attention to the slow build of suspense before the final battle, with relatively little action in between. Nonetheless, *The Two Towers* eventually turns most of these potential problems into unusual strengths, allowing for Jackson's most poetic visual flourishes and character touches, like Theoden holding a flower whilst standing before his dead son's grave, and Gríma making a romantic overture to Éowyn so surprisingly lush in its longing that it momentarily arrests Éowyn's justified loathing of him.



Particularly effective in this manner is the mid-film sequence where Elrond, trying to convince Arwen not to remain in Middle-earth pining for the mortal Aragorn, paints a picture of future grief as the unchanging Elf weeps over Aragorn's sarcophagus under billowing wintry leaves, one of the many images in Jackson's repertoire that seem stolen from some pre-Raphaelite painter. Jackson's approach had plenty of cinematic forebears too. The feel for grandeur both natural and architectural and the basic lexicon of this kind of screen fantasy can be traced back to Fritz Lang's *Die Nibelungen* (1924), and some of Jackson's shots might as well have been clipped out of it. There's also the strong imprint of Boorman's Arthurian epic *Excalibur* (1981) with its careful visual contrast between sleek and brilliant, fashioned textures of armour and gleaming pseudo-classical buildings and the crude earth and fecund nature, but Jackson can't quite reproduce the directness of Boorman's gleaned concept of the human social order and natural flourishing as entwined. There are flashes of *Conan the Barbarian* and *Krull* (1983), along with *King Kong* (1933) and Ray Harryhausen's stop-motion fantasy films: Kong shaking the log informs Gandalf's confrontation with the Balrog whilst the heroes sailing past the feet of the Argonauts nods to the equally dwarfed heroes of *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963). There are some tips of the hat to Hong Kong *wu xia* cinema in the gravity-defying athleticism and deftness of Legolas as well as the balletic camerawork, harking back to Tsui Hark's *Zu: Warriors of the Magic Mountain* (1980) and Tony Siu-Tung Ching's *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1987), an influence that would grow more pronounced in the prequel *The Hobbit* series.



The battle scenes draw on suitable models ranging from *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) to *Seven Samurai* (1954), *Spartacus* (1960), *Zulu* (1964), and *Waterloo* (1970) with their sense of how to handle large masses locked in deadly, diagrammatic symmetry, delivering moments of raw cinematic spectacle like the defenders of Helm's Deep beholding the awesome host of their enemies in flashes of lightning, before Kurosawan rain begins to fall upon the assembled armies. The war movie influence becomes stronger in the second and third episodes of the trilogy as the narrative switches from quest to combat. Jackson's most vigorous innovation on his influences lies in his attempt to make the films studies in near-constant motion both narratively and stylistically. He exploits the digital effects to present an unfettered use of the camera, whilst still trying to retain a sense of contiguous gracefulness, creating something distinct from the increasingly hyperactive approach of some Hollywood directors in the 1990s whilst still declaratively modern. One great example comes when Saruman stands atop his tower using incantations to foil the Fellowship's progress, the camera sweeping down with a bird's-eye-view, conveying all the wild drama and shamanic natural communion inherent in the scene. Another, more traditional piece of camera dynamism comes in the climax of *The Fellowship of the Ring* with a long tracking shot that starts on ground level and soars to high overhead, following Uruk-hai as Boromir blowing the Horn of Gondor brings them running to that fight.



The combination of CGI and model work is used to deliver breathless spectacle, like the flying explorations of Saruman's underground works where Orcs labour constantly, before going in closer for memorable visions of the Uruk-hai being born out mud. Certain sequences in the trilogy have the kind of breathless, super-cinematic power once reserved in reference for the likes of the parting of the Red Sea from *The Ten Commandments* (1956) or Kong on the Empire State Building or the end of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), and they're liberally scattered through all three instalments – the chase through Moria and Gandalf's stand-off against the Balrog in *The Fellowship of the Ring* and the return to at the very start of *The Two Towers* as he and the beast plunge into the bowls of the earth; the ride of the Rohirrim climaxing *The Two Towers*; just about the whole battle for Minas Tirith in *The Return of the King* including Éowyn standing against the Witch King and Legolas clambering up the back of one of the monstrous elephant-like creatures called Oliphaunts and felling the beast and all its crew. The heavy emphasis on special effects to make all of this work on screen sometimes results in some tacky interludes, like the visualisation of Frodo's delirium whilst arriving at Rivendell in *The Fellowship of the Ring* with faces looming in a digital blur overlaying Elvish architecture captured in swooning camerawork, looking like a TV commercial for a day spa. Similarly misjudged is the depiction of the Dead Men in *The Return of the King*, who look like day-glo ghouls off the back of some trading cards.



But other effects are consistently remarkable, particularly the motion-capture work applied to Serkis to realise Gollum and the techniques used to place the actors playing Hobbits and Dwarves in shot with those playing normal-sized folk, effects that are virtually seamless and let the actors interact believably. Most importantly, the effects come on with a level of giddy enthusiasm directly tied to the storytelling, and Jackson's capacity to make them serve his impeccable sense of staging, particularly when used with a dash of appropriate poetry, as when Arwen summons a flood upon the pursuing Nazgûl, the wave plunging upon them forming foamy shapes of horses on the gallop, or the flood of dazzling light that cascades down the hillside with the Rohirrim charging the Orcs at Helm's Deep. One critic at the time of the films' release cleverly likened the smaller, more fleeting effects dropped seemingly casually into shots to Sergio Aragones' margin doodles for *MAD Magazine*, like Legolas managing to swing himself up onto a charging horse with a casual show of his superhuman dexterity, and one of the Ents rushing to douse his burning head in floodwater.



Despite all the outsized trappings and showmanship, the three films nonetheless usually retain a canny sense of when to slow down and contemplate, in vignettes like Gandalf's famous speech to Frodo about weathering terrible times and deciding "what to do with the time that is given us," or Gríma's appeal to Éowyn, and Théoden mourning his son, slain in combat with the Orcs. Whilst it's not exactly a character drama in the fullest sense, *The Lord of the Rings* keeps the human level in focus. The sense of the characters' purpose as mythic emblems is wielded with a Dickensian sense of potent caricature and constantly mediated by humour, preventing any hint of characters becoming frieze blocks of nobility. Merry and Pippin are mostly comic relief figures at first, as is Gimli, whose very real prowess as a warrior is given a constant edge of irony by his need to talk himself up with his outsized pride matched to his small stature, engaging in a running competition with Legolas. Bloom was immediately, if briefly anointed with matinee idol status in playing the longhaired, eternally poised, stoic-faced but mischievous-eyed Legolas, the character in the trilogy most in touch with swashbuckling spirit of movies of yore, thanks to Jackson who hands him some of the movies' most inventive action moments, as when he surfs down a flight of stairs to save his friends during the Helm's Deep battle, and the more elaborate set-piece of him bringing down the Oliphaunt.



Jackson was one of the first directors to truly exploit the new DVD era as he prepared considerably longer versions of the three films for home viewing release – *The Return of the King* was the first film to

capture Best Picture whilst still technically being in production. Not everything added to the extended editions works, like a silly scene with Merry and Pippin in the forest under Treebeard's watch, and the scene where Aragorn, Gimli, and Legolas are chased off by the Dead Men at first with a cascade of skulls is rather pointless. They're also inevitably less smoothly paced, playing more as TV series-like, and in their way probably helped give birth to the age of binge-watching. Nonetheless, the extended versions are considerably more dense and coherent works, making many relationships and moves of the plot more intelligible as well as more sharply defining the character and events in the context of their world. Particularly valuable is the restored scene where Saruman and Gríma, trapped by the Ents in the sorcerer's tower, fall out and Gríma kills Saruman before being struck by one of Legolas' arrows. The scene's absence from the theatrical version was particularly egregious not dealing with the fates of two of the trilogy's major characters, and the performances by Dourif, adding to his great gallery of on-screen weirdos, and Lee, capping his career with a role that was important to him as a great fan of Tolkien.



If there's a lack in *The Lord of the Rings*, it's one inherited in large part from the source material. We're certainly in mythopoeic territory where the characters, both humanoid and other, exist in emblematic dimensions, ranging from Gollum as pathetic-malevolent greed to Gríma as political corruptor to Shelob as septic sexuality, Middle-earth conceived as a grand Jungian world of archetypes and Freudian dream-symbols. And, of course, a large part of the reason why the story is loved is precisely for the deliverance from sordid realities and entrance into a realm where the beauty and purity of the Elves and humble fortitude of the Hobbits coexist, where the valiant arrive on horseback to charge the lines of pure malice, and the entire universe trembles like a spider's web to the palpable ruptures of good and evil. *The Lord of the Rings*, both books and films, is often criticised for black-and-white moral schemes, which isn't entirely accurate: what it tries to do is allegorically dramatise moral ideas, like Gollum literally split between his good and bad streaks, and the confrontation with evil involving a physical and spiritual pilgrimage, in a manner that is authentically mythic. But it does lack some of that vital fire of human behaviour that drives great epics, both literary and cinematic, particular romantic and sexual desire, and protagonists who battle deep flaws.



It's worth noting how vivid the human characters in authentic great myths and sagas tend to be. Any glance at some of Tolkien's sources like the *Nibelungenlied*, the *Völsunga Saga*, the Arthurian cycle, *Beowulf*, and the Greek myths is to behold tales filled with spectacles of human perversity, savagery, interwoven with civilising traits, the tales of mad kings and wicked queens and perfect knights who are imperfect men, wild passion, incest, ego, greed, treachery, murder, and most particularly warring value systems, an essential ingredient of classical myth and tragedy. By creating Sauron and the Orcs Tolkien purposefully removed a rival moral and social faction to the heroes, presenting instead a catch-all Other to be resisted and slain without compunction. In terms of epic movie tradition, too, there's a lack. There isn't anything as elemental as the clash of personal and politico-religious urges in *The Ten Commandments*, or as fervent as Rhett and Scarlett or even Jack and Rose, or the pointed political subtexts and well-parsed metaphors for maturation of the *Star Wars* films, and despite the similarities in story it never explores the social meaning of a warrior creed like *Seven Samurai*. *The Lord of the Rings* accepts the medieval proposition that government is just about as good as the individuals holding power, and whilst Frodo and the other Hobbits all learn they're stronger than they think, there's no psychological process to their growth. When characters behave ignobly, like Boromir, it's the external influence of the ring that causes their lapses. The notion of a personified and objectivised evil is very much at the heart of the story but also one that helps keep the story and its dimensions in the childlike. There is passion, but it's relentlessly chaste: Éowyn's love for Aragorn remains unrequited; Aragorn's love for Arwen is given some body by Mortensen and Tyler but remains an almost entirely ethereal idea. *The Lord of the Rings* leans heavily upon its audience's presumed fondness for virtuous simplicity and a boyish idea of the adult world.



Jackson and his fellow writers mediate the simplicity in this regard by fleshing out the characters' needs and anxieties. Gríma's desire for Éowyn is noted as his motive in the novel but given extra dimension in the films. Aragorn's self-doubt is a recurring note that pays off in one moment of significant suspense when he seems to be arrested by Sauron's whispered offerings, only to turn his comrades a smile before launching into battle. Perhaps Jackson's most ambitious moment of grand and lyrical pathos comes in *The Return of the King* where Denethor, having ordered Faramir's suicide attack, sits down for dinner and makes Pippin sing him a song to leaven the oppressive mood. Juice from his meal dripping like blood from his lips, Denethor listens to Pippin's sad, spare lament, intercut with the defeat of the knights. It's not a subtle scene – the eating is either a bit much or perfectly in tune with the kind of morality play the story emulates, depending on your point of view. But it works a powerful spell thanks to the crafting, the way Monaghan's beautiful singing is used over images of defeat and death, and the spectacle of the aged potentate's oblivious arrogance. Jackson touches upon a sense of futility and regret in the warfare the rest of the series generally delights in, examining the difference between selfless communal bravery and the misuse of power, presenting not a meaningful warrior death fighting against bottomless evil but something more familiar, young men dying to satisfy the egotisms of their rulers. Jackson may well have been moved to include the scene given the films' release amidst the furore of the post-9/11 moment, a moment the films somewhat incidentally fed into and when some critics took aim at the films' enshrining of martial valour.



Denethor's presence in *The Return of the King* gives the trilogy something it otherwise lacks, a character who might well have stumbled of a Norse saga, embodying the more familiar evils of human nature but also with flashes of its more pitiable side, a wounded overlord whose decline is tied to the teetering state of his realm. To a certain extent Gríma inhabits a similar zone, but he might as well have "villain" tattooed on his forehead: even his last stab at redemption is a pathetic murder. Denethor is splendidly awful with his consuming blend of bitterness, pessimism, pain, and cruelty, constantly belittling Faramir as a fool and weakling, and venerating the fallen Boromir. His gestures of grandiose, nihilistic impulse reach their apex when he tries burn himself and Faramir alive together, only foiled through Gandalf and Pippin intervening to save Faramir. Denethor's end makes a good example of the adaptors' augmenting touch: where in the novel Denethor dies in the full grip of crazed will, Jackson votes him a moment of clarity and then pity, noticing Faramir is alive and for the first time seeming to actually love his son, just before he catches fire and dies falling from the city battlements. Denethor's subordinating use of his sons as mirrors to his own vanity and self-loathing has a clear connection with Jackson's previous studies in sick psychological dynamics, like the relationship of the two girls in *Heavenly Creatures* where the offspring elect to annihilate their repressing elders, and in *Brain Dead* where the son's squirming Oedipal repression is finally dramatized when he's swallowed back up his zombie mother's womb.



Tolkien always rejected the idea his novel was a metaphor for World War II and Sauron a Hitlerian figure, but it still feels likely the logic of his own time thoroughly informed that of his book as well as his understanding of the historical perspective of ancient Britons. The story recreates a certain parochial vision where evil is out there in the simmering east and south, with the abhorred land of Mordor, and the Orcs, a race of diseased and devolved beings, representing everything foreign and threatening. Tolkien was despite his overall conservatism reputedly firmly anti-racist, and the storyline reflects that, presenting the different 'races' who overcome all their sometimes vast differences in worldview and understanding and fractious history to work together, embodied most crucially by the slow-warming friendship of Legolas and Gimli, as well as the army of Elf warriors who come to fight with Men at Helm's Deep, and the ultimate choice of Théoden to ride to Gondor's aid despite them doing nothing for Rohan. Another one of Jackson's great visualisations, something of an apotheosis of epic moviemaking, comes when Gandalf, ignoring Denethor's hostile refusal, gets Pippin to light a signal fire, one of a chain set up to communicate between the two kingdoms and call for aid: Jackson's soaring aerial shots of jagged mountains and remote sentries lighting each fire, all set to Shore's most lushly momentous scoring, capped by the long, boding pause as Théoden is told "Gondor calls for aid," before he answers, "And Rohan will answer."





When anticipating the third film's release it was difficult to see Jackson topping the Helm's Deep battle, but then came the battle in and around Minas Tirith, a sequence marked by ever-ratcheting levels of beautifully choreographed craziness, complete with Nazgûl riding their flying dragon-like creatures to maraud over the city, and the onslaught of the Oliphaunts. Théoden leads the Rohirrim in a grand charge, and Éowyn and Merry, both forbidden to enter the fight but doing it anyway, weave their way through the carnage before finally facing down the Witch King after he attacks Théoden and mortally wounds. Éowyn is close to being my favourite character in the trilogy, first glimpsed as the picture-perfect Saxon princess struggling to stay out of Gríma's clutches and trying to stave off a depressive stupor, before eventually donning armour and riding secretly to war with Merry at her side as another of the heroes determined to prove she's stronger than anyone knows. Otto, despite a scene when she lapses into a strange mid-Pacific brogue (perhaps a sign of the production's occasional shifts in direction), is a luminous presence, and gives the film one of its major sources of heart, building to the moment when she reveals herself to the Witch King and declares, "I am no man," the greatest moment of on-screen girl power since Ripley's choice words to the alien queen in *Aliens* (1986).



Whilst much smaller in scale, Frodo and Sam's encounter with Shelob, into whose lair Gollum successfully tricks Frodo into entering after separating him and Sam through conniving, is just as potent a scene, thanks largely to the incredibly good effects used to realise the monstrous arachnid and the sickly intimacy of the struggle: the sight of Shelob silently stalking Frodo through crags is something I can easily imagine sending arachnophobes into fits. Sam's reappearance just as Shelob is about to consume the paralysed and trussed Frodo is the best of Jackson's many last-second interventions, Sam's emergence as the ideal yeoman hero crystallising as he confronts the monster with sword and bottled starlight, a magical gift from Galadriel painful to the dark-dwelling monster. Jackson's gift for staging extends in the final, depleting trek to Mount Doom, whilst the survivors of the great battle at Minas Tirith, led by Aragorn, march to Mordor's gate to distract Sauron and his legions and give the Hobbits a chance to gain their goal. Jackson's elaborate tricks to make the experience ever more agonising are deployed to their best effect here as the final yards prove the most gruelling, not just in physical exhaustion but the bitter final twist of Frodo finally succumbing to the ring's influence and refusing to throw it into the lava, closing the circle as he stands in the same place as Isildur millennia earlier and falls prey to the same, undeniable influence.



Only this time the joker in the deck proves to be Gollum whose need for the ring seem to even exceed its creator's, assaulting Frodo at the threshold and biting his finger off to get the ring, only for the enraged Hobbit to push his doppelganger into the fiery chasm, Gollum so lost in his utter joy at reclaiming the precious he doesn't even notice as he falls, finally burning up with the ring in the lava. Jackson gleefully goes for broke in the sight of Sauron's tower collapsing, his great eye quivering in agony and despair before exploding, and the ground swallowing up the Orc army, before Gandalf flies in to rescue Sam and Frodo before they perish in the lava streams. The final passages of *The Return of the King*, which frustrated some in offering several potential endings, see Aragorn installed as king of Gondor and marrying Arwen and obliging everyone to pay homage to the heroism of the Hobbits, who then return home and try to settle back into life, something Frodo eventually finds he can't do. So Frodo is invited to leave Middle-earth with Elrond, Galadriel, Bilbo, and Gandalf and head off the Undying Lands, making his farewells to Sam, Merry, and Pippin. The embrace of a melancholy tone in the concluding scenes, the awareness of the great conflict claiming costs from its hero that can't be healed, invests the trilogy with its last and finest flash of stylised truth, Frodo's ascension to the status of a legendary figure one that also cleaves him from the living, growing, dying world. It's left to Sam, naturally, to return home and resume the business of living. It's a reminder that for all the heroic lustre and otherworldly lyricism invested in the material it's a work written by someone who knew how hard coming home from war could be, and it's this final motif, at once sobering and yet also deepening the mythopoetic resonance, Jackson respects to the utmost.



*The Lord of the Rings* has proved both the great moment and a bit of a millstone in terms of Jackson's career. His subsequent efforts, *King Kong* (2005), *The Lovely Bones* (2009), and *The Hobbit* trilogy (2012-14), were all greeted with varying levels of disappointment, in large part because each of them was beholden to pre-existing material Jackson's approach strained against, but also all sported passages of great filmmaking. Whilst there was some legitimacy to complaints *The Hobbit* films were overindulged, and the attempts to synthesise an equal kind of epic story out of a slim book could not match what came before it, nonetheless Jackson used the second trilogy to explore the troubles afflicting Middle-earth largely skimmed over in *The Lord of the Rings* films, like the schism of Elves and Dwarves and the general spectacle of greed, and giving greater psychological dimension to figures like Bilbo and Thorin Oakenshield, the latter emerging as an authentic antihero. Jackson dug deeper to find the material to find more of the satirical aspect he once thrived on, at the risk of spurning the lustre of heroic escapism the first trilogy so perfectly enshrined. *The Lord of the Rings* as a trilogy has its missteps and hyperbolic passages, but they're a part of its overall, giddy texture. There were and are few cinema experiences to match it, an achievement that seems, so far, to have set the bar for Hollywood just a little too high to reach again.

## Jungle Cruise (2021)



**Director:** Jaume Collet-Serra

**Screenwriters:** Glenn Ficarra, Michael Green, John Requa

*Here there be spoilers...you'll thank me.*

The latest attempt by Disney to spin one of their theme park rides into a narrative, following their very successful *Pirates of the Caribbean* series, Jaume Collet-Serra's *Jungle Cruise* opens with a prologue detailing the disappearance of the legendary conquistador Aguirre (Edgar Ramirez), who as the movie has it was lost whilst seeking the Tears of the Moon, a legendary flowering tree growing in the Amazon Jungle and which supposedly has incredible healing properties. Flash forward to 1916. Lily Houghton (Emily Blunt) is the indomitable, brilliant female scientist bucking the male establishment – is there any other kind? – who wants to realise her father's dream of discovering the Tears of the Moon. MacGregor (Jack Whitehall) is her brother, who she has deliver an address to some snooty scientific society – the film won't say which one – essentially as a distraction whilst she breaks into a workroom and steals a priceless artefact, an arrowhead needed to access the tree, which Lily hopes to find using the historical map her father left that supposedly shows the way to the tree's location.



Lily manages to abscond with the arrowhead, eluding a German-accented man (Jessie Plemons) visiting the society for some reason and decides to try and impede her getaway. He promptly slays all the men in the room because the man who showed him in uses his real name, a la Frank in *Once Upon A Time In The West* (1968), which apparently the screenwriters watched once. You see, he's Prince Joachim, the youngest son of Kaiser Wilhelm, and he was trying to steal the same relic. Gasp, might the rather recognisable woman seen trying to sneak in there a few moments earlier, and created an elaborate diversion to facilitate it, be suspected of the murders and be sought by the police? Ha, no, this little thing of a few dead archaeologists in the middle of London is of no consequence; such things don't raise an eyebrow, any more than a German prince being at large in England in the middle of the Great War, or gentlemen being invited to give speeches to snooty scientific organisations without rehearsing what they're going to say. Lily doesn't even bother going on the search for the relic until her brother's started screwing up the distracting speech. Next thing we know she's in South America, looking for a boat to take her in the jungle.



Soon she encounters Frank Wolff (Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson), down-on-his-luck everyman skipper who makes a living ferrying tourists around the river. It seems that despite the war going on there were a very large number of very proper English tourists hanging around the Amazon looking for rides from captains who endanger their lives with his ridiculously haphazard behaviour and dubious stunts to

augment the experience. Frank owes all his money to Nilo (Paul Giamatti, who I hope made enough on this to retire, or start his own theatre group, or whatever he's pulling) and is on the verge of losing his boat to him. Now, we never actually find out why Frank is in debt: he seems to do a good business, and later on we find out things about that, well, make it all rather moot anyway. By all reports *Jungle Cruise* the movie fits in many of the familiar elements of the *Jungle Cruise* ride, which makes sense. Such elements include the skipper's awful puns, which Collet-Serra insists on underlining in the visual equivalent of fluorescent ink by having the tourists cringe and groan to each one, down to one mouthing "Wow" in disbelief.



Anyway, because Frank is in Nilo's office trying to steal back the keys to his boat's impounded engine when Lily comes calling, he plays along with her mistaken impression that he is Nilo in order to get hired by her. When he's busted he still manages to impress Lily and MacGregor by facing down a jaguar that enters the tavern where they're talking, only for the jaguar to turn out to be Frank's pet: he arranged the whole thing, somehow. Lily is snatched by some kidnappers who lock her in a cage with some captive exotic birds, but she manages to break out, and she and Frank run around some in a chaotic action interlude. Prince Joachim turns up in a submarine that seems capable of navigating all the twists and shallows of the muddy river, and he madly fires off the sub's machine guns and torpedos, mostly with the effect of tearing apart the town and eventually the sub crashes into Nilo's boats – ha ha, he was a jerk, you see – whilst Frank, MacGregor, and Lily get away. Frank insists his boat is the fastest on the river, and at one point in trying to elude a torpedo fired by the U-boat it manages to move like a speedboat despite the fact that it never seems capable of more than slow chug, and Frank is first introduced trying to get the breakdown-prone machine working. The filmmakers seem to think it's a worthy counterpart to the *Millennium Falcon*.



I should note that all of the above scenes I've noted constitute the good part of *Jungle Cruise*, the portion of the film where its excess and inanity at least comes on with a few good gags and a sense that it's trying oh so hard to deliver giddy fun. Once upstream, Lily demands the best bath in South America Frank promised her, so he points overboard and explains that the river is just that, a few moments before he incidentally demonstrates that there are flesh-stripping piranha in the water. Oh, and Lily, having donned a cliché explorer's costume during her foray into the society, now insists on wearing trousers all the time, and Frank hilariously nicknames her "Pants." Now, I can hear you all now begging the chance to say: but Mr Heath old chap, this movie's supposed to be a jaunty, old-school adventure movie made to enthrall kids and for adults to tolerate, it doesn't need to make that much sense. And I agree – to a degree. But suspensions of disbelief and moments embracing puckish disinterest in logic ought to be like time-outs in American football or basketball, carefully rationed and used only to strategic effect. *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) famously, mirthfully neglected explaining how Indiana Jones sails with the submarine to the island, but *Jungle Cruise* is apparently made by people who think you can make an entire movie on that level.



*Jungle Cruise* is so aggressively senseless, so utterly detached from any semblance of narrative control and human content, that it becomes a parade of everything that's bad and stupid and wrong about contemporary movies. It piles clichés upon clichés and then tries to shock them to Frankensteinian life

by amplifying them to garish degrees of excess. We don't just have banter, we have banter coming on in whiplash-inducing levels of rhythmic sound, like someone tried to film one of Ralph Vaughan Williams's orchestrations of Edith Sitwell's nonsense poems. The film can't just have MacGregor over-pack for the journey, no no! He has to come encumbered with huge trunks filled with ridiculous items, all of which Frank insists on throwing into the river rather than letting them be left behind in the hotel. This sort of gag might pass muster in a Bugs Bunny short, but here it's stupefyingly witless and absurd. The film can't merely make Lily a strong-willed woman but one utterly bulldozer-like in her life-endangering arrogance, pushing Frank to try braving some rapids that he knows are incredibly dangerous, and their voyage ends up with them almost going over a waterfall.



Lily and Frank's feudin'-and-a-fussin' masking their attraction is pushed constantly to the point where I wanted piranha to eat them both. She and Frank can't simply strike sparks as polarised characters stuck together like obvious models Humphrey Bogart and Katherine Hepburn in *The African Queen* (1951), but repetitively fall out in whirlwinds of hyperbolic reaction. Lily's supposed to be a tough, brave person and yet she constantly acts like a reality TV princess, constantly performing her outrage to let the audience know she's a strong woman, y'all. The inspiration here feels less *The African Queen* than Brendan Fraser and Rachel Weisz in Stephen Sommers' goofy, often clumsy, but enjoyable *The Mummy* films (1999, 2002), because those films, now about twenty years old, officially count as affectionate sort-of-classics for millennials and also just forgotten enough to justify recycling them for a young audience. But where those films' protagonists at least were characterised with some care, and came with challenges in terms of their own sense of themselves to overcome, Johnson and Blunt are stuck playing mobile assemblages of necessary traits. Every single principle of good film crafting is subordinated here to the need for constant humour and visual stimulus-response.





Once our insufferable, reprehensible heroes get on their way, *Jungle Cruise* sets about more thoroughly ransacking the established formula of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films in trucking in folkloric and supernatural aspects. As we saw at the outset, Aguirre and some of his loyal men were not killed but cursed after massacring a native village and doomed never to stray far from the river, but they've become trapped in a grotto and infested by jungle plants and animals: one can throw out vines like tentacles, another has a bee's nest in his skull, and Aguirre himself has snakes that writhe under his face and sometime burst out in a manner rather too reminiscent of Davy Jones' tentacles in the second two *Pirates of the Caribbean* films. I grew to truly dislike the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films over the years as I meditated on their superficially energetic and yet perversely enervating take on the pulp adventure tradition. But they at least had pre-cancellation Johnny Depp's blasé humour and against-the-grain showmanship to invest proceedings with the faintest hint of actual roguishness. *Jungle Cruise*, by contrast, is a relentless exercise more harmed than helped by its stars' willingness to play their roles just as written.



Only Plemons seems to be trying to work slightly off the beat with his part, playing the compulsory German baddie as bluffly good-humoured rather than icily menacing, and getting one of the few real laughs with his pronunciation of the world 'jungle.' Trouble is this means he's never at all scary, and he's the second annoyingly jovial German character in a big-budget movie this year, after Zack

Snyder's *Army of the Dead*, suggesting a new trope is emerging. Somehow Prince Joachim finds where Aguirre and his men are trapped – common knowledge, it seems – and revives them by sprinkling river water on them. Once freed, they agree to help the Prince whilst seeking the Tears of the Moon to cure themselves. The Prince seems quite unbothered by encountering 400-year-old undead conquistadors, to the point which makes you wonder how often it's happened to him. The script for *Jungle Cruise*, by the way, is co-credited to *Logan* (2015) and *Blade Runner 2046* (2017) co-writer Michael Green, who hitherto has displayed a remarkable capacity for making fantastical material feel bog-ordinary, and Glenn Ficarra and John Requa, who often work as a directing team including on the likeable *I Love You Phillip Morris* (2009) and the passable *Focus* (2015). I can't connect this movie with those beyond a certain habit of hyperactive writing.



Eventually, when he and Frank share just about the film's only coherent moment of downtime conversation, MacGregor strongly implies that he's gay, and has followed his sister partly to avoid disgrace, and partly to honour her for defending him. In its own way this is actually one of the few solid moments of the film, allowing the two men to share understanding with an emotional tug, with Frank extending the calm solicitude of one outsider to another. But in context of the totality of the film, as well in terms of its aim, it's a dreadful failure. MacGregor is constantly characterised throughout as the worst kind of nelly caricature, posh, unmanly, utterly lost in the jungle. We're told that Lily spent her childhood moving around from exotic locale to locale learning all of her father's business, an education apparently not extended to MacGregor. I couldn't help but wonder if this scene was added after the rest of the film was shot to try and ride the ally wave. In any event it has the opposite effect, not just in making MacGregor, who might just otherwise be a comical dweeb, an offensive stereotype, but also as the Disney paymasters still can't quite bring themselves to put their stamp on any explicit statement, so the film retains a fig-leaf of deniability so the I-don't-want-that-stuff-shoved-down-my-kids'-throats-during-a-fun-movie crowd won't get too hot and bothered.



This is particularly indecent given the film's incompetent stabs at bending over backwards to be politically correct. It tries to offer a period feminist message a la *Wonder Woman* (2017) but doesn't actually, whilst actually managing to rip off something like Lasse Hallstrom's *Casanova* (2005) in its method. All the dart-blowing, mask-wearing natives are in on Frank's act, and the real bad guys are European imperialists. But I get ahead of myself. The natives knock out Lily and MacGregor with darts and put them through a terrifying routine where they're threatened with torture and death, to the point where Lily starts fighting back only for the leader of the charade, Trader Sam (Veronica Falcón), to wearily pull off her mask and call time. They also knock out Frank, despite him being their confederate, because the movie needs to fool the audience to make the joke work, and despite the fact that given what we later learn about Frank it's odd that a blow dart can render him unconscious when a sword through the heart doesn't bother him much. But again I get ahead of myself. The notion of the unga-bunga natives suddenly turning out to be loquacious and hip (at one point Trader Sam admonishes someone to "be cool") isn't new, being a gag that goes back past *F Troop* and on to old Bob Hope-Bing Crosby *Road To...* movies, and *Jungle Cruise* can't even land it squarely.

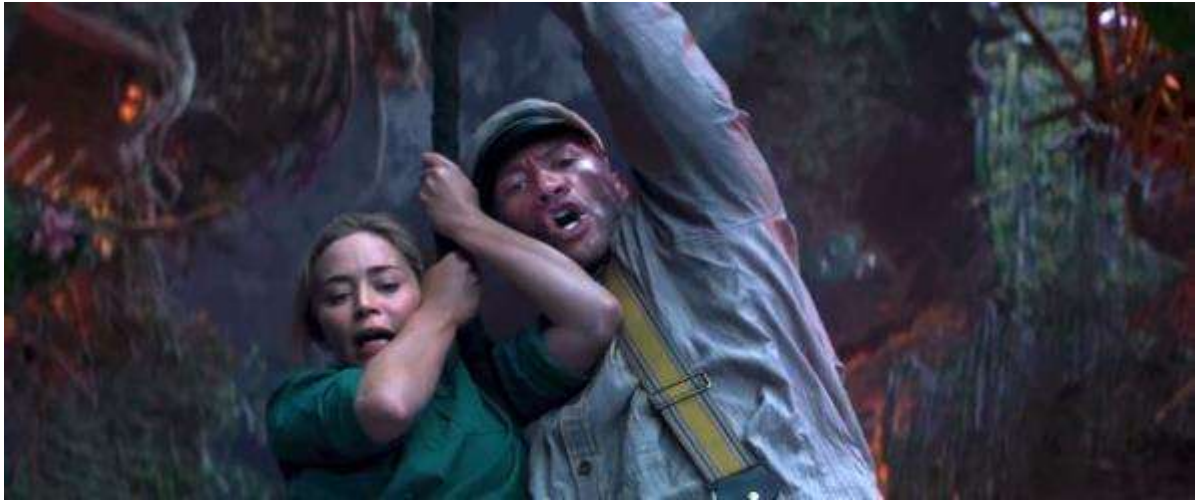


The film also has an odd, ineffectual approach to Aguirre and his men, who scarcely emerge from sideshow status despite nominally being the real antagonists, turning up now and then to give the heroes something to fight and run from. Aguirre is presented as both the arch conquistador scoundrel,

who slayed the friendly Indians who saved his life, but also as a sympathetic figure driven by his need to find the Tears of the Moon and save his sickly daughter, in backstory that might have made sense but seems to have been edited with a garden mulcher. Also, the film insists on playing out the story of Aguirre and crew's cursing twice, helping pad out a film that, whilst only just over two hours in running time, feels twice that long. Insert joke about *Jungle Cruise* helping to open up an *Aguirre, The Wrath of God* (1972) cinematic universe here. There's also, weirdly enough, what could be called nods to Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* (1982) as Prince Joachim sails upriver whilst blaring out Wagner, although I was more reminded of Herbert Lom's similarly arrogant German villain in J. Lee Thompson's *King Solomon's Mines* (1985), a much-derided film I nonetheless found myself thinking back to fondly during this.



Eventually it emerges that Frank is actually one of Aguirre's cursed men, in a twist that's been weakly suggested beforehand but really comes across like the screenwriters decided to toss it in once they reached this point of the script and then backtracked to make it vaguely sensible. Frank managed to avoid being trapped with his fellows and is the subject of Aguirre's eternal hatred because Frank, real name Francisco, tried to stop the massacre, giving the tribal shaman time to foil and enchant them. So, Frank isn't a down-on-his-luck everyman skipper after all, but an eternal Flying Dutchman's captain, consumed by a sense of existential futility. As absurd as this twist is, it could have been effective and interesting, and demands a performer with a sense of haunted charisma and deeply inscrutable mystique. Instead we get Johnson, who's always an affable screen presence and a decent comic actor, but also has all the haunted charisma and inscrutable mystique of a Burger King drive-thru attendant, mysteriously sporting an American accent despite being a Spanish-Algerian trapped for centuries in South America.



Given how entertainment-starved we've been over the past eighteen months, it feels like just about any big movie release ought to be worth celebrating. And *Jungle Cruise* is no slapdash quickie. It's one of the most expensive films ever made, and it looks it: there are truly brilliant sets and special effects littered throughout, to the degree the film ever slows down to enjoy them. But *Jungle Cruise* is a timely reminder of just how bad modern Hollywood can be at what it's supposed to be the best in the world at doing, labouring to do the sort of thing just about any backlot salary director could have tossed off in a hour back in the 1930s. What's especially galling as the genuinely fun and interesting film this could have been is constantly in evidence. Collet-Serra has been one of the more talented genre film hands to emerge in the past few years, delivering strong, no-nonsense but artfully constructed thrillers often starring Liam Neeson. And the best thing that can be said about *Jungle Cruise* is as frenetic as things get it never quite dissolves into total incoherence on a visual level, and sports some of Collet-Serra's eye for colour composition. But on *Jungle Cruise* he seems to have been swallowed up and infested, much like Aguirre and his men, with the pulverising blandness and incoherence of Disney's corporate prerogatives. It's not in any authentic manner a Collet-Serra film, but an accumulation of executive notes, Twitter feed ploys, and special effects team make-work taped together and called a movie.



Part of what's really, gruellingly painful about *Jungle Cruise* is how unexciting it is, and how unfunny after its first couple of reels, as the story with its magical MacGuffin begins to congeal into the limpest

brand of current digi-cinema. Movie thrills demand that at least on some level the audience be given the feeling that on some level what we're seeing on screen is dangerous, that it involves some slight blurring of the line between fiction and life, something that used to manifest through the beauties of stunt work. Of the few attempts to deliver any proper derring-do in *Jungle Cruise*, there's a scene where Frank tries to swing with Lily on a cable from one side of the native village to the other, only to slip and swing back again. Not a bad idea for a comically deflated swashbuckler move, but Collet-Serra doesn't offer any consequence to the failure to pull off the move – it doesn't matter that they don't make it, so the whole vignette just dies a quiet death. Eventually Lily and Frank forge ahead without MacGregor, who they leave behind when he injures his foot. The film contrives to get MacGregor back into the film by having him get snatched by Prince Joachim. In the end he mans up enough to suddenly throw a few good punches at the Prince, knocking him prone and inadvertently cause his death. Which somehow only manages to increase the embarrassing patronisation of the anointed gay character, in a movie set at a time when T.E. Lawrence and Siegfried Sassoon were jousting with empires.



Finally, Lily and Frank track their goal to a remote waterfall basin called La Luna Rota, and manage to brave an underwater mechanism that closes a lock to block the waterfall and drain off the water, so the basin drains out and reveals some ancient Mayan ruins containing the Tears of the Moon tree, which I shall henceforth call the wondrous *Avatar* tree. Before diving in the water Lily makes Frank turn away whilst she strips down to her long underwear, although a couple of seconds later they're both swimming together *en deshabelle*: we just needed to sneak in that little bit more banter and violate what little we know about these people. At least the scene where Lily gets trapped whilst trying to close the lock whilst Frank is attacked by piranha was actually filmed underwater and so there's a tiny flicker of suspense. The wondrous *Avatar* tree is an enormous thing that flowers when moonlight touches it, and we get one of those climaxes where the characters have to rush to pluck some of the petals before the moon moves on despite the fact they could reasonably wait until the following night. In a climax the film seems to think is rather apt but is actually grotesquely horrible, Frank eventually elects to entrap himself with the other Conquistadors, returned to their petrified fate by cutting off the water flow into the cavern: Aguirre manages to shout, "This is worse than torture!", and he's entirely right. Fortunately Lily uses the one petal she managed to pluck to save Frank, but apparently leaving the other men to suffer there for all eternity.



What nice heroes. I mean, yes, Aguirre and his crew did terrible things once. And that given, isn't 400 years of being the living dead punishment enough? There's some kind of unpleasant pseudo-morality at work here I found disturbing. Some of the petals bloom anew and the heroes return to civilisation with the prize in hand. Lily again has MacGregor lecture the society, only this time to inform them she's been made a Cambridge professor on the back of discovering the flower and he tells the society all to stick it, because apparently Cambridge is good and has no connection at all to whatever society this is and there will be no professional consequences to such an act whatsoever. Now of course this kind of movie always has a bit of fun with historical licence, but where *Raiders of the Lost Ark* handled the hero's success in bringing back an impossible relic to an inimical world with economy and a beautiful kick, *Jungle Cruise* begs the question of just exactly what will be made of Lily's world-changing discovery of a magic curative plant. Despite having a narrative about discovery and recovery, nobody learns anything in the course of the movie. *Jungle Cruise* is a fascinating, perhaps even ultimate example of what happens to movies when they're made by people with no apparent connection to anything even vaguely like the real world, but simply take the phenomenon of mixing together other movies and acts of corporate branding, ultimately debasing the adventure movie tradition.

## The Suicide Squad (2021)



Just when I thought *Jungle Cruise* was a lock to be the worst 'big' movie of 2021, along comes James Gunn's *The Suicide Squad*, a sequel-cum-reboot to David Ayer's 2016 definite article-lacking *Suicide Squad*. Gunn found big league success converting the third-string Marvel Comics property *Guardians of the Galaxy* into a hit movie in 2014. Despite Gunn's brief disgrace and sacking over some stupid old tweets, Warner Bros. handed him the keys to this beat-up jalopy because the Ayer film, reportedly heavily recut and reshot by studio mandate, was poorly received, although it still made a wad of cash and encouraged Warner Bros. to make *Birds of Prey, and the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn* (2020), as a star vehicle for the film's only breakout performance, Margot Robbie as the Joker's cracked ex-girlfriend turned mercenary. Gunn, who started off as a screenwriter for the legendary low-budget provocateur studio Troma before moving on to direct indie genre films like *Slither* (2006) and *Super* (2011), toned down his fondness for grotesquery for the *Guardians of the Galaxy* films and played up a facetious but popular blend of deflating, semi-satiric humour and odd, seemingly unironic sentimentality. Here, he's set loose to deliver a gory, absurdist action-comedy that is, at least in theory, something very different to your run-of-the-mill superhero flick.





So, Gunn kicks off with members of the first film's squad, Harley, Captain Boomerang (Jai Courtney), and Captain Rick Flag (Joel Kinnaman), now paired with a number of newly chosen cannon fodder, played in jokey cameos by known faces including Nathan Fillion, Pete Davidson, and Michael Rooker, only for most of them to be massacred in the first few minutes when they make landfall on the central American island republic of Corto Maltese. Turns out an entirely different squad, under the nominal leadership of former contract killer Bloodsport (Idris Elba), lands further along the coast with no opposition. The nefarious author of the Suicide Squad concept and its commander, Amanda Waller (Viola Davis), has strong-armed Bloodsport into leading the team with threats of getting his daughter imprisoned. Bloodsport's squad includes helmeted fascist enforcer Peacemaker (John Cena), a luckless man infected with an alien virus he can expel as brilliantly-coloured projectiles known as Polka-Dot Man (David Dastmalchian), a young woman dubbed Ratcatcher 2 (Daniela Melchior) who has taken up the mantle of her crazed father who made machines that could command armies of rodents, and Nanaue, aka King Shark (voiced by Sylvester Stallone), a hulking chimera of man and shark who might be the progeny of some Pacific islander god and who provides a kind of likeable lunk-head mascot for the team when he's not eating people.



Gunn tries from the earliest moments of *The Suicide Squad* to hit a note of queasily gross-comic mayhem, casually icing his first selection of scumbag antiheroes save Harley and Flag and then surveying the scattered, mashed corpses under the opening credits set to Jim Carroll's punk rock anthem "People Who Died." There are signs that Gunn might be engaging in a little auteurist self-satire, as he lampoons the fierce-cute Rocket Raccoon from *Guardians of the Galaxy* by introducing Weasel, like the other character an anthropomorphic motion-capture creation played by Gunn's brother Sean, but one that's more warped, a man-sized rodent who, we're told, killed twenty children. Ha ha, I guess? Anyway, Weasel proves the first of the initial team to get into trouble when he's made to leap out of a helicopter into the ocean only to prove unable to swim. The difference between auteurist self-satire and a lack of fresh ideas become increasingly moot henceforth, with Stallone's Nanaue providing a thin variation on Groot. There's a potentially great joke in the idea of introducing one set of protagonists and then suddenly cutting to the proper set, one Gunn tries hard to make land by flashing the title over the heads of the second team as if to emphasise that this is, in fact, the true and proper team (and movie) after the false start of the Ayer film.



And yet for some reason the joke falls flat, like most every other gag in the film. *The Suicide Squad* seems to depend almost entirely on whether or not you find exploding heads intrinsically hilarious. Despite the script being written far in advance of the film's release that Gunn's take would be superior to Ayer's, I found myself thinking back to the flickers of interest in the editorial cyclone of the earlier film. The dashes of tragic romanticism, the visions of Harley's perverting at the hands of her sadistic lover-slaver, and the cursed sword-wielding assassin Katana praying before battle -- all moments that had more delirious kick and engagement with the deeper strangeness of comic book images and emotions than anything Gunn offers. *The Suicide Squad* is instead entirely preoccupied with an adolescent concept of naughtiness in the constant killing and bloodshed. Gunn offers Polka-Dot Man as a variation on the kind of morbid, stifled outsider he dealt with in *Super*, whilst his manifestation of obsessive madness -- he projects the face of his scientist mother, who infected him with the alien virus in her attempt to create superheroes -- is a repeat of the gag climax of *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* (2017) involving Peter Quill's father taking on the form of David Hasselhoff, although at least in doing so Gunn presents a superhero movie that takes a brief break from daddy issues.



The plot, such as it is, involves the Suicide Squad(s) being sent to Corto Maltese, which has recently suffered a revolution, to penetrate a Nazi-built, American-annexed facility called Jotenheim, and prevent information stored there from falling into the hands of the military coup's leaders. But the new ruler, the suave General Silvio Luna (Juan Diego Botto), and his major confederate, the grizzled and more bluntly brutal General Mateo Suarez (Joaquín Cosío), have already laid claim to the facility and its terrifying inhabitant, a colossal alien being. The alien was stashed there by the US government after it was picked up by a space shuttle crew who were then amongst the first enslaved by its ability to shoot out small extensions of itself that latch onto the faces of luckless people: turns out the previous regime was using this unpleasant capacity to dispose of political enemies. The alien is overseen by a doctor referred to simply as Thinker (Peter Capaldi), a weapons-grade mad scientist who has his shaved head studded with grafted-on gadgets to resist the alien's influence. Thinker has given the creature the nickname of Starro the Destroyer, because of its starfish-like shape. Bloodsport's squad decides to take Thinker captive and use him to penetrate the facility. Along the way, they move to rescue Flag, massacring a camp of what they think are government soldiers only for these to prove to be the good freedom fighters who were treating Flag well. Ha ha, I guess? Then they make a diversion to recover Harley, who, after being taken captive on the beach, is dolled up and presented to Luna, who has a major crush on her and regards her as a fellow rebel against American hegemony.



The concept of the *Suicide Squad* is implicitly cynical about statecraft and covert warfare, and the political facet of the story here is pretty blunt for a modern blockbuster, even if it's no more radical than a couple of dozen '80s action movies: hell, *Predator* (1987) is just about as biting about neo-Monroe Doctrine meddling and outsourced repression. Gunn's attempts to make Jotenheim a quasi-Guantanamo are nonetheless undercut by the confused approach to the local villains, who occupy the blurry mid-ground between clichéd Latin American revolutionary cadres and clichéd Latin American military junta types, as well as the absurdity of Starro as the engine for the metaphor. Alice Braga appears in a thankless role as the leader of the anti-fascist rebels. Cena's Peacemaker is an interesting figure insofar as he gives the film its strongest link with a tradition of satire on gung-ho types – with his polished silver helmet and willingness to kill for peace he resembles a tinpot soldier out of a Terry Southern book, or William Klein's *Mister Freedom* (1969), or Kurt Vonnegut's vicious John W. Campbell caricature in *Slaughterhouse Five*. But even with Cena's droll way with curtly domineering dialogue, Peacemaker never evolves into a genuinely galvanising or frightening figure. Gunn's glibness is an all-consuming thing, much like Starro itself.



I came up with an axiom a couple of years ago that applies with particular pertinence here: CGI gore is not gore. *The Suicide Squad* sets about proving it with gusto, offering a panoply of weightless bloodletting which conjoins with the sickly CGI texture hovering about most of the film (I'm starting to feel repulsed by the sight of too much CGI on screen, like one of those species of fish that catch diseases from human fingertips). Much like the *Guardians of the Galaxy* films, *The Suicide Squad* makes a show of its superficial impudence but actually lacks anything genuinely surprising or witty: an hour after watching the film I was damned if I could remember a line of dialogue. Gunn urgently invites his movie to be described with words like "outrageous," and yet there's nothing authentically risky about this. Gunn eventually pipes in some of his trademark mawkishness, which hovers somewhere between absolute sincerity and a kind of lampoon that makes me feel like Gunn has contempt for his audience on some level. He listlessly fashions Elba's Bloodsport into a reluctant leader and surrogate father for Ratcatcher after establishing his bitter relationship with his real teenage daughter (Storm Reid), which recycles the set-up for Will Smith's *Deadshot* in the previous film whilst also seeming to kid it because father and daughter swear at each-other this time. Apart from a moment where Bloodsport threatens Waller with a pen jammed against her throat, a brief flash of real fierceness between two strong actors playing professional risk-takers, Elba paces through the whole film with a justified look of tested patience, as if he's truly wondering where his Hollywood ventures have brought him to.



To be fair, sometimes Gunn hits the mark, even if it's not enough to redeem the film. Third time isn't exactly a charm for Robbie. Harley's jarring perkiness and lurking ultraviolence has become familiar but barely more substantial: Ayer's the only filmmaker so far to try and delve into the character's internal sense of damage and suffering as well as wackiness. Gunn does try to give the character more things to do than the laboured Deadpool-esque shtick of *Birds of Prey*, particularly in her whirlwind romance with Luna before she shoots him when he reveals a monstrous streak. Harley dovetails her own determination to avoid more venomous boyfriends with a political version of the same won't-be-fooled-again impulse, and it's the one moment that comes close to returning to some of the dimension the character was imbued with in Ayer's film. Again, there might have been something interesting here, but the whole movement plays out in about five minutes, carrying no emotional weight at all. There's also a running joke about Harley's bewilderment in inheriting the Excaliburian javelin carried by one of her dead fellows, the aptly named Javelin (Flula Borg), that remains remarkably unfunny. That said, at least Gunn finally delivers his own best scene, and Robbie's, when Harley, viciously tortured after killing Luna, effects an escape, reclaims the javelin, and carves a path through the soldiers guarding her.



Gunn decorates this brief outbreak of marauding not by blood spray but clouds of animated flowers and birds, as if Harley's cracked way of seeing the world is revealed to be one part *Oldboy* (2006) and one part Merry Melodies cartoon, and all set to Louis Prima's "Just A Gigolo." It's a reminder that Gunn is at his most confident and playful when building scenes around with his, his characters', and his audience's love of music, as this scene has a similar vibe to the "Come and Get Your Love" scene in *Guardians of the Galaxy*, as well as the mock-musical animated opening of *Super*. There's also a nice moment mid-film where the squad members briefly get loose in a tavern where they plan to nab Thinker, the characters managing to find a space to have fun if still remaining sequestered within their little bubbles of strangeness and neurosis. Casting Capaldi as a mad scientist with a penchant for seamy bars and trash-talking to alien monsters sounds like a great idea, but like Elba he's given perversely little to do. There is at least one performance in the film that remains unshakeably potent: Davis' Waller, whose dead-eyed gaze is vast and cold and pitiless as space, successfully embodying everything malevolent and unswayable about someone willing to countenance anything in the name of her nation's security. She provides great villainy without anyone worthy of her to truly go up against.





Melchior also lends her interesting and expressive presence as Ratcatcher, a character costumed like a wasteland survivor from an '80s post-apocalyptic movie and who wields a tenor of innocence contrasting her character's seamy origin story and icky skill set. Melchior almost manages by force of thespian will to instil some actual emotion in proceedings. But the film quickly resets after Harley's escape to its glumly predictable brand of unpredictability, building to a finale of gobsmacking tastelessness where Starro breaks loose and rampages in the streets, only for Harley to attack it with the javelin whilst Ratcatcher, after a touchy-feely flashback to her dead junkie father, summons up all the city's rats to consume it. Gunn moves to give Starro a flicker of sympathy right at the end when through its human mouthpiece it groans that it was just happy drifting in space looking at the stars, an unusual sting of pathos that feels horribly misjudged considering Gunn has just offered up the sight of Starro being eaten inside out by a horde of rats. Sometimes a descent into bloody anarchy and the suspension of moral sense can deliver vast entertainment and catharsis. But watching this film after recently revisiting Sam Raimi's *Army of Darkness* (1992) wasn't wise: where Raimi in his prime knew just how to walk the line between gross-out and belly-laugh, absurdity and earnestness, Gunn has no such finesse. If one catches the movie's wave, then you might enjoy, but I did not, and the experience left me feeling depressed and angered. It's the kind of movie fascists will love whilst thinking themselves rebellious for it.



## The Sting (1973)



**Director:** George Roy Hill  
**Screenwriter:** David S. Ward

Despite winning the 1973 Best Picture Oscar and proving one of the most popular movies ever made, *The Sting* rarely gets much serious appreciation. Today's popular hits can very often prove tomorrow's deflated gasbags, but *The Sting* retains a kind of perfection, an ingenious and multileveled engine, a film with a narrative that takes the matter at its heart, the arts of deception and dishonesty, and also makes them the framework for its story, with a deft guile and cocksure vigour almost vanished now from popular cinema. *The Sting* began life when the struggling screenwriter David S. Ward, doing some research into pickpockets, read some books about the classic methods and characters of confidence tricksters, particularly David Maurer's 1940 book *The Big Con: The Story of the Confidence Man*, about the brothers and partners in grifting, Fred and Charley Gondorff, whose last name Ward appended to one of his fictional antiheroes. Ward later had to fend off a lawsuit from Maurer, claiming that he plagiarised the book. *The Sting* eventually reunited the two biggest male movie stars of the moment, Robert Redford and Paul Newman, and director George Roy Hill, after the trio had scored a huge hit with 1969's semi-satiric, counterculture-infused western *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*.



*The Sting* pulled off the ultimate trick of beating out William Friedkin's horror juggernaut *The Exorcist* for the Oscar after giving it a run for its money at the box office. Of course, *The Sting's* upbeat, retro fun was easier for the Academy to embrace than Friedkin's garish and nightmarish experience, as Hill's film exemplified old-fashioned Hollywood values in a New Hollywood context, packing major star power together with a sure-fire script. *The Sting* also rode a wave of nostalgic longing for bygone days, expertly coaxed by the score's use of ragtime tunes by the near-forgotten Scott Joplin, whose works, as arranged and recorded by Marvin Hamlisch, enjoyed sudden new popularity on the back of the soundtrack's success. Joplin's music, most famously "The Entertainer," used as the film's main title music and recurring throughout, but perhaps more crucially in terms of the film's aesthetic the melancholy piano theme "Solace," punctuates the repeating vision of its heroes as solitary or at drift in the streets of 1936 Joliet and Chicago, dogged by their own strange knowledge of the world and themselves, both a part of but also distinct from the society whose homeless and destitute rejects still litter the sidewalks in the waning Depression.



The appeal for the Academy might well have been something more subtle too, in the way Ward's story offered a sharp metaphor for being a Hollywood player, depicting talented people obliged to live in a netherworld in putting their abilities on the line. The con men of *The Sting* are directors, writers, and above all dynamic actors who put on their shows for the highest stakes, always a twist of chance away from beggardom, imprisonment, starvation or riches and their own kind of hermetic celebrity, needing only a performance so convincing it erases the line between fakery and authenticity, a show of brilliant wit and world-reordering sleight-of-hand. Redford's character Johnny Hooker, first glimpsed expertly bilking a mark of a bundle of cash in league with his partner Luther Coleman (Robert Earl Jones), is a young man with a true gift for his unusual art, but a need for father figures and a compulsion to try and persuade luck the same way he persuades people, a need he fulfils through gambling, at which he always ultimately loses. Despite being young and good-looking he's so much an interloper and a habitual screw-up he can't even keep his stripper girlfriend Crystal (Sally Kirdland) after blowing his first big score on a game of roulette, and he spends much of the rest of the film running, often literally, from men who want to kill him and from his own shiftless, exile-on-main street lack of identity.



Film and plot gain momentum from the opening moments where Hill surveys human wreckage on the streets of Joliet, one of many, prickling remembrances that the story unfolds in a time of hardship: the characters on screen have been created by their circumstance. The initial spur of the story is deeply wound into the time and place: a numbers operation, part of the larger crime syndicate run by Doyle Lonnegan (Robert Shaw), making fortunes off ordinary people making their own paltry plays for sudden, unlikely enrichment. The Joliet operation is run by Granger (Ed Bakey), who reports relatively weak profits and a slow count owing to a brief shutdown of the operations in town by a mayor on one of his tough-on-crime kicks, gives the week's take of \$10,000 to one of his men, Mottola (James J. Sloyan), to carry up to Chicago. Just after setting off, he glimpses an aging black man who's been stabbed and robbed by a fleeing thief: Mottola declines to take down the thief but another bystander does and gets the money back. The old man explains he was heading to make a payoff to some loan sharks he owes money to, and begs Mottola to carry the money there for him. The third man advises him to keep his money wrapped in his handkerchief and stuffed down his pants in case the thief and any pals are lying in wait for him. Mottola takes the old man's bundle with a kindly assurance to help him and then absconds, gleefully thinking he's made a killing, only to find he's the one who's been ripped off. He's just fallen victim to Hooker, his mentor and partner in crime Luther, and their confederate Kid Erie (Jack Kehoe).



This opening employs oblique method to get the story moving, starting with the vignette of the numbers racket and following Mottola as he's suckered in by the expert flimflam of the three conmen, the wise guy outmanoeuvred when he thinks he's made "the world's easiest five grand." Mottola's surprise is the audience's surprise, even as we're schooled in both the cunning method the tricksters employ, their piercing psychology in counting on the greed and dishonesty of the people they take down in the food chain of street life and the quick twists of logic used to sell the scam. This opening also privileges us with information the conmen won't learn until it's too late, the mistake they're unwittingly making in suckering a man working for a big steam operation like Lonnegan's. The sociology of the film is also, swiftly established: there are big sharks making well-protected fortunes bilking people and the smaller, entrepreneurial kind living on their wits. Astounded by the huge sum they've swindled out of Mottola, the three men divide their share, with Luther happily telling the startled and disappointed Hooker that he plans to use his cut to stop grifting altogether. Hooker meanwhile blows all his share, and is then waylaid by corrupt local detective Snyder (Charles Durning), who knows about his windfall and threatens to hand Hooker over to Lonnegan's people if he doesn't pay him off. Hooker gives him the counterfeit money he used in the con and then races back to Luther's place to warn him about the heat coming down, only to find Luther's been thrown to his death from his apartment window.



Vowing revenge and knowing Joliet is now highly hazardous to his health, Hooker heads to Chicago, where, following Luther's last piece of advice to him, he looks up Henry Gondorff (Newman), a big-time con artist who's now hiding out from FBI agents after a sting that went wrong: Hooker appeals to Gondorff to find some way of putting the sting on Lonnegan as payback for Luther because "I don't know enough about killing to kill him." Hooker first finds Gondorff lying wedged between his bed and the wall sleeping off a drunk, living as he does with his brothel madam girlfriend Billie (Eileen Brennan) in his efforts to keep hidden from the feds: Johnny's sour introduction to "the great Henry Gondorff" is a deflating experience. Gondorff, in between soaking his aching face in a sink full of chipped ice and repairing the merry-go-round Billie uses to entertain the children of her clientele, explains the difficulties and deal-breakers, particularly warning Hooker against deciding half-way through that just bilking Lonnegan isn't enough payback. Nonetheless Gondorff agrees to mastermind the sting not just because Lonnegan's a big fish who could pay off in a big payday but because of offended professional community pride, a motive he knows others will feel too: "After what happened to Luther I don't think I could get more than two, three hundred guys."





Much as he would a couple of years later in *Jaws* (1975), Shaw gives proceedings a potent dose of theatrical bravura as Lonnegan, introduced playing golf with a underworld friend-rival, refusing to let Hooker get away after Luther's death because it tarnish his image as an exacting and omnipotent operator lest men like his current golfing opponent think they can get one over on him. He snaps his intimidating catchphrase "D'ya follow?" at people in his grating Irish-by-way-of-Five Points accent, as vicious and sharklike as anything in *Jaws*. Lonnegan is another poor boy made good through criminal enterprise but garners absolutely no sympathy because his type of criminal enterprise demands a ruthlessness he dishes out with relish: it's made clear that he murdered his way to the top of the rackets and murders to stay there. Of course, Lonnegan needs to be a grade-A bastard to make it easier to cheer along our lesser bastard heroes. Gondorff draws together a team of the best grifters he knows, with the dapper Kid Twist (Harold Gould) acting as his agent in hiring the rest of the outfit and doing much of the legwork; he also draws in the motormouthed J.J. Singleton (Ray Walston) and Eddie Niles (John Heffernan). Together they decide to hit Lonnegan with a version of an outmoded con trick called "The Wire," depending on the brief lag between horse races and the broadcasting of the results, which demands setting up a fake bookie's office to draw Lonnegan in and get him to put up a big stake on a supposedly sure-fire bet. To get the cash to set up the big sting, a smaller one is needed, so Gondorff swings into action, buying his way into a poker match Lonnegan likes to hold on the train between New York and Chicago, and goes up against him a duel of dextrous cheating.



Peter Bogdanovich's *Paper Moon* (1972) had staked out similar territory the year before in dealing with Depression-era swindlers, although with quite a different relationship at its heart and its setting out in the dusty Midwest. Like many gangster stories, from any of James Cagney's hoodlum flicks through *The Godfather* films and the TV series *Breaking Bad*, *The Sting* plays games with the audience's fantasies. It appeals to that part of the viewer who for a moment forgets the rage and insult of being on the wrong side of a con trick and instead reclines in the wish we too had such talents to ward off the worst abuses of the world. *The Sting* makes this appeal something of a motif, as the main characters, despite their general alienation and outsider stature, are imbued with fraternal distinction and seedy glamour when surrounded by the victims of the Depression camped out in the street and in tent cities under railway lines. Whilst the conmen might any moment be as broke as the other people, they're by and large never more than a couple of sharp moves away from cash in pocket as long as they keep their cool. Con artists were usually, in earlier crime fiction and movies, depicted as the lowest of the low on the criminal world food chain, but *The Sting* converts this into part of the appeal. They're the mostly non-violent, clever, impudent criminal class, usually operating alone or in small teams but when roused capable of fiendish communal purpose and ingenuity, usually punching upwards in their labours, and absent prejudice in their own circles, a zone where a black man like Luther and a white one like Hooker can work together.



The greater part of *The Sting*'s pleasure is the way it invites the viewer into this peculiar little subculture and its mystique – the little rituals, lingo, and signs of recognition all concisely captured and deployed, like the nose rub the grifters use to signal each-other, and the tavern haunt that doubles as a hiring hall. The big question before Hooker is whether, as Luther thought, he's a truly top-rank conman, because he's never participated in a trick on the level Gondorff has operated on. The price the grifters pay for their kind of freedom is however constantly reiterated in their isolation, only able to relate to women who are prostitutes or fellow rootless drifters, as when Hooker makes a play for the waitress, Loretta (Dimitra Arliss), he meets in a diner who explains she's only working there long enough to make enough money to get out of town. Hooker's inability to get laid, despite looking like Robert Redford, becomes a minor running joke in the film as well as a signifier of his character straits, until he makes an anxious, self-lacerating appeal to Loretta: "I'm just like you – it's two in the morning and I don't know nobody." 1930s nostalgia, as improbable as it might have seemed to some who lived through the Depression, had become a familiar pop cultural topic by the time of *The Sting*. But Hill's restrained but rigorous sense of style and Ward's writing are particularly piquant in annexing the ghostly echoes of writers of the era like Damon Runyon and Dashiell Hammett, luxuriating in the old-school streetwise language, and magazine illustrators and advertising as well as, for more elevated reference, artists like George Bellows and Edward Hopper. The division of the film into chapters, each announced with title cards illustrated with vintage *Saturday Evening Post*-like flavour by Jaroslav Gebr, signals how the film is structured like the ritualistic form of a con game itself.



Part of the narrative's wit lies precisely in affecting to let the audience in on the art of the con, making the basic mechanics of the sting aimed at Lonnegan comprehensible, whilst also working to keep a few twists hidden, particularly the subplots involving Hooker, who we're told is the target of a top-notch assassin named Salino, hired by Lonnegan because his local killers Riley (Brad Sullivan) and Cole (John Quade) failed to get him. Hooker is also picked up and strongarmed by an FBI agent, Polk (Dana Elcar), who has also roped in Snyder and bullies them both into helping him nab Gondorff. Snyder, played by the ever-marvellous Durning, has followed Hooker to Chicago in his determination to nail him for the counterfeit payoff. When he happens upon Kid Erie, who's also come to Chicago on the lam, in a bar, Snyder slams his face against the counter to avenge a quip. He also tries pushing Billie around when he insists on searching her brothel, only for her to warn him to stay out of one room because the chief of police is in there. Snyder represents degraded authority and a cynical sense of society, the nominal enforcer of the law enriching himself by leaning on criminals and punishing infractions as zealously as Lonnegan: Snyder takes it as a matter of logical course that Luther's death isn't worth investigating and that his murderer should be escorted safely and unobtrusively from the scene of the intended FBI bust, as Polk commissions him to do. But he's not as convincing as the gangster in his badass qualifications, as Hooker keeps managing to give him the slip, most notably when Snyder catches Hooker in a phone booth and surprises him ramming his revolver through the glass, only for Hooker to simply open the concertina door, trapping Snyder's arm long enough to make an escape.



Hill studied 1930s movies and hit upon recreating their relatively sparse approach to utilising extras in street scenes, to help emphasise the isolation of the heroes and the schematics of their self-involved gamesmanship. The sense of throwback style is also extended to the opening credits, which mimic the movies of the early sound era in using Universal's old logo sequence and introducing the cast with their names and roles with images in the opening credits. And yet *The Sting* is still most definitely a '70s movie, with its buddy movie underpinnings, the Watergate-era sarcasm about power, and the sympathy and affection for characters usually designated as worthless riffraff in any other moment. And like many films that seemed like pure popular fodder in that decade like *The Exorcist*, *Jaws* and *Rocky* (1976), today *The Sting*, with its low-key, melancholy-soaked texture, character-based storytelling, and sense of finesse in historical and plot detail, feels closer to the art house than today's big, bludgeoning blockbuster equivalents: the biggest thrills in *The Sting* come from things like a well-played hand of cards. *The Sting* relies deeply on the appeal of seeing Redford and Newman, two damn good-looking and charming men as well as accomplished actors, hanging out together on screen, although the storyline polarises their roles more than their precursor vehicle *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. Where that film offered a slick and popular variation on the late 1960s' sense of fatalism for the beautiful loser, *The Sting* rides its crowd-pleasing impulses all the way, and is the better for it.



Hill stands today as a relatively neglected figure, despite making a handful of bona fide classics and mammoth hits. Hill, who as a young man had a love for Bach and acting and was at one point a student of Paul Hindemith, also had a lifelong passion for flying, obtaining a pilot's licence at 16. This particular talent made him invaluable in war as he became a pilot in the Marines flying transport planes in World War II, and was later reactivated to be a fighter pilot in Korea. The schism in Hill's formative experiences, the sensitive young man deeply immersed in art and the active warrior, were mediated through the alternations of striking, gritty realism and flashes of horror and wistful, dreamy detachment in his best movies, perhaps coming closest to articulating this in his underrated adaptation of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1972), whilst his jarring box office bomb *The Great Waldo Pepper* (1975) revolved around both his love of flying and his trademark sense of dashed and stymied romanticism. Hill, after making a name for himself in the theatre first as an actor and then director, shifted into television in the mid-1950s, including writing and directing for *Playhouse 90* a compressed but interesting version of Walter Lord's *Titanic* account *A Night To Remember* two years before the film version. He debuted as a filmmaker with *Period of Adjustment* (1962).



His follow-up, *Toys in the Attic* (1963), a Lillian Hellman adaptation starring an improbably cast Dean Martin, nonetheless first articulated a basic theme of wandering innocents trying to comprehend the world and absorb its evil shocks whilst seeking a home or an ideal, a theme infused in most of Hill's subsequent works, and it made him a perfect fit for the mood of pop culture in the late 1960s and '70s. Hill's first major film, *The World of Henry Orient* (1964), worked to evoke a wistful, almost fairytale-like style and poignancy whilst also providing moments of satire and high farce, in depicting two teenage girls obsessed with a concert pianist as a distraction from their unhappy home lives. He subsequently scored hits with the glossy, big budget labours *Hawaii* (1966) and *Thoroughly Modern Millie* (1967): the latter helped define Hill's lighter comedic talents and feel for nostalgia as a dramatic value in itself in his ability to take a quasi-sociological snapshot. Whilst not a showy director, Hill developed a distinctive shooting style, often employing muted and diffused colour to amplify the kind of strong Americana atmosphere he had a special gift for conveying, culminating in the brilliant *Slap Shot* (1977), a panoramic study of a changing society at that moment partly disguised by the foul-mouthed and raucous vision of ice hockey. In the 1980s Hill scored his last major critical and commercial success with an adaptation of *The World According to Garp* (1982), before a halting version of John LeCarre's *The Little Drummer Girl* (1984) and his last work, *Funny Farm* (1988), which suffered from fights with the studio over what kind of movie it was supposed to be, after which Hill quit cinema and taught drama at Yale.



*The Sting* depends on Hill's ability to imbue Ward's script with a sense of place and time as exacting as the machinations. It's often noted that the use of Joplin's music wasn't a great fit for the late 1930s at the height of big band jazz. But the job of a film score is to describe the film's evanescent emotional plain, and Joplin's tunes are perfect for this, as well as suggestively evoking a similar meaning for the characters, beset in adulthood and feeling the pensive tug of the past, that the film as whole has for the audience watching it, describing places just over the line of sight in the past. Whilst much of the film revolves around relatively mundane settings and small gestures that have large meanings, Hill injects nods to the slapstick movie tradition, particularly when he lets the camera hang back to watch slim and fleet-footed Redford trying to elude the bulbous but dancer-nimble Durning. Hill plays games with planes within his framing, as Hooker climbs onto an L station roof to elude the cop, or when he vanishes from the frame as Lonnegan's goons chase him, only to be carried back into the shot as he clings to the side of street cleaning machine, successfully eluding the hoods. The setting has its sleazy side: Hill beautifully captures the grimly funny tawdriness of an old burlesque show with Hooker's visit to Crystal early in the film, planning to wow her with his new fortune: Hooker waits in the wings for her to get off stage whilst she, nearly naked, shakes her tits at the sparse audience, and is supplanted on stage by a blue comedian.





As if by counterpoint Hill gains a note faintly surreal and childlike glee in the sight of Billie's stable of girls gleefully riding the merry-go-round on a quiet night, a vision of strange innocence amidst seediness matching the story's overall lilt. Hill and cinematographer Robert Surtees often utilise deep-focus shots and use vertical frames within frames, conveying period flavour in the cramped and pokey urban environs the characters inhabit, the small, dingy back rooms, diners, train compartments, and dens of iniquity, and also capturing the psychological pressure, the tightness of their lives, and also contrasted with the blasted, depopulated city streets. Directorial flourishes often have two meanings in the film much like the grifter's art – at one point Hill's camera draws back from a window encompassing Hooker and Loretta in bed, a particularly Hopperesque image in the glimpse through from an urban space into a private world, only to pull back further and reveal an unseen presence watching them from across the street, turning the shot into a *giallo* movie-like vignette complete with black-gloved hands switching off a light, signalling the presence of lurking threat. Later, in a vaguely horror movie-like vignette, Hooker eludes the hitman Cole who's still hunting for him, only for Riley to be cornered and shot by an unseen figure he calls Salino – the name strongly suggests a nod to the demonic hitman Canino in *The Big Sleep* (1946). Here, the film's own sleight-of-hand involving Salino's identity is foreshadowed, and a note of real menace is struck here to generate tension in the otherwise, generally jaunty proceedings. There's also another, wryer dimension to this vignette" Salino's vindictive brutality, killing a colleague because he didn't get out of the way as professional courtesy demands, also rather cheekily gives the world of assassins a similar sense of a code to that of the hitmen, even if their way of handling things is far less amusing.



Hooker and Gondorff are unusual film protagonists, in their unrepentant criminality but also in their essential ambivalence. Gondorff's reassurance to Hooker in regards to Lonnegan, "Don't worry kid – we had him ten years ago when he decided to be somebody," reflects Gondorff's jaded knowledge of human nature, the things that make some people successful also being exactly what people like him and Hooker feed off. Gondorff was initially characterised as an aging, portly has-been in Ward's script – one reason perhaps in the film's ill-fated, afterthought sequel *The Sting II* (1982) Jackie Gleason stepped into the role – but was revised when Newman became interested in the role into a charismatic rogue who knows enough angles to be the Pythagoras of crime but one who knows "I could do a lot worse" when Hooker goads him by asking if he wants to remain Billie's handyman. Although not seen for half-an-hour, Gondorff quickly dominates the film as he sets his peculiar genius to work, seen in a long, droll sequence where he begins the great game against Lonnegan, first by arranging for Billie to lift his wallet and then going toe to toe with him in the card game, schooling Hooker all the while in touches like what kind of liquor to drink with a mark. The resulting, intimate comic set-piece sees Lonnegan's habitual ferocity easily stoked by Gondorff's performance, posing as Shaw, an insolent and besotted Chicago bookie who keeps getting Lonnegan's name wrong, but also outdoes him in card sharpening: Lonnegan's wrath is potent, but it also blinds him to the game he's really in, which he doesn't realise until he's soundly beaten. Hill cuts at one point to an exterior view of the train passing by the fire of some encamped hobos, another jabbing reminder of the social landscape beyond the hermetic workings of the plot and the obsessiveness of the characters.



Hooker sets the next phase of the plan in motion by posing as Shaw's disaffected henchman. The humour has a queasy undercurrent as just how close to the edge the tricksters are dancing is made clear when Lonnegan is swiftly moved to murder Hooker when he reveals 'Shaw's' con, something only Hooker's self-possession and quick line of patter staves off. Hooker's role is to pretend to want to draw Lonnegan into his plot to bankrupt his hated boss by feeding him tips on winning horses in races, supplied by a source working for Western Union. When Lonnegan demands to meet the source, Kid Twist steps into the role, he and Singleton bluffing their way in to take over a Western Union office for a few minutes, long enough to pull off the deception. Whilst the mechanics of these scenes carefully lay out for the audience just how the grifters are taking down Lonnegan, other aspects of the plot are still ambiguous, the blow from the mysterious Salino waiting to fall, and the FBI leaning on the anguished Hooker to betray his new pals. These elements threaten to prove the ghost in the well-sprung machine, particularly as Hooker's habit of keeping secrets from Gondorff has already almost gotten him killed.



Whilst the star power of Newman and Redford anchor the film with their megawattage charm and crafty performances, the remarkably good cast of character actors giving them support also give it flesh. Some of the strong turns include Gould, whose Kid Twist presents the incarnation of what perhaps every grifter wants to be as they get older, worldly and debonair and sublimely easy in their command of studied surfaces, and Kehoe, whose Kid Erie is the opposite, a small-timer like Hooker who wants a bit of payback and to prove himself capable in high-pressure situations. He gets his chance when Twist hires him and he successfully pushes the hook just a little bit deeper in Lonnegan in playing a gabby gambler hanging about Shaw's bookie office. Jones, father of James Earl, does an invaluable job in a short time as he gives the film its initial dose of pathos, presenting the more realistic face of the aging con man, tired, greying, happy to take whatever happy exit he can grab. There's also a great example of how an actor with a small role can almost steal a movie with one well-turned line, in this case Avon Long as Benny, the agent who rents Kid Twist the necessary fittings for the fake bookie's office who, after Twist asks him if he wants to be paid a flat rate or get a percentage of the score and then learns the mark is Lonnegan, responds with wisest of wiseguy drawls, "Flat rate," as there's a good chance no-one might be alive to claim his money from.



Amidst the largely masculine milieu and cast, Arliss and Brennan provide strong, refreshingly earthy presences. Billie's relationship with Gondorff presents the only strong human attachment anyone glimpsed in the film retains, and she stands up to Snyder with a nonchalance that's almost transcendental. The turning gears of the plot finally begin reaching their climax after Hill portrays his heroes, and villains, waking and readying on the morning of the main event with a sense of breath being inhaled and held. Hooker is surprised to find Loretta gone from her bed when he wakes up alone, but is pleased to see her in the alley outside, only for a gunman to appear behind her and plant a bullet in her forehead. Hooker, shocked, nonetheless finds the gunman (Joe Tornatore), the man who was watching him from across the street, was actually sent by Gondorff to protect him, and Loretta was Salino, who couldn't kill Hooker the night before for witnesses but found the perfect way to keep him on ice overnight. A jarring moment but another one where the world of con artistry and professional murder have their common aspects in the game of concealment and surprise, Hooker almost falling victim to someone willing to play a long game.



The other dangling subplot is resolved at the same time as the central tale, as Lonnegan descends into the bookie joint to place a mammoth \$500,000 bet, goading 'Shaw' into taking the bet: "Not only are ye a cheat, you're a gutless cheat as well." The last twist of the knife is delivered, as Kid Twist in character as the source drives Lonnegan to apoplexy in his mortified report Lonnegan was meant to bet on the horse to place rather than win, but just as Lonnegan begins raising hell in bursts Polk and his agents with Snyder: Gondorff guns down Hooker when he realises he's screwed him over, and Polk immediately shoots Gondorff. Snyder bustles Lonnegan out: the gangster should know he's well out of it, but his fixation on his money almost overrides his good sense. Of course, once Lonnegan's gone, the dead rise from the floor and wipe away the fake blood, fake FBI man shakes hands with resurrected Gondorff, and the band of merrie men start packing up to head their different ways, much richer and rather satisfied: "You're right," Hooker comments to Gondorff, harking back to the older man's warning: "It's not enough...But it's close."



Hooker turns down his share of the take, not through some phoney attack of conscience – one thing the movie is blissfully freed from is any kind of official morality – but because he’s gained something in self-knowledge, an awareness of why he does the things he does and a sense of what he needs to do to escape his own vicious circle. So he and Gondorff stride off together, seen off by Hill with the last of his old-timey touches, an iris shot, closing the curtain on this rarefied annex where show business and crime readily commingle. *The Sting* has remained a permanent wellspring of influence in Hollywood, and not just in providing a reusable template to a subgenre of likeable, swashbuckling criminal trickster movies like *Focus* (2015) or Steven Soderbergh’s *Oceans 11* series, which owes it infinitely more than the movie they nominally remade, and darker but still similar fare like *The Usual Suspects* (1995), but arguably in the whole craze for twist and puzzle narratives seen in the past quarter-century. But *The Sting* remains inimitable in its most fundamental qualities, its cast, its insouciant veneer and gentle mockery of familiar movie melodrama, and its old-fashioned faith that, no matter how clever the gimmick, what finally delivers the gold is the human element.

## The Silent Flute (1978)

*aka Circle of Iron*



The origins of *The Silent Flute* are draped in Hollywood legend. It began as a project dreamt up by Bruce Lee with James Coburn and screenwriter Stirling Silliphant, who were both Lee's kung fu students at the time, circa 1970. Lee's intention for the story was to illustrate the spiritual journey implicit in Asian martial arts practices as well as the requisite physical discipline and kinetic action, the deeper theme supposedly mixed with liberal amounts of violence and tantric sex that would have pushed screen boundaries at the time. The movie was to be set and filmed in Thailand, with Coburn set to play Cord, a quester who passes through a series of trials under the tutelage of a mentor Lee was to play. The project fell apart as Lee and Coburn's friendship was strained by trying to work together. As Lee's popularity only grew after his tragic demise, just about every scrap of footage he ever left on a cutting room floor was being repurposed for patched-together starring vehicles, so the curiosity value of a film he had a hand in writing must have seemed then a decent commercial proposition by that point, and Silliphant took the script up again with another top screenwriter, Stanley Mann. Cinematographer and Panavision co-founder Richard Moore made it his lone feature directing outing, whilst David Carradine, who had starred in the TV series *Kung Fu* and so was after Lee the closest thing to a Hollywood martial arts star at that point, was tapped to play what was originally Lee's part. The result is one of the most genuinely strange Hollywood studio projects ever released.





One major change from the original story saw the film now set in an everywhere-and-nowhere realm in a quasi-historical epoch, a surreal stage for Cord's journey of body and soul. Cord (Jeff Cooper) is first glimpsed taking part in a martial arts tournament overseen by White Robe (Roddy McDowall), the potentate of a medieval city in the steppes. The contest is held with the purpose of winnowing contestants down to the most gifted, brave, and fitting candidates to then go out into the wilderness and track down the mysterious magus named Zetan and claim a book supposedly containing the most profound wisdom in his keeping. Cord is thrown out of the contest despite being obviously the best fighter after he hits his opponent whilst he's on the ground and earns the censure of White Robe. Cord sullenly resolves to track the man chosen for the mission, Morthond (Anthony de Longis). Morthond dies at the first challenge, fatally beaten whilst taking on the king (Carradine) of a tribe of monkey-men. Cord encounters a blind man (Carradine again) who first gains his attention walking by him in the city streets with a bell on one toe. The Blind Man possesses incredibly keen hearing and touch to compensate for his lack of vision, able to smite a gang of bandits who attack him, and he offers gnomic clues to Cord on how to proceed across the wilderness, including how to defeat the monkey king. Cord, claiming Morthond's talisman as anointed quester, manages to make the king yield and the creature points Cord on to the next trial.



*The Silent Flute* is the pure stuff of cult followings, weaving a unique atmosphere with a general glaze of stark eccentricity that inevitably strikes some as garishly silly and others as intriguingly dreamlike, existing within some acid-trip harlequinade. The two titles the film is known by interchangeably point to the disparity of expectation, the oneiric parable and the martial arts flick. Visually and tonally it has similarities to other fantasy-adventure movies made in the late 1970s and '80s, somewhere on the scale between *Conan The Barbarian* (1982) and *Hawk The Slayer* (1980). It has a similar sun-struck look and out-of-time feel to *Conan The Barbarian*, a film with a similar if more concretely realised metaphorical journey. But it's not really that kind of film. Call *The Silent Flute* an Alejandro Jodorowsky film remade as a Shaw Brothers joint, or a Jose Luis Borges story as realised by Robert Clouse, or an animated prog rock album cover. There are plenty of movies about callow men gaining self-control and wisdom on the path to becoming fighting masters, like Akira Kurosawa's *Sanshiro Sugata* (1941), George Sidney's *Scaramouche* (1952), Chang Cheh's *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin* (1978), or Irvin Kershner's *Star Wars – Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back* (1980).



*The Silent Flute* turns that kind of movie inside out, insofar as it spurns melodramatic stakes and instead persists within some Jungian space, disassembling the usual movements on a plot and looks at how they represent parts of ourselves, warring with the other parts. When a potential revenge theme is eventually set in motion, this proves only another facet of the allegory. The film also subverts the traditional approach of portraying such growth in tandem with the hero's growth as a fighter. It's Cord's character that needs refining, not his fighting prowess, although of course the two are linked in martial arts philosophy: perfect physical expression is the product of perfect mental awareness. Cord's quest takes him from the land of the monkeys to a baked desert plain where he encounters Eli Wallach playing a man so troubled by his restless sexuality and determined to achieve a state of grace he's immersed himself for ten years in a pot of oil to painlessly dissolve his legs and genitals away, and he heartily recommends the same regimen to Cord. This perverse comic vignette proves to be foreshadowing, as Cord himself suffers from the consequences of his nagging virility despite having taken a vow of celibacy for the duration of his quest.



Cord comes to the encampment of a warlord and grandmaster named Chang-Sha (Carradine thrice) who lives a nomadic life with a large retinue of entertainers, wives, and warriors. Chang-Sha offers Cord his hospitality up to and including sexual delights with one of his veiled wives, Tara (Erica Creer). Cord demurs, wanting instead to fight Chang-Sha, even after he sees the lord challenged by one of his own hulking guards (Earl Maynard). The guard, who seems to have been another quester like Cord but joined Chang-Sha instead, now feels the gnawing need to finally take him on, only for Chang-Sha to easily defeat and kill him, claiming his talisman as a prize. During the night the young and doe-like Tara comes to Cord and breaks down his wall of chastity. They spend a night of dreamily perfect eroticism together and make plans to leave together, only for Cord to awake in the morning to find Chang-Sha and all his people have vanished like a mirage, leaving only Tara behind, crucified and dead. Continuing on his way with the guttering desire for retribution on Chang-Sha that slowly gives way to self-reprehending regret, Cord sleeps in a ruin, only to dream of being stalked by a man-beast, entirely black and with long claws: death itself, the deepest foe.



Cord finished up being played by Canadian actor Cooper, who had been hanging around Hollywood since the early 1960s and had occasional brushes with breaking out as an action star, having co-starred in Tom Laughlin's *Born Losers* (1967) and played the lead in a Mexican adaptation of the beloved Latin American comic book hero *Kaliman the Incredible* (1972). He later appeared on *Dallas* during its famous "Who Shot J.R.?" run. He was certainly in sufficient shape for his role here (the costuming, or lack of it, certainly wants you to drink him in), but he lacks star stature and specific gravitas, with his mane of shaggy blonde hair and not-quite-ruggedly handsome features. His lack of depth makes Cord seem initially more petulant than fiery and arrogant, although he handles one scene well, in which Cord is confronted by the black beast and responds with the fearlessness of a man who's been hollowed out by grief and anger and now occupies a zone of coldly expectant defiance: "Are you waiting for fear to freeze my heart before you carve it out?" Carradine's multiple roles are all connected to the quest and all of them perhaps avatars of a single being. There is a degree of silliness to him done up in monkey make-up and then as a vaguely Asiatic warrior. But he fulfils the key role of the blind master well, allowed to invert his *Kung Fu* role and play the mentor dispensing riddles as sage advice, announcing his mysterious and ethereal presence by playing a flute only Cord can hear. Quentin Tarantino paid homage to the role by having Carradine play the same flute in *Kill Bill Vol. 2* (2004). There's a well-done if overlong comic action sequence later in the where Cord and the Blind Man avoid a squad of murderous marauders on horseback, the Blind Man pausing to perform seemingly random and absurd acts during the frantic fight for survival, leaving it up to the bewildered Cord to deduce their meaning.



The vignettes are not supposed to be literal, of course, as Cord first overcomes the spectre of his own vain and bestial self and confronts the pointlessness of denying life in the search for its meaning, before learning to accept both love and pain and his inevitable complicity in both. The lessons have flashes of moral and aesthetic shock, including Tara's death, and when the Blind Man sinks a boat he's hired from a poor ferryman, and later when he smacks a good-looking boy in the face, breaking his nose and ruining his looks, leaving Cord increasingly beggared. Eventually he erupts and declares the Blind Man is crazy, only for the Blind Man to explain all his actions with such exact reasoning – hitting the boy for instance because he looks were making him a monster – and Cord finally realises the Blind Man has travelled the same path and encountered the same manifestations of cosmic challenge before. Cord's own journey is realising both the necessity of loving and also the impossibility of holding onto it: by the time he again encounters Chang-Sha he holds himself responsible for Tara's death, and his combat with Chang-Sha when it comes is one of equilibrium and neutral feeling. Even though Chang-Sha seems to turn into the monkey king and the black beast for a blink during their fight, Cord remains focused and fights him to a draw. This gives him the key to finally finding Zetan, and Cord is ferried to a castle on an island where Zetan (Christopher Lee) awaits.



As would be expected from a movie made by a cinematographer of Moore's standing, *The Silent Flute* looks beautiful, often belying what seems to have been a pretty low budget, employing stark, bright colours against the ochres and oranges of the Israeli locations, with a sense of physical majesty and scale in the craggy mountains and surging coastlines and authentic ruins, often bathed in sunset and sunrise hues. Even the cheap, minimalist special effects help weave the weird mood to a certain degree, like the blurry colour effects denoting Cord's dream, and the matte painting buildings. The combat with the monkey king takes place in a cave with cabalistic symbols carved into the walls, and the heroes traverse a landscape littered with arcane ruins where dreams become solid. One nagging problem is Moore's evident lack of experience in shooting fight choreography, constantly failing to mask missed punches and communicate the bone-cracking immediacy of the fights, despite the physicality of Cooper, Carradine, and Maynard.



Of the odd star cameos Christopher Lee comes off best in playing Zetan who, far from the ultimate warrior Cord was expecting, proves to be a nobly courteous and gentle man, head of a monastery where the brethren grow roses and winnow the knowledge of eternity. The ultimate punch-line, as Cord is given the book of wisdom only to find contains a mirror reflecting back his own image indicating self-knowledge as the end of all journeys, comes with a sting of inspired pathos as Zetan begs Cord to “release me” from the role of the book’s keeper even as Cord laughs at the cosmic joke. Cord instead leaves Zetan’s island and meets up with the Blind Man, who can now see, having fulfilled the creed Zetan explained of letting master and pupil go through the lesson together. The man happily makes Cord the gift of his flute, signalling Cord will now take over as the guide for other questers, and the last shot zooms out from the pair in the midst of the primal landscape. A true oddity, and one of those movies where I’m not at all sure it’s good, and yet I feel some genuine love for it. Bruce Smeaton’s atmospheric score is worth noting. A new TV version based more faithfully on the original concept has been announced.





## High Noon (1952)



**Director: Fred Zinnemann**  
**Screenwriter: Carl Foreman**

Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon* stands in popular moviegoing memory as perhaps the most famous and purely emblematic of Westerns, and yet what made it stand out in 1952 was the way it violated conventions over the look and sound, as well as the deeper themes, usually found in the genre. It's also one of two films made in the 1950s that provide a perpetual blueprint for modern action filmmaking, the other being Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954). Kurosawa's film set the template for tales about a group of warriors with diverse talents and qualities drawn together for righteous battle. *High Noon*, its immediate precursor, by contrast portrays the crucial vision of a fighter forced to stand alone, with a title that became a by-word for moments of fraught confrontation. Both films, of course, were themselves condensations of earlier movie and storytelling traditions and particular influences, but each managed to winnow their concerns and approach into such precisely articulated iconography that they became henceforth the instant point of reference. Despite eventually being accepted as not just a classic but a perfect totem for an attitude of fortitude and resolve, Zinnemann's film became a contested moment in screen history: greeted with general but by no means universal plaudits and solid popular success, it nonetheless irritated many, including John Wayne, and Howard Hawks, who felt the film's

basic premise so wrongheaded he made *Rio Bravo* (1959) as a riposte. *High Noon* was nominated for multiple Oscars and yet the disquiet behind the story it told probably resulted in losing out for Best Picture against reactionary chieftain Cecil B. DeMille's *The Greatest Show On Earth*. Ironies proliferate, as a movie specifically birthed by, and depicting, the failure of political and social leaders became a morale-boosting favourite of both American Presidents, as well as the Polish Solidarity movement.



The story behind *High Noon*'s making is now impossible to detach from the film itself, even as most viewers in its time were unaware and indifferent. Screenwriter Carl Foreman, working from an outline he had penned and a short story called "The Tin Star" by John W. Cunningham, claimed his completed script was an allegory for the anti-Communist McCarthyist furore casting a torturous and destructive shadow over Hollywood, an episode where many hauled in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee suddenly found themselves without support or backing in the climate of fear and fecklessness. Foreman himself was called before the committee as *High Noon* was being made, and began revising the script to incorporate some of the things happening to him, particularly the church argument sequence. Foreman's refusal to name any people he had once been members of the Communist Party with left him vulnerable to blacklisting. As if fulfilling his own prophecy, Foreman's producing partner Stanley Kramer immediately severed their association. Whilst a political conservative who had given friendly if trivial testimony to the HUAC, Cooper disliked the blacklist and backed Foreman, helping keep his name on the film, to such a degree that Wayne and others threatened to get him blacklisted too. Foreman eventually moved to England, and rebounded in Hollywood years later when he pseudonymously wrote David Lean's *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), another tale of resisting oppressive power that shades into oblivious collaboration with that power, and then officially by writing and producing *The Guns of Navarone* (1961).



Polish-born Zinnemann saw the project more universally, later noting that there was “something timely – and timeless” about the story, and perhaps with a degree of pretension declared that he didn’t see it as a Western but simply a story taking place in a particular historical setting. For Zinnemann, whose parents had died in the Holocaust, *High Noon* presented the perfect myth of civilisation standing its ground against malevolence, anarchy, and most insidious of all, cravenness. Certainly he would return repeatedly in his career to the concern of a protagonist wrestling with moral dilemmas and forced eventually to face a reckoning, whether it be with their own conscience, like the heroine of *The Nun’s Story* (1959), or, as in *High Noon*, *From Here To Eternity* (1953), and *A Man For All Seasons* (1966), being forced to take a stand against bullying and bludgeoning power despite the inevitable cost this invites. Zinnemann had made his prototype with 1948’s *Act of Violence*, a movie crucially depicting an inexorable march towards a potentially deadly confrontation that also, crucially, hinged on a demand for justice and accountability, in the tale of one war veteran hunting down a former fellow inmate of a POW camp he believes betrayed his comrades. Decades later Zinnemann would invert *High Noon*’s focus to an extent with *The Day of the Jackal* (1973), depicting an icily detached assassin’s exacting preparations for killing a political leader at a fatefully appointed hour.



If *High Noon*'s standing has declined over the years, part of it's because of greater recognition that it didn't spark the "adult Western" movement of the '50s, although it certainly seems to have helped define it in certain key qualities. Zinnemann, whose defining traits of fine-grained, carefully sober, borderline minimalist style has gone in and out of critical fashion, moreover worked to purposefully reject the visual sweep and epic lustre associated with the genre's leading exponents like John Ford and Hawks, despite the film resembling a feature-length take on the ending of Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939). Zinnemann and cinematographer Floyd Crosby studied Matthew Brady's Civil War-era photographs to and recreated their look, stripping away all hint of painterly gloss and what Zinnemann later called the "religious ritual" quality of most Western cinematography, instead shooting the film in a unsoftened, unfiltered black-and-white. The unvarnished approach gave the film a level of visual similarity to what was emerging as the distinct aesthetic of the era's television, which seemed all the better for putting across studies of psychological angst and moral drama. At the same time, Zinnemann and Foreman's key storytelling touch laid down a template for more recent crazes in trying to create a sense of unified realism in cinema, in labouring to make the film play out in very close to real time, with a ruthlessly metronomic sense of editing's meaning and its relationship with time that finally becomes overt and oppressively intense in the legendary passage immediately preceding the inevitable climax. Time in *High Noon* is life, and death.



The story is simplicity itself. In the small but burgeoning town of Hadleyville, in the New Mexico Territory, Marshal Will Kane (Gary Cooper) is marrying his young Quaker bride Amy Fowler (Grace Kelly). The wedding, performed by the town judge Percy Mettrick (Otto Kruger) in his court, brings together many of the players in the subsequent drama celebrating the hero Marshal's nuptials, including the Mayor, Jonas Henderson (Thomas Mitchell), Will's predecessor and mentor Martin Howe (Lon Chaney), his friend Sam Fuller (Harry Morgan), and Fuller's wife Mildred (Eve McVeagh). After the ceremony he surrenders the Marshal's star before leaving on his honeymoon, although his replacement will not arrive the following day. Just before heading off, however, two coinciding events ruin the happy day. News arrives by telegram that Frank Miller (Ian MacDonal), a cruel and violent outlaw who used to tyrannise Hadleyville and its residents until Will took over as Marshal, has just had his sentence commuted by the Governor and been released. Moreover, three men who once comprised Miller's gang, his brother Ben (Sheb Wooley), Jack Colby (Lee Van Cleef), and Jim Pierce (Robert J. Wilke), have just ridden into town and are now waiting at the railway station for the noon train. This portends an obvious fact: Frank is coming back, intending vengeance and renewal of his reign of terror. After initially continuing on out of town, Will eventually heaves the wagon to and tells his new wife he must head back. Amy retorts with a line of thinking he soon hears repeated in many variations, that it's not his job anymore. But there's no-one else to do it, and Will feels the obligation.



Zinnemann commences the film with initially mysterious shots of the three hoodlums assembling in the wilds outside of Hadleyville and heading for the town. The style is immediately unusual, playing out wordlessly under the opening credits but already setting the drama in motion, suggested in the hard, bullet-eyed, expectant faces of the gunmen, set to the strains of Dimitri Tiomkin and Ned Washington's ballad "High Noon," sung for the film by Tex Ritter, with its plaintive refrain of "Do not forsake me, O my darling," which then returns at intervals throughout the film, as if it's playing within Will's head, loping, repetitive, nagging, anxious. The song's popularity and clever dramatic justification sparked a craze for Westerns to all sport their Top Ten-wannabe theme song, but most of those imitators tended much more strident: in *High Noon* the song is spare, stark, mournfully simple, sounding at once like an authentic Western ballad whilst also evoking the courtly romanticism of a medieval troubadour's poem. The lyrics recount the film's plot informally, and suggest the story's most deeply essential relationship is, ultimately, that between Will and Amy rather than Will and the community: anyone can stand facing the world and its evils when the one person dear to them stands behind them.



Will knows his enemy, sure in his anticipation that Miller and his gang, vicious thugs all with a lode of pent-up anger to expiate, will visit abuse, murder, and rape upon the town, as well as the risk of them running him and Amy down on the road. Will soon forms the conviction that the only way to stop them is to meet them with sufficient force to ward them off. Will soon finds his conscientious sense of purpose, which he feels as surely as any knight or samurai, isn't necessarily shared by his fellow townspeople. His first major disenchantment comes from Amy herself, as she tells him in a fury that she doesn't want him risking his life or taking those of others, and swiftly presents an ultimatum, promising to abandon him and head off on the train if he doesn't immediately leave with her. Will looks pained but makes no gesture to comply, so Amy heads to the station. Will at least knows this was a potential problem with his mate, having accepted her and her Quaker faith, which, as she memorably narrates later, she turned to after losing loved-ones to ferocious violence: "My father and my brother were killed by guns. They were on the right side but that didn't help them when the shooting started. My brother was nineteen. I watched him die." Amy's moral perspective runs counter to the basic precepts that Will espouses through deed and unspoken feeling rather than intellectual formulae, that certain dangers must be braved in order for society to hold together.





*High Noon*'s take on an eternal dialogue between pacifism and measured force is cast in the roles of masculine and feminine values, purposefully set at extremes, but also entangled by the bonds of affection, as well as an incipient trial of strength within the marriage, the marriage of two minds as inevitably fraught contests of moral vision with mutual degrees of incomprehension. This element of the film, which threads right through it both dramatically and philosophically, immediately connects *High Noon* to the social perspective espoused in Ford's great Westerns but also confronts it and asks certain interesting questions. In *My Darling Clementine* (1946) the eponymous lady embodied civilised values the gunfighter hero could dance with but could not countenance settling down with: as he had before in *Stagecoach* (1939) and would again in *The Searchers* (1956), despite their divergences in theme and style, Ford conceived of the Western hero as a figure who had substance only in a specific place and moment and had to yield to a civilisation, defined as intrinsically feminine. One thing that's particularly interesting about *High Noon*, both within its own narrative and in terms of its genre, is that it actually tells the story after the story. Will's first victory over Miller can be regarded as the Western genre in miniature: the barbarian has been defeated, civilisation has settled. Now the warrior can turn in his badge and take the bride who will have him "running a store."



Of course, the narrative compels us to recognise the more imminent validity of Will's point, because his foes aren't reasonable men with motives that can be assimilated or negotiated, but rather holdovers from a barbarian past who once might have held sway over the Steppes or the Danelaw, given an historical petri dish to grow again by the Wild West's disorder. This aspect also both builds upon and interrogates Ford's concept of the Western, suggesting that barbarity and civilisation exist one inside the other like Matroushka dolls than a rolling tide of colonial superceding, one keeping a check on the other, requiring that certain people, in this case Will, retain their outback bushido as the only way to ensure the world holds together. The message is most easily and commonly formulated by the famous line Wayne delivered in another film, "A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do." But just what is it a man's gotta do? A phrase repeated twice in the film in variations is an answer to a character's uncomprehending question as to why Will pursues his sense of duty: "If you don't know, then I can't explain it to you," evoking a realm of ethical experience that almost lies beyond liminal understanding, a sense of personal responsibility for the world that one either possesses or doesn't.



Will soon finds others want him to move on for a wide variety of reasons. His chief deputy, Harvey Pell (Lloyd Bridges), a callow and resentful man, is annoyed that he got passed over for being Will's replacement, a choice Will says was that of the town council rather than himself: where Amy's resistance is principled, Harvey's motives are more aggressively perverse, his desire to assimilate Will's stature plain in not just seeking his job but also in having taken up with his former lover Helen Ramírez (Katy Jurado). It's as if Harvey sees all this as the blueprint for evolving into a similarly potent and sovereign man, also manifesting in a need to hinder Will, to reduce him rather than try to live up to his example. Harvey quits when Will refuses to promise him the sheriff's job in exchange for his help, and later assaults Will to forestall his confrontation with the gang, not to save him but because Harvey knows it would too sorely expose his own weakness. Mettrick, who passed sentence on Miller, packs up his belongings upon hearing Miller is coming, whilst coolly and calmly explaining his own attitude to Will, recounting both historical precedent and personal, including one from ancient Athens and a similar situation he was involved in himself years before and feeling discretion the better part of valour: "I've been a judge many times in many towns – I hope to live to be a judge again." The rule of law has no strength without its enforcers.



Mettrick is glimpsed, in a mordant touch, taking down and folding up the American flag; afterwards the rectangular imprint of it on the wall behind him remains visible. Invisible presences are important in this scene, nudged more forcefully as Mettrick reminds Will of Miller's promise to return and kill him, pointing to the chair where he sat during the trial and spoke those words. Zinnemann dollies up to the empty piece of furniture as it becomes the totem of Miller's tyrannical presence, before making a jagged jump cut to Pierce smashing an empty liquor bottle as he and his companions wait in sweaty frustration. Others in town wouldn't mind seeing Will go up against the gang and earn a few bullet holes, like the impudently sarcastic hotel receptionist (Howland Chamberlain) and tavern owner Gillis (Larry J. Blake), still annoyed that the process of "cleaning up" Hadleyville cost them their best sources of business. When Will enters the tavern on the search for volunteers to back him up, immediately after a charged, silent encounter with the smirking Harvey, he hears Gillis delighting in the prospect. Will socks Gillis in the face, but immediately apologises when the bloody-lipped Gillis notes he has all the power in their immediate situation. Will tries to find Fuller, but Fuller hides in his house and has Mildred tell Will he's not home: "Well what do you want, you want me to get killed?" he demands of her when she wears a shameful look after lying to Will.



The central scene sees the failure of support for Will implicate the community's innermost ranks, when he visits the congregation gathered in the local church mid-service. This scene bears a strong and deliberate-feeling resemblance to scenes that often featured in movies made during World War II where communities argued about the costs of resistance versus passivity, like *Edge of Darkness* (1943), which also takes place in a church. Except that the upshot of such scenes is inverted, starting off with some of the men in the congregation immediately rising to pledge their aid, only for objecting voices to be raised and stall them, and Will's hope of forging a unified response bleeds steam and dies. Will's motives are impugned, accused of wanting to drag others into what is a personal feud between him and Miller. The parson (Morgan Farley), who snippily criticises Will for coming to the church despite rarely visiting it other times and not getting married there, notes with confused gravitas that the Commandments forbids killing "but we hire men to go out and do it for us," and remains noncommittal. Voice of protest are still raised from those who find the failure to support Will disgusting and those who remember how bad things were before he took up his job and got rid of Miller. The real blow falls when Henderson starts giving a speech that seems to be supporting Will until he suddenly changes tack and argues any gunfighting will ruin the town's nascent prosperity and that likely nothing will happen if Will doesn't confront the gang, preferring the illusion of peace and harmony to its actuality. This finally leaves Will without any support.



Zinnemann provides both a dash of comic relief and pointed symbolism as Will leaves the church, as the children play tug-of-war on the lawn mimics the verbal contests of their elders before all falling over. The connection between the church scene and those forebears from wartime movies, with the stinging diagnosis of faltering communal will and purpose, takes aim at the chief disease of a hard-bought peacetime: apathy. The accumulating portrait of a community now paralysed by its own timidity and uncertainty is mediated by a complex sense of individual purposes. Everyone has their reasons, from Henderson's forced-seeming declaration of faith in simply avoiding the fight, breaking out in a muck sweat as he praises Will to the heavens whilst also abandoning him in his cause, to Harvey's more personal, egocentric objections. The only men who fearlessly volunteer to help Will are disabled, like the one-eyed Jimmy (William Newell), or addicted, or very young, wanting to prove themselves, and Will must gently turn them down. Will's last visit to make an appeal for help is to Howe. Howe too elects to stay out of the fight, in part for the right reasons as he's too old and riddled with arthritis to be of any real help. But he also clearly mortifies Will when he comments on the underlying problem Will's facing: "They don't care. Deep down, they don't care." Finally the only one of Will's deputies who shows up, Herb Baker (James Millican), immediately begs release from his duty, and Will grants it, knowing by this point there's no point resisting this particular tide.



Just about everyone has experienced some moment in their life, perhaps relatively trivial or truly life-and-death, where they've felt exposed and alone before fate to the indifference of others. *High Noon* converted this feeling, this familiarity, into a perpetual legend applicable to any variation; indeed, it might even have incidentally exposed it as something close to the existential state of the modern world. Whilst the genre plot rhythms might disguise it, *High Noon* is as disillusioned with the post-war settlement as any Italian alienation epic. Despite Zinnemann's unease with identifying the film as a Western, it nonetheless depends on its genre setting for its potency, and not just to provide an accessible commercial chassis. *High Noon* annexes the already well-defined capacity of the Western to tell rock-ribbed, quasi-mythic stories about good and bad, about civilisation and its discontents. It's a genre where the arrival of civilisation is supposed to be a good thing but also an ambivalent moment if only because its arrival chokes off further hope for the kind of violent, freewheeling action the genre required. *High Noon*, like a sagebrush take on Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, nonetheless took that ambivalence a step further to diagnose jealousy, selfishness, cowardice, disloyalty, and all the other familiar traits of human beings since time immemorial in Hadleyville. Of course, none of this was exactly, entirely original in the Western. After all, Ford had introduced his heroes in *Stagecoach* as social outcasts, beset by Pharisaic creeps appointing themselves the defenders of civilisations. Nor did *High Noon* introduce the idea of a lawman making an appeal to townsfolk for aid: many dozens upon dozens of oaters had featured the sheriff rounding up a posse to go hunt down somebody. What *High Noon* did more concertedly than most before it was make the Western a realm for social drama, an idea that ironically helped fuel its explosive popularity over the next 15 years, as now it could encompass analogies for any kind of moral conundrum and interpersonal conflict, but most crucially the fraught relationship between individual and the community values.



Cooper was in a rough patch in when he came on board for *High Noon*. He'd made several financially disappointing films in a row, he was separated from his wife after a string of affairs with leading ladies, and he was in physical pain from both his hip, which had been injured in a car accident when he was a teenager, and from a recent operation to remove a bleeding ulcer. He only landed the role of Will Kane after several other stars turned it down, including Marlon Brando, the breakout star of Zinnemann's earlier film *The Men* (1950), and Kirk Douglas. Cooper had been the top male movie star in the world fifteen years earlier, powered by a rarefied combination of rough-and-ready charm and sanguine cool, able to wear a tuxedo or buckskins with equal ease and as deft at comedy as gunfighting, playing a certain kind of male ideal but never projecting an aura of compensating force, instead offering a gently discursive, off-the-beat rhythm in his dialogue and emoting. His handsome playboys and igneous range heroes often seemed slightly embarrassed, conscious of the disparity between their inner and outer worlds. Cooper had won his first Oscar acting in Hawks' *Sergeant York* (1941), playing a character who could well be described as a combination of Will and Amy, a pacifist who becomes a warrior through his desire to save others rather than kill.





Cooper's presence is the life blood of *High Noon*, his familiarly subtle, discursive acting style helping make Will Kane an unusually realistic, palpable hero, one who distilled Cooper's entire career and persona into one character. He's somewhat off the beat for the style of hero gaining traction in 1950s dramas who wore their jagged anger on their sleeves, those played by actors like Douglas and Brando. Will Kane is by contrast an emblematic stoic, and yet Cooper constantly reveals through controlled gestures the troubled, shocked, infuriated soul lurking behind his limpid gaze: Will Kane is compelled by inner virtue to take a stand, but he's all too aware he's probably asking to be gunned down in the street, and he's frightened. The registration of staggering treachery and weakness in his encounters with various townsfolk registers in that gaze like tiny star shells going off, reaching an apogee when he realises Henderson is deserting him, his expression barely changing yet his absolutely beggared shock still apparent, as well as his sense of sudden exposure, suddenly changed from public hero to the indicted problem, a fool at the pillory, his desire to sock Henderson just as he did Gillis plainly simmering even as he keeps his cool this time and offers a single, terse "Thanks" before stalking out. Cooper's health problems only amplified the performance as Zinnemann and Crosby's intense, almost excoriating close-ups found the most finite registers of discomfort and disenchantment.



Kelly, by contrast, was the fresh-faced starlet plucked off Broadway, still with a little baby fat around her famous face, easily projects maturity far greater than her 21 years, her posh, cut-glass accent odd in the setting and yet helping give haughty edge to Amy's vehement, zealous moralism and repudiation of Will when he can't be swayed. Jurado is the dark and bodied opposite of Kelly's virginal blonde primness, spindly white-clad form and earthy, fleshy, dark-draped body in strange gravitational proximity when the two meet. Helen Ramirez combines opposites within herself: she is at once a figure of social potency and a sort of anointed priestess in a primeval cult, moving as lover from villain to hero to Harvey, the avatar of a misbegotten species of boy-man hovering in between. Amy, who knew nothing about Helen before Will feels obliged to visit her to ask for her influence, eventually visits her hotel room in furtive fascination. Like so much of the film, they retain multivalent symbolic power, Madonna and whore, Latin America and WASP, independent woman and spouse, and two different but equally fierce private codes. Helen knows Hadleyville's secret life with unblinking honesty, grasps its true nature with its supercilious piety and imminent lack of real character: "I hate this town. I always hated it. To be a Mexican woman in a town like this."



Helen is many ways the most vividly realised and remarkable character in the film, both exemplifying and undercutting the figure of the Latin temptress, a worldly being whose charisma and fecund sexuality, something she has no compunction in bestowing on men who catch her fancy, have ironically made her a potent and respected figure in her community. Helen alone stands outside the communal dynamics being acted out as she coldly repudiates everything that begins to disgust her all at once, most particularly Harvey who finds he has no sway over her at all when tries to force her to stay and kisses her. “I don’t like anybody to put his hands on me unless I want him to – and I don’t like you to anymore,” she states imperiously, and gives him a good slap to seal the deal. Helen may be anointed but also knows her role is to do the anointing of the successor in the chain of masculine maturation, and Harvey just ain’t got it. Helen does what Will most pointedly cannot do, and forsakes Hadleyville and its citizens in her conviction that when Will dies the town dies with him, and refuses to wait around to watch it. Meanwhile the offended and semi-soused Harvey tries to force Will to leave town, finally attacking him physically when he cannot be persuaded, his eyes bright with hysterical need to rid himself of Will. Fisticuffs are sparked when Will finally resists by throwing off his grasp: “Don’t shove me, Harv. I’m tired of being shoved.”



Will wins the brutal fistfight that follows but emerges battered and bloodied and perhaps robbed of his best fighting edge: Will still pauses to tip a pail of water over Harvey to make sure he rouses, a lovely little character touch, as is the subsequent scene where, after writing his last will and testament, he releases town drunk Charlie (Jack Elam), who's utterly oblivious of the primal drama gripping the town and asks if the saloon is open yet. The film's real climax is the marvellous montage sequence as Will writes his legacy in his office whilst the clock ticks down the last few seconds to noon. Zinnemann cuts between the various players in the previous hour or so locked in their little spaces of particular feeling – all of them suddenly solitary like Will even amongst community – before returning to the empty chair where Miller sat, in his absence now as powerful as any dragon, whilst Tiomkin's mostly sparing score gyres up the sense of imminent drama in obedience to the ticks of the clock's pendulum, until suddenly severed by the whistle of the approaching train, sounding exactly upon the noon stroke.



Zinnemann's aesthetic for *High Noon*, which studio chieftains kept complaining about during shooting, helped speed up a process in which Hollywood divested itself of the lingering influence of Expressionism and adopted the look Zinnemann and Crosby created as the new template of realism which was in its way as stylised as what it was supplanting particularly in the flat lighting, quickly travelling beyond the boundaries of the Western. But the harsh, flat look doesn't obscure the precision of Zinnemann's framing, his careful use of close-ups and tightly composed images of the actors that still retain some of the flavour of the silent era German cinema he had been involved in, and that cinema's overriding desire to capture people in both their physical and mental dimensions. Zinnemann's shots in the countdown montage, like a looming close-up not entirely contained by the frame of the three waiting outlaws looking like the three heads of a sleazy Cerberus, and a glimpse of the Fullers in locked together in their safe, guilty space, have piercing clarity. The countdown montage, endlessly influential in terms of the mounting suspense and rhythmic intensity of a movie, sees Zinnemann and collaborators turn cinematic time itself into an iron maiden squeezing upon each character, not simply heightening the suspense but offering in its way a final signature on each facet of the social drama, each person who has failed Will and themselves weighing up the value of their mortality.



After releasing Charlie and sealing up his will, Will heads out into the street where the only thing that moves is the carriage carrying Helen and Amy to the station: Helen dares a glance at Will alone on the street but Amy cannot. Zinnemann's deft punctuation with camera movement is as notable as the editing proceeding this vignette, first offering a dolly shot moving away from Will, the act of abandoning him rendered physically palpable. Zinnemann then switches to a crane shot that moves remorselessly upwards from Will until he's a small, dark, spindly figure alone in a ghost town: Will is at once dwarfed by space, realising just how completely alone he is, but he's also now the only presence, the rest of the townspeople, as Helen predicted, erased and meaningless. This particular shot has also been endlessly imitated and invoked in heroic cinema, inverting as it does Ford's introduction of Wayne's Ringo in *Stagecoach*, where the hero resolves out of shadow, mythic function, the storehouse of archetype, suddenly loaned flesh; Will instead becomes the focal point of a different mode of cinematic exaltation, one that diminishes him physically but also urges in the opposite direction, from man to figure fit for legend.



Zinnemann continues to keep Miller himself a vague, almost abstract presence even after he steps off the train and greets his confederates; his acne-scarred, crudely charismatic features aren't seen until he glances up and sees Helen boarding the train. The demon finally has a face, and he's granted immediate potency precisely because he's not immediately presented as a frothing mad dog, but as a coldly imperious figure. The businesslike swagger of the gunmen as they head into town has the focused precision of a death squad rather than a gang of scabby desperados, but the discipline is broken when thought turns to the revels to come after the hunt: Ben steals a lady's bonnet from a shopfront display, the sound of shattering glass warning Will where the killers are and allowing him to lie in ambush, gunning down Ben in the first volley. The first gunfire also shatters Amy's glaze of resolve, and she dashes off the train and back into the town to find Will, whilst Helen is carried out of town.



Will uses his immediate familiarity with the town as his one real advantage, lying in wait, shooting, running, eluding, finally ending up in the hayloft of a stables. He manages to kill Colby when he comes in close for the kill. Will's innate decency and his quick thinking converge when he's trapped in a barn and the gang try to force him out by setting fire to it: Will frees the frightened horses and drives them out of the stables, clinging low and hard to one as he speeds out, bullets whizzing around him. The action in the finale is notably intense and realistic – nobody's a superhuman shot and the violence is quick and frenetic. Men die in the blink of an eye. Will's tactics and use of the town as an obstacle course not only make perfect sense given his situation but also makes clear why he preferred to make his stand there rather than risk running on the prairie. When, inevitably, Amy intervenes in the fight and shoots Pierce, it's a powerfully affirming gesture for Amy in intervening to save her husband, but also a distinctly inglorious one: she shoots Pierce in the back from the window of the Marshal's office when he's reloading his pistols, and Zinnemann cuts to a close shot of her cringing in horror and pain.





It's easy enough to see this as the ultimate "stand by your man" message, but it's more complex upon consideration, chiefly in the fact that Amy likely saves her husband's life and then saves her own, granting her equity as Will's partner, and when one remembers Amy's motives in becoming a Quaker, because of her dead loved-ones: the one essential impulse drives two seemingly contradictory impulses, much indeed as it does Will. Amy's intervention also makes her a combatant and therefore she immediately becomes vulnerable: Miller takes the chance to sneak up on her and take her hostage. Amy helps save herself and Will by clawing at Miller with sufficient ferocity that he thrust her away, giving Will the chance to gun him down. And just like that, the threat is gone, the dead very dead, the living holding each-other in numbed gratitude. Will's famous last gesture, picking off the star after giving a long look of disgust to the crowd flocking and tossing it into the dirt, confirms there are limits to even the best person's sense of duty and responsibility, and Will, fully justified in his house if not his town, leaves with his bride to the lilting refrain of the title ballad. As an ending this still feels daring in its curt diminuendo, the refusal to force any kind of make-nice or underline with bombast: doing right has been a terrible thing, but not half as terrible as watching others do wrong.



*High Noon's* impact is such a constant in pop culture it's hard to summarise, giving rise most immediately to Westerns as diverse as the self-consciously mythic *Shane* (1953) and the vividly psychological *Johnny Guitar* (1954), and echoing on in overt variations and tributes. The template was as easily transposed into space for Peter Hyams' *Outland* (1981) and monster movie for *Predator* (1987) as into the contemporary landscape for the likes of *Dirty Harry* (1971), which pointedly invested new meaning to Will's last gesture, and *Die Hard* (1988), where duelling memories of the film define the relationship between the hero and villain ("That was Gary Cooper, asshole!") and the worlds they represent. Despite his lack of fondness for the way the film changed the Western towards something more psychological and moralistic, Sergio Leone offered his own, characteristically magnified tribute in the opening scene of *Once Upon A Time In The West* (1968) as he recreated the vision of three bored, tense gunmen waiting for a train. Sam Peckinpah inverted the march of the villains into the town for the legendary march of *The Wild Bunch* (1969) towards their auto-da-fe. But as is so often the case, the wellspring retains its own, specific power, one that can still sneak up on a viewer even now.

## The Philadelphia Experiment (1984)



1984 was a great year for science fiction cinema, particularly for entries about ordinary contemporary women having their lives turned upside down when they meet and fall in love with a male traveller in time or space. That brief fits movies as tonally diverse as James Cameron's *The Terminator*, John Carpenter's *Starman*, John Sayles' *The Brother From Another Planet*, and Stewart Raffill's *The Philadelphia Experiment*. Raffill's entry, made for Roger Corman's New World Films, took up the infamous urban myth that seemingly owed its existence to a series of letters and annotations sent to a writer fascinated by UFOs and Forteanism in the mid-1950s. Despite being patently disprovable and sourced in writings that seemed pure crankery, the story became part of the modern canon of esoterica, thanks particularly to a book written on the subject by Ufologist William L. Moore and the high priest of 1970s new-age bestselling blarney, Charles Berlitz. The story has it that in 1943 the US Navy conducted a series of experiments trying to utilise Einsteinian unified field theorems to render a ship invisible to radar, conducting the test on the USS *Eldridge* at the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard, only for the entire ship to vanish and then reappear, with signs of everything on board including the crew suffering from destabilised atomic structures, with crewmen winking in and out of reality or becoming embedded in the ship's hull.



The source tale certainly has the stuff of an eerie, paranoid sci-fi chiller, and the reason it gained traction surely lies in its potent, cinematic imagery – the disappearing-reappearing ship and crew and the grotesquery of men fused into metal. Also, despite the absurd scientific rationale it sounded close enough to stuff the US military did pull in the early decades of the cold war, like the MKUltra experiments and marching soldiers into atomic bomb test sites, to retain a lingering frisson, and existed within a neatly closed loop of logic: denials about the event might only be proof it happened. Add to that the accusations of brainwashing used to suppress the crew's memories and you might have something disturbing as *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962). But Raffill's film swerves in a different direction in coming up with a usable sci-fi movie plot. The film, officially spun from Moore and Berlitz's book, proposes that the experiment, conducted by young scientific wizard Dr James Longstreet (Miles McNamara), opened up a portal into hyperspace, into which two of the ship's crew, David Herdeg (Michael Paré) and Jim Parker (Bobby Di Cicco) plunge, and find themselves deposited in 1984.



David and Jim, the two sailors assigned to run the generators for the experimental equipment on the *Eldridge*, find themselves on an army reserve, briefly glimpsing a town that then vanishes leaving them in an empty nowhere, and are chased by an army helicopter, which crashes in a fireball. The two men wander through the west bewildered by the time they've arrived in and still connected with the portal, which has now ripped a hole in reality and grows stronger until it threatens the world. Jim, who burned his hand whilst trying to shut down the generators on the ship, suffers mysterious electrical discharges randomly spring from his limbs, frying pinball machines and jukeboxes. Threatened by a diner owner for destroying his machines, David and Jim grab his gun and force a young woman travelling to California, Allison Hayes (Nancy Allen), to drive them away. Eventually Jim is hospitalised and disappears in a flash of energy, leaving David to be chased by the current-day military who he thinks want to kill him, and finds himself taken under Allison's wing.



Whilst certainly not a hit on the scale of *The Terminator*, *The Philadelphia Experiment* became the stuff of a video store shelf cult hit. Rayfill had begun his directing career making family adventure movies in the 1970s like *The Adventures of the Wilderness Family* (1975) and *Across the Great Divide* (1976), and he followed *The Philadelphia Experiment* immediately with the clumsy but inventive *The Ice Pirates* (1984) before inspiring generational cringe with *Mac and Me* (1988). *The Philadelphia Experiment* offered Rayfill a neat way of rendering his willingness to offer square virtues in movies with a touch of ironic self-assessment, retaining a dash of old-fashioned romantic charm, with a subtext similar to the following year's *Back To The Future* (1985) in a half-ironic, half-yearning consideration of contemporary America's relationship with its recent past. The film has just enough levity to keep it jaunty whilst still taking the characters and their plights seriously. Paré and DiCiccio are ideal as the two time-displaced men, first glimpsed cutting the rug with Jim's wife Pamela (Debra Troyer) at a big band dance before being trucked out the next day to the ship where reality, they soon find, has limits. The early scenes nail down the period specifics, some obvious – the band playing "In The Mood" – and others more subtle – Longstreet cast and costumed to look a lot like Robert Oppenheimer – but cumulatively making its 1943 feel as off-handedly naturalistic as the present day scenes.



Raffill studiously avoids making David and Joe omniscient, instead offering them as a pair of entirely ordinary guys, stuck trying to puzzle out the 1980s at first through archaeological signs like beer and Coke cans they come across, before being confronted by the real brain melters like gory VHS movies and punkettes. And of course there's the inevitable, charged moment when David and Joe urgently ask Allison who won the war. Paré, who appeared the same year in another low-budget cult hit, Martin Davidson's *Eddie and the Cruisers*, despite his striking good looks and definite screen presence never quite managed to escape B-movie stardom, but he brings a lilt of gently comic humanism to a moment like David interacting in gently bewildered good-humour with a transvestite he shares a prison cell with. Likewise Allen is habitually believable as the woman who finds herself attracted the nice, square, good-looking dude, despite their first meeting at gunpoint, having just been screwed over by the more modern type. She tries to fill David in on shifted contemporary mores – “Now that I'll never agree with,” David comments with a frustrated chuckle when Allison tells him they don't need to be married to have a baby.



There are inevitable jokes that would crop up again in *Back To The Future* played here more wryly, like David stunned to see Ronald Reagan is the President (“I know this guy, is this another movie?”), and his first forays in TV channel surfing lead him to the safe harbour of an Abbott and Costello movie. Eventually, when he reaches his father’s former gas station and repair shop in rural California, David breaks down in tears when learning his father has died but achieved his dream of being a race car champion. At times *The Philadelphia Experiment* seems to wish it something closer to *Somewhere In Time* (1980) or *Forever Young* (1993) as a wistful fantasy about men out of time experiencing wistful love and mortality. David visits Pamela (played old by Louise Latham) and finds Joe came back to 1943 when the *Eldridge* reappeared, but the elderly Joe (Ralph Manza) is too haunted and damaged by his experience, and everyone’s refusal to believe it, to acknowledge him. Soon David learns that the now older but no wiser Longstreet (Eric Christmas) has caused the time-space rift by repeating his experiment, this time on a small town that vanished from the site where David and Joe arrived. When Longstreet’s army research team launches a sensor rocket into the portal they glimpse the *Eldridge* and the town both hovering in the void.





John Carpenter, listed in the credits as executive producer, wrote one of the many versions of the script only to abandon it because he couldn't think of a third act. Raffill did last-minute rewrites of later drafts when he came aboard, although the screenplay is credited only to Wallace C. Bennett. The film has some Carpenter-esque qualities, however, in emphasising the normality of its characters in the face of cosmic upheaval, and the cleverness of its genre conceits. The film is both helped and hampered by Raffill's workmanlike direction, which helps create a believable mood and offers intimate attention to David's emotional experience as well as his physical one. But it also ambles along and dispenses clinically with the expected car chases despite the story never quite delivering coherent reasons to be excited.



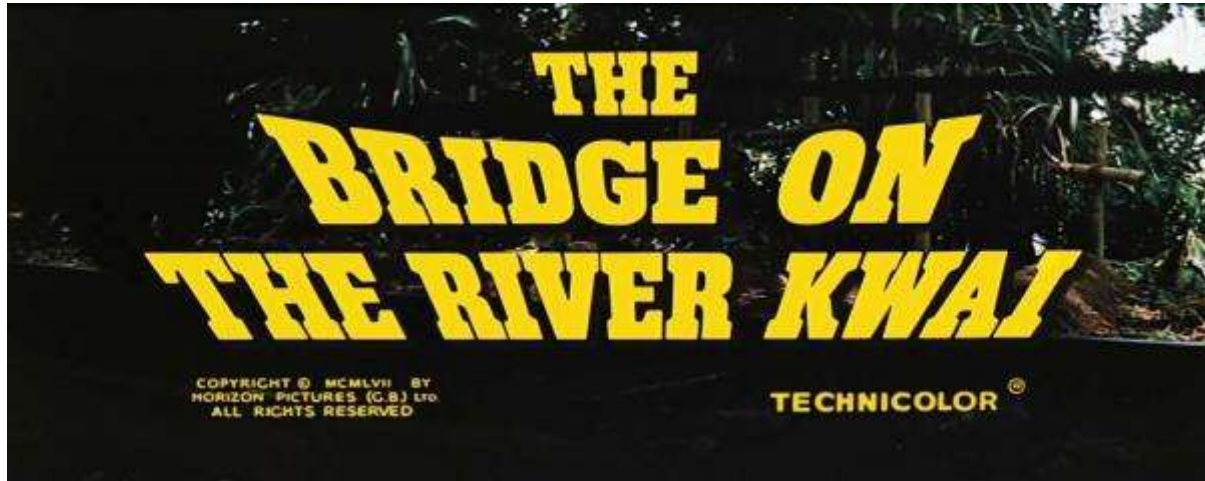
The biggest problem with the film is indeed on a story level, particularly as that third act problem was never really solved. Despite what would seem their natural inclination as Navy sailors from wartime, David and Joe spend the whole movie running from authority essentially because that's what an '80s thriller demands of them. David is pursued by an army security chief, Major Clark (Joe Dorsey), and his team, but Clark proves to be a false enemy who helps David achieve his mission in the climax, and seems perfectly fine by that point with David getting at least one of his men killed during the pursuit. The plot would feel much less happenstance and the action scenes more pertinent if it was made clear the government wanted to eliminate the rogue sailors to keep their experiments secret and provided some substantial antagonists. Instead it's shown that Longstreet prevents his people contacting Washington to buy them time to puzzle out the incredible phenomenon they've caused but has no malevolent motive – in fact he's presented as the guilty conscience and memory-keeper of the original experiment.



David's constant flight from Clark merely serves the purpose of stretching out the film until the David confronts Longstreet and finds the scientist needs David to save the world by ascending into the hyperspace vortex, reboarding the *Eldridge*, and shutting off the forcefield generator. The narrative touches on some nice ramifications of paradox, as Longstreet tells David he must have already done what the scientist needs him to do or the *Eldridge* would never have returned to 1943. The special effects are minimal but enjoyable – there's a sort of sawn-off version of *2001: A Space Odyssey's* star gate sequence when David is launched into hyperspace done with embryonic computer graphics, whilst the shots of the churning black void growing in strength hovering over the desolate Utah plains has some creep force. The finale is rather too straightforward as David easily achieves his objective, pausing to offer farewell to Jim before leaping overboard again and returning to 1984 where he's found by Allison in time for a final clinch, underlining that the film is essentially a scientific romance rather than a thriller. If, cumulatively, *The Philadelphia Experiment* manages to be both over-ambitious and not ambitious enough, it's still a fun, satisfying, very likeable example of '80s genre film.



## The Bridge on the River Kwai (1957)



**Director:** David Lean

**Screenwriters:** Carl Foreman, Michael Wilson, David Lean (uncredited)

My father once told me the story of how when he was a child, he and my grandfather, who had been a professional soldier in the British Army since before World War II and remained one for a time after, went to see *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. They saw it in a grandiose Piccadilly movie theatre during the film's first release, a movie experience they had to skirt one of Bertrand Russell's ban-the-bomb marches to attend. My grandfather, who had fought in North Africa, Malta, and Burma, and survived being struck by a mortar bomb, the shrapnel from which he carried until the day he died, was normally rather disdainful of war movies, but nonetheless he emerged from *The Bridge on the River Kwai* extremely impressed, particularly by the climax's realism in capturing an injury he had suffered. He wasn't alone: the film was granted colossal success, capturing multiple Oscars and proving one of the biggest hits of the 1950s, and fatefully catapulting director David Lean into new and lasting fame as a maker of epic tales. And yet, *The Bridge on the River Kwai* was and is a strange kind of popular hit, a movie that mediated a crested and now waning surge of nostalgia for the war's certainties and manifold heroic tales, and the onset of something new, more doubtful and questioning, and did so through a bleak, semi-satirical storyline wielding a edge of barbed cynicism aimed at several key mythologies of the war.



*The Bridge on the River Kwai* was adapted from a novel by French writer Pierre Boulle, whose peculiar, acerbic imagination would also produce a very different popular tale nonetheless sharing preoccupation with culture clashes and reversals of dominance, *Planet of the Apes*. Boulle, an engineer who worked in rubber plantations in what was then called French Indochina, became a spy when war with Japan broke out, only to be eventually captured by Vichy collaborators and thrown into a Japanese POW camp, where he was forced to take part in the construction of the infamous Burma-Thailand Railway, where his observations of collaborating French officers would inform his eventual novel's acidic portrayals. Boulle tried his hand at writing after he returned to France and fell on hard times, scoring an enormous breakthrough success with *Le Pont de la rivière Kwai*, his third published work. In his novel, perhaps to avoid controversy with a French readership but also certainly to deploy his sardonic perspective on different forms of national and imperial arrogance contending, Boulle focused on British POWs and amalgamated the officers he remembered in the figure of an imaginary British Lieutenant-Colonel named Nicholson. The novel was brought to the screen by the entrepreneurial, Anglophiliac Polish-American producer Sam Spiegel, but the project owed its inception to writer Carl Foreman, who had left the US after writing *High Noon* (1952) because of blacklisting, and bought the movie rights to Boulle's novel.

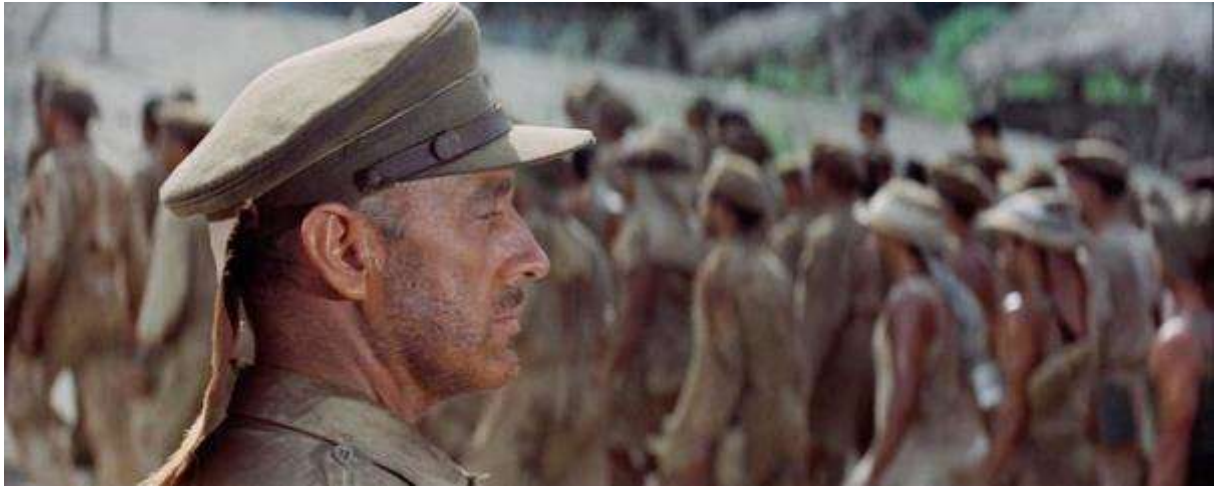


Spiegel, after considering an array of major directors including Orson Welles, eventually settled on David Lean. Lean and Foreman eventually suffered a clash of vision of Foreman, and when he pulled out

of the project Foreman suggested fellow blacklisted émigré Michael Wilson to take over, whilst Lean also later said he contributed much to the script. In a stinging but fairly familiar irony when it comes to the annals of 1950s moviemaking, none of them gained screen credit, with a screenwriting Oscar eventually instead given to Boule, who didn't speak English. Lean was already a respected and successful director, although he had not quite been able to recapture the acclaim garnered by his early collaborations with Noel Coward, including *In Which We Serve* (1942) and *Brief Encounter* (1945), and his diptych of Charles Dickens adaptations, *Great Expectations* (1946) and *Oliver Twist* (1948), films where Lean's rigorous filmmaking and illustrative verve were perfectly suited to his preoccupation with half-stifled, half-rampant quixotic urges. The films Lean made after that legendary run have only slowly gained the respect they deserve, particularly *The Passionate Friends* (1949) and *Madeleine* (1950), Lean's most intimate and agonised portrayals of romantic frustration shading into acts of violence against self and others. *The Sound Barrier* (1952), *Hobson's Choice* (1954), and *Summertime* (1955) all tackled characters pushing themselves to shatter boundaries that repress and stymie their capacities, with the latter film offering a mediation between the personal, domestic focus of Lean's early films in depicting a spinster finding love during a holiday in Venice, and a fantastic liberation in a foreign clime realised in splendid colour that presaged Lean's own emergence into the glare of international spectacle cinema.



*The Bridge on the River Kwai* was certainly never intended to be a documentary or true account any more than the book had been, although Boule, working from his own hazy memory of the region where he set the book, wilfully crossed paths with some agonising events. As with the rather more populist *The Great Escape* (1962), based more directly on a real incident, the fame of the fictional version made the real history invoked all the more stinging for those involved in it, including the real commander of British troops who had built a bridge over the Kwae Hai river in Thailand, Lt-Col. Philip Toosey, and the Japanese commander, who Toosey defended as a relatively humane man amidst the general cynicism and degradation that marked the railway's construction, the building of which cost upwards of 100,000 lives, mostly South Asian slave labourers but also including 12,000 POWs. *The Bridge on the River Kwai's* take on imperialism, and militarism aggravated members of its cast, including Alec Guinness and James Donald, whose fretting about the alleged anti-British streak in the material contributed to the general tension that grew between Lean and his actors on set during the film's lengthy shoot in Sri Lanka, then called Ceylon. This almost caused a permanent falling-out between Lean and Guinness who was cast as Nicholson, whose movie career Lean had vitally boosted by casting him in his Dickens films, especially when Lean kept reminding Guinness he originally wanted Charles Laughton in the role. The film's success, and Guinness' Oscar win, nonetheless proved irrevocably that they were a winning team.



Today some of *The Bridge on the River Kwai*'s original stature has been reassigned to another great antiwar film about an obsessed military leader released the same year, Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory*. Whilst feeling both are very great films, I think *The Bridge on the River Kwai* is the superior work in large part because it's more ambivalent: Kubrick's film all but screams its humanist principles from the rooftop, where Lean's sustains the opposing tensions between its many perspectives. *The Bridge on the River Kwai*'s famous early scene of the column of British POWs under Nicholson marching into the POW camp run by Colonel Saito (Sessue Hayakawa) whilst whistling the march "Colonel Bogey," is more than just a jaunty interlude in an otherwise cruel and concerted drama: it's an act of calculated showmanship, the first of Nicholson's many attempts to hold his men together as a coherent team despite captivity and privation, obliging them to mark time march on the spot as they whistle. The sight is at once inspiring and more than a little sadomasochistic. The scene is also an evergreen example of Lean's technique, his ground in editing and sense of cinema as a rhythmic thing that could stand being stretched or curtailed to any degree in service of a point. The scene has no particular dramatic necessity, and yet it illustrates everything about what we're about to see, expostulating the essence of the drama entirely through cinematic gesture. The tune's ear-invading catchiness officially invokes regimented yet waggish defiance. Nicholson's stiff-necked pride and force of command over his men who play along, despite sceptical glances to one-another, is plain, as the men march in past the graves of their predecessors in this fetid little hell. Survival is the name of the game, survival must be communal, and Nicholson feels fully the lot given to him as commander to lead. Composer Malcolm's Arnold's counterpoint arrangement rises up to give accompaniment to the whistling, interlacing it with a sarcastically carnivalesque quality that resurges in the film's very last scene.





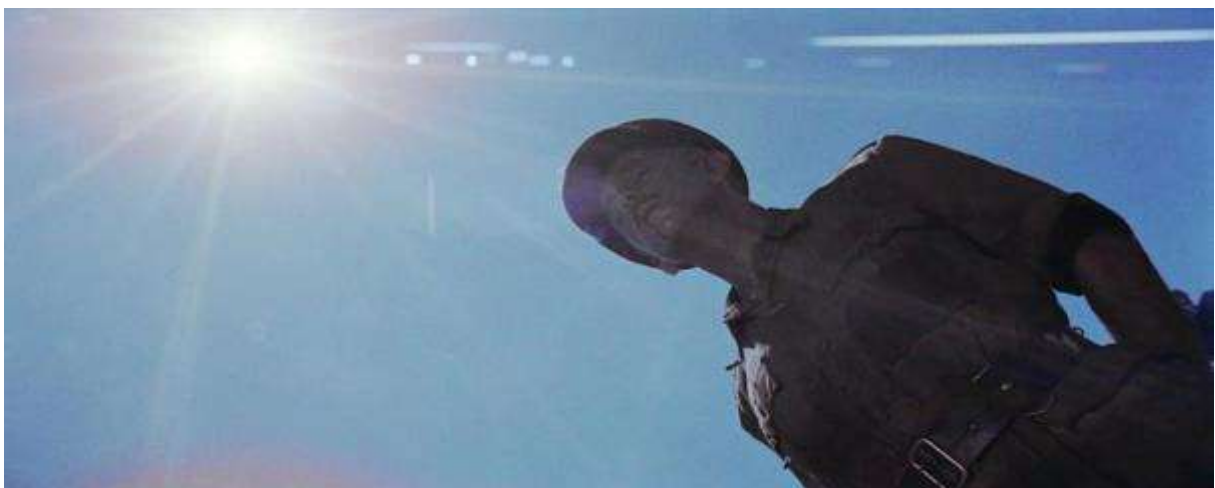
Circularity is also staked out by the opening and closing shots of eagles reeling in the sky above the jungle, before Lean and his cinematographer Jack Hildyard offer sweeping helicopter shots descending into and retreating out of the greenery, the viewpoint of gods and carnivorous birds aligned in considering the mean human drama about to unfold. The opening credits unfurl over shots of Nicholson and his men, deposited at the end of the completed line by train in the middle of the jungle where desperately thin and exhausted men are working on digging cuttings, before marching through the jungle and looking down upon what is to be their new home, the River Kwai, which they're to build a bridge across as part of the railway. Nicholson's solution seems to be to pretend nothing is wrong, that he and his men are still on the parade ground back in old Blighty, under the comforting sway of the Union Jack rather than the Rising Sun. But Nicholson's choice to bring his men into the camp with a show of discipline and spirit is really the first shot in a different kind of war, one where one side seems to have all the cards. Saito looks on, perhaps sensing the oncoming battle of wills and grasping the soldiers' defiance of his particular, very different sense of honour.



The last gang of POWs kept in the camp, including the hardy, wily American Navy man Shears (William Holden), are a mostly shattered and withered remnant, many resident in the camp hospital: Shears himself has stayed strong through his talents as a scrounger and the nourishing nectar of his own cynicism. He's introduced bribing a guard to get put on the sick list with a lighter purloined from a soldier he and another captive have just buried. Holden was plainly cast as Shears as an extension of his Oscar-winning role as J.J. Sefton in Billy Wilder's *Stalag 17* (1953), although where Sefton was a misanthropist, Shears is decent, but sceptical about warfare in general, representing an articulate everyman's perspective: Shears, who has been accepted as a Commander but is actually, secretly a ranking sailor, having put on an officer's uniform in the hope of getting better treatment from his captors only to suffer Saito's utter indifference to such things, presents the polar opposite to Nicholson's governing philosophy and outlook. "I don't mock the grave or the man," Shears assures his comrade as he knocks a crude crucifix grave marker into the ground over the new grave, after he delivers an acerbic eulogy, just as he surely means nonetheless to mock the forces that put the man in the grave.



The first half of *The Bridge on the River Kwai* depicts Nicholson seeming to prove himself right as he stands up to Saito's harshest punishments and humiliations. Nicholson determines to insist he and his men be treated according to the Geneva Convention, which in particular means resisting Saito's insistence that the officers work with the men, because as Nicholson formulates it, "our men must always feel they are still commanded by us and not by the Japanese – so long as they have that idea to cling to they'll be soldiers and not slaves." The degree to which Nicholson is directed as much by snooty pride as by gallant motives is left ambiguous, although perhaps such things can never entirely be separated. Saito responds furiously to Nicholson's defiance, smacking him on the parade ground and leaving him and his officers standing at attention through a broiling hot day. Saito tries to threaten Nicholson with shooting him and the officers, but Nicholson's medical officer Clipton (James Donald) intervenes, warning Saito that he can't kill all the potential witnesses in the sick bay, a move Shears has already, sullenly anticipated. But Clipton's intervention, which uses Saito's own invocation of his bushido against him – "Is this your soldier's code? Murdering unarmed men?" – works.



Saito instead has Nicholson beaten and flung alone into a corrugated iron box to swelter away, whilst the other officers are similarly imprisoned. Saito doesn't realise the moment he reveals there are limits to his methods he loses the fight. Hayakawa, who forty years earlier had been Hollywood's most popular male actor with a niche playing cruel and destructive "exotic" lovers, made a sudden resurgence thanks to his performance as Saito. Hayakawa, who unlike Guinness got along famously with Lean, proved his

charisma hadn't entirely deserted him even though he was pushing 70 at the time, as well as his tendency to get typecast as Asiatic brutes. Hayakawa nonetheless is quite brilliant at portraying weakness hiding within apparent strength, apparent in Saito's frantic, incompetent reaction to being challenged, and his desperately smarmy attempts to save face even whilst trying to get Nicholson to let him off the hook, before he again erupts in a quivering harangue: "I hate the British. You are defeated, but you have no shame. You are stubborn but have no pride. You endure but you have no courage." Nicholson remains steadfast: even when Clijfton eventually talks Saito into letting him attend to him in the hot box, he finds Nicholson retains all his strength of purpose as if he's the one being perfectly reasonable, commenting with exasperation, "That man is the worst commanding officer I've ever come across - actually I think he's mad," a judgement Saito in turn passes on Nicholson. "Without law, Commander, there is no civilisation," Nicholson tells Shears, who ripostes that here there is no civilisation: "Then we have the opportunity to introduce it."



Nicholson's approach to his new and his men's new situation emerges as he resolves that, with escape more or less impossible and his legal situation strange - he explains that he was ordered to surrender when Singapore fell, which might mean escape attempts might well constitute a breach of those orders - he resolves instead that "here is where we must win through," particularly after Shears and some other men seem to all be killed attempting an escape. Nicholson's defiance stokes his men's resistance, singing "For he's a jolly good fellow" as he's put in the hot box, and they sabotage and generally foul up the bridge-building attempts, causing the project to fall far behind schedule. Saito's anger falls heavily on his chief engineer, eventually taking over the construction himself, but to no avail. Eventually Saito makes overtures to Nicholson, first trying to win him over by offering to let him remain exempt from working, but Nicholson refuses. Finally, under the cover of a magnanimous deed in celebrating the anniversary of the Battle of Tsushima, Saito agrees to Nicholson's demands. Soon, Nicholson sets his engineering officers to the task of building a better bridge, to give his men something to labour on and take pride in, and leave something to posterity even in their defeat.



Lean's films hinged on crucial identification with his heroes as mediators of his intense but divided personal nature, his creative and emotional passion clashing with his firmly instilled personal morality stemming from his Quaker upbringing, with his unique talents for animating landscape, either through the careful studio stylisation of his Dickens films or the dynamic sense of landscape exhibited in his epics, offering elemental contrast to the human irony of his stories. And yet Lean resisted identifying too overtly with Nicholson for both himself and the audience, reportedly insisting that Nicholson needed to be a bit of a bore, despite Guinness's desire to make him more appealing. I think I know why. The first time I ever watched *The Bridge on the River Kwai* as a child, I burst into tears at the climax, for I had granted Nicholson all my sympathy in the story, identifying with his pride in creation without quite understanding the depth of his breach of duty. Lean understood this, and guarded against it: the story's rich irony demands both sympathy with Nicholson but also some distance from him. But it's also plain Lean knew Nicholson was the avatar for his creative-romantic streak. Hayakawa, in an interview given to *Films and Filming*, recalled one of the crew complaining that Lean "shot 30 seconds of film a day and then sat on a rock and stared at his goddamn bridge!" It's impossible not to see Lean and Nicholson almost fusing there in their near-religious sense of craft, just as it also offers pertinent context to the scenes Lean's next hero, T.E. Lawrence, dreaming up his attack on Aqaba in a similarly contemplative position.



By contrast, Clipton offers a constant counterpart also constant in Lean's films, the figure of moral authority and adamant perspective, a figure that would splinter across various protagonists in *Doctor Zhivago* (1965) but reconfigure as the priest in *Ryan's Daughter* (1970) and Fielding in *A Passage To India* (1984). Clipton's business is saving lives, a service he performs for Nicholson, but later prods him with questions as to whether he's now collaborating with the enemy, and the end refuses to be involved in the christening of the bridge, a choice that accidentally saves his own life. Nicholson's arguments in riposte make sense to a degree: assuming the bridge will be built somehow and either by his men or atop their graves, Nicholson determines to make it suit his purpose. Trouble is, Nicholson's sense of the camp and bridge as their existential amphitheatre forgets there's still a world beyond. Foreman's attraction to the story seems fairly obvious: like *High Noon* it's a story of a man suffering to stand up for principle, and culminates with the whistle of a train announcing an imminent battle.



But that film's moral certainty and elemental approach to violence-as-justice have been scattered all to hell. Nicholson's rigid stance against Saito is at once heroic and unnerving, a matador provoking the bull's horns, in part because Nicholson knows as well as Saito that killing him would be, in a strange way, to lose the game. Saito in turn, although he seems clearly tempted to kill Nicholson at several points including by stabbing him after Nicholson refuses his peace offering meal, nonetheless holds off. Saito's restraint matches Nicholson's, as if proving the British officer's stance by responding to his show of fortitude with his own. Saito, however, is in a radically different position, knowing he'll be expected to commit seppuku if the bridge isn't completed on schedule, and his vehement, shuddering displays of anger and disdain for his British counterpart register the overtones of fear lurking behind his own cruelty. Nicholson and Saito represent, at their broadest, symbolic conceptions of the respective British and Japanese armies, the former defined by a mysterious high-tensile ability to be rigid and flexible at once in hyper-courteous browbeating, the latter by the maniacal severity of its concepts of honour and purpose.



But the narrative plays some intricate games with these presumptions. *The Bridge on the River Kwai* glances back at Lean's films with Coward, in their mythological engagement with the wartime ethos of the stiff upper lip, particularly *In Which We Serve*, where Coward's idealised Captain hero figure coaches his men through disaster. Here the fortitude is laced with irony and delusion, the adamant strength of purpose questioned and eventually found confused and self-defeating. Saito is the official representative of the barbaric treatment meted out by the Imperial Army on just about they considered their inferiors, but as the story unfolds he becomes a faintly comic figure, outmanoeuvred by Nicholson. Lean and Hayakawa oblige sympathy for Saito for glimpsing his deep, weeping humiliation after caving in to Nicholson. This vignette proves one Saito never truly seems to recover from, spending much of the rest of the film in a near-silent, almost zombified state, gazing on silently and beggared as Nicholson and his men set about feverishly doing his work for him, whilst also aware that Nicholson's purpose, to triumph in the face of shame, is one he cannot encompass. Nicholson earns the love of his men as the seeming exemplar of his creed, and yet collaborates actively with the enemy to fulfil his own ends, however self-justifying those ends are. Saito, a prisoner of his own values, can't do that, and it's made plain late in the film that he intends to commit seppuku upon the passing of the first train down the railway line, even though he and Nicholson eventually seem to work up an odd kind of camaraderie.



That militarism eventually consumes all its children, British or Japanese or anyone else, is made abundantly clear in the climax, particularly when Major Warden (Jack Hawkins) mortar bombs some of

his own people to prevent their capture, and the possibility of any kind of private achievement or separate peace eventually, literally goes up in flames. The stand-off between Nicholson and Saito consumes most of the film's first half, and whilst in many ways it presents the inverse situation to the first half of *Lawrence of Arabia* with its sweeping portrait of Lawrence's desert-spanning, myth-making raid on Aqaba, in concentrating on a tiny microcosm that gets even smaller when Nicholson is jammed in the hot box, it nonetheless has the same rolling, compulsive power and sense of punishing physical straits. Lean shoots extremely low-angle shots of the sweltering, at-attention soldiers with the glaring sun above, and makes maximum use of the widescreen frame's expanse and depth of field in moments like when Shears comments balefully on Nicholson's actions as he and other men in the sick bay watch the officers on the parade ground, one man fainting dead away as they speak in the distance of the centre frame. One moment of sublime accord for Lean's direction and Guinness' performance, one indeed Guinness himself felt was his best screen moment ever, sees Nicholson, exhausted, bedraggled, and barely able to stand, nonetheless forcing himself to walk unaided from the hot box to Saito's office with an automaton-like gait (which Guinness said he based on his son, who was recovering from polio), watched with deadpan patience by the camera in a tracking shot with his men saluting as he passes.



Something of Boule's more sarcastic, quasi-satirical sensibility filters to the surface in the scene where Nicholson and his officers take over Saito's conference on how to proceed with building the bridge, Saito now the one acting mechanically with his repetitions of "I have already given the order" in response to Nicholson's utterly reasoned and quietly irresistible logic. The same streak returns later on as Shears, softly blackmailed into joining a commando raid on the bridge, is repeatedly acclaimed with the arch old-boyism, "Good show!" Shears' story, pushed off to one side during Nicholson's resistance except for a brief depiction of his and his companions' escape attempt, which seems to end brutally when Shears is shot and plunges into the river. But Shears, only lightly wounded, crawls out of the river and stumbles desperately through the jungle, where, in perhaps the film's oddest and most misjudged touch, he mistakes a kite for a buzzard swooping to pick his carcass: the kite proves to be flown by some kids from a nearby village. The villagers happily give Shears a boat so he can continue downriver, but when he runs out of water he makes the mistake of drinking the river water, and drifts out of his mind with fever down to the ocean, where he's eventually spotted and rescued by a plane and taken to Ceylon. Cue another unfortunate moment, this time the result of Columbia's insistence at least one white woman be added to the cast, adding a romantic scene for Shears cavorting with a nurse (Ann Sears) from the hospital where he recovers on the beach.



This scene nonetheless serves as the moment Shears meets Warden, a former Cambridge teacher of Oriental Languages turned demolitions expert and commando (“We’re trying to discourage the use of that words, it’s come to have such a melodramatic air about it”) with a group called Force 316. *The Bridge on the River Kwai* is in essence two separate stories, and Foreman put that down to it having two writers who never quite reconciled things. But the stories are also deeply entwined, one commenting on the other and coinciding in the finale. Shears’ story is a more traditional kind of adventure story than Nicholson’s, but no less barbed a story of people who prove avatars for incoherent values. Warden, who keeps alive a sort of happy amateur ideal of the English gentleman of war as he playfully shows off the new wonder of plastic explosive, invites Shears to join the group. They want him to guide them from the village he visited back up to the Kwai bridge, so they can sabotage it. Shears, who’s been maintaining his pose as an officer in the hospital, confesses his deception in the course of vehemently refusing to go back, but Warden reveals that he and his superiors had already learned about this and the US Navy, to avoid embarrassment, has handed Shears over to them.



Shears sourly volunteers, and at least gets the rank of “simulated Major” out of it. Asked by the commander of 316, Colonel Green (Andre Morell), for his impressions of the prospective team, Shears is less anxious about the young, unblooded accountant-turned-warrior Lt Joyce (Geoffrey Horne) elected to the unit than by Warden, who strikes him as playing a game of war. Green starts telling him about Warden’s combat experience, including of being captured by the enemy, an anecdote left crucially



unfinished. When they are eventually parachuted into the jungle, one member of the team is killed in the drop. The rest reach the village Shears visited before, and the village chief, Khun Yai (M.R.B. Chakrabandhu), and six of their young women volunteer to help their mission. They begin a trek through the jungle. Joyce's hesitation in stabbing a Japanese soldier they encounter obliges Warden to do it for him, but injures his ankle in the process: Warden insists on continuing with the team, limping along in agonising fashion.



Lean's emergence as the doyen of "epic" filmmakers entailed a new way of filming, some of it engaged with the changing nature of cinema itself. Widescreen formats had been introduced in 1953 to counter television with a new expanse and vividness of visual experience. Despite Fritz Lang's infamous comment that it was only good for snakes and funerals, many major filmmakers immediately began experimenting with what could be achieved in widescreen, but most of the movies made in the format were very brightly lit and glossily colourful. Lean, seeing the widescreen style was punishing on any sort of artifice, completely eschewed any shooting shortcuts like rear projection or sets, helping imbue a monumental, tactile quality that immediately changed the way other filmmakers would approach such things, where just a year before epic cinema had meant the total artifice of Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*. *The Bridge on the River Kwai* has a palette of muddy greens and browns and shaded, shadowy frame reaches. In its way, Lean's film might well have done the most of any movie up until that time to demonstrate that colour cinema could be as compellingly immersive and realistic, just as black-and-white had become the accepted language for realism as opposed to the usually decorative effect colour was put to. Lean had filmed stark figures amidst bleak, near-animate landscapes in the opening scenes of his Dickens films, creating backdrops that seethe and overwhelm in a manner harking back to J.M.W. Turner, an artist Lean had vital traits in common with. He expanded on this motif in *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, which is now part of the basic lexicon of large-scale moviemaking, in the sequences depicting the demolition team's march through the jungle, bestriding cliff faces and marching up the flanks of hills, humans dwarfed by natural forms, in a reversal of the deadly intimacy of the first half.



Unlike filmmakers who would absorb his influence and transmute it into a more rarefied thing, including Werner Herzog and Terrence Malick, Lean's approach to the natural world doesn't regard it as sublimely indifferent but rather as a stage humans can't escape from, nor it from them. The narrative is on one level a straightforward adventure movie, with the heroes braving the wilderness to achieve a difficult, noble objective. But as Lean would reiterate more completely in *Lawrence of Arabia*, the punishing drive of his heroes, Tennyson's *Ulysses*-like, to cross and conquer the earth feels more like neurotic compulsion than straightforward intrepidity, as if identity can only be gained by risking its negation, becoming part of the landscape – death, in short. The jungle trek is defined by its objective, one where the characters are searching for an answer to a question, sometimes asked aloud, sometimes not. Whether Joyce can kill a man. Whether Shears can escape hell twice, and whether there's something he would actually consider worth dying for. Whether Warden can prove he's the man he wants to be, the great war commander. They counterpoint Nicholson, who finds the last chance for identity in the project of building the bridge, something to leave to the age. And of course the commandos want to destroy his brainchild, meaning that inevitably the men will destroy each-other in their pursuit of identity. Nicholson's first fight with Saito is at its heart that same quest, as Nicholson knows being reduced to chattel will destroy him and his men as men. Nicholson's quasi-messianic sense of mission eventually sees him leading out the sick and lame men from the hospital to work, and Nicholson's strange genius is his ability to make it all seem utterly reasonable.



The trek culminates when Shears, Joyce, and Warden gain a vista over the Kwai, camera tilting down vast horizon until the bridge comes into view, seen for the first time in its complete state. That the bridge proves to be an all-wood pastiche of the Forth Bridge, that signal monument to the emergence of the industrial age's height in Britain, is both a mordant underlining of Nicholson's desire to make British genius bloom in the desert, and an entirely earnest nod to it, the last stand of imperialist export. Nicholson is right in one regard: here is where the stand must be made, but civilisation isn't just righteousness and tea. It's also rivalry for resources and tests of strength and will — in short, war. So inevitably Nicholson's desire to build civilisation must meet the determination to destroy it. Lean's roots in editing are equally crucial in his then-unusual approach to building scenes, most indefinably yet vitally in the rhythmic unfolding of Nicholson's resistance, and sometimes more overtly. The scene where the commando team are surprised by a unit of Japanese soldiers whilst swimming at a cascade is a fine example, in the way Lean circles around standard action staging to instead present quick, vivid tableaux and symbolic force. The scene starts playfully, the soldiers and the women taking a last chance to enjoy themselves, before the enemy arrive: they, seeing only the women, seem to have the same end on their mind. Lean cuts from Warden throwing a grenade and the commandos firing down on the enemy to shots of teeming fruit bats scared out of the trees and flocking madly in the sky, their screeching panic mimicking the violence. When Lean returns to the Japanese soldiers they're now dead, blood pooling in the water. Life and death, human and inhuman, natural and unnatural, all stirred into a state of flux, thesis and antithesis.



The march through the jungle, whilst describing human smallness and mutability, is punctuated with personal vignettes noting the growing bond between the men and the village women. This skirts potentially risible romantic interest but instead registers an extra, finite emotional texture that rubs salt in during the climax, where the women, each with their own preferred potential warrior-mate, have to watch as they die, as much unwitting priestesses in a death cult as lovers. One of the film's notable descendants, Francis Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), would provide the peyote-soaked take on all this; Herzog's *Aguirre, The Wrath of God* (1972) would strip it down to maniacal-visionary essentials. When the raiders finally arrive at the Kwai, Nicholson is at the same time inspecting his construction, indulging pride, and he muses on his career and disappointments to a quietly receptive if bewildered Saito, and it becomes clear why all that's happened on the Kwai has happened, a last stage for Nicholson to make his life matter. Guinness was aggravated by Lean choice to shoot the scene from behind, but why is very clear when viewed, Nicholson allowed a degree of privacy even as he confesses something poignant about himself, the weight of emotion carried by Guinness' lilt.



Nicholson then attends a celebratory performance his men put on, including drag acts and dubious song numbers, intercut with Shears, Yai, and Joyce silently and methodically stealing up on the bridge and laying explosive charges on its stanchions, in a sequence that suggests the influence of the quiet robbery scene in *Rififi* (1955) as the men do their best to not make noise and attract the attention of guards above nor ruffle the moonlit water. The attention to the saboteurs' method and the deadly seriousness of their endeavour sharply offsets the festivities echoing from above and the placidity of Nicholson's musings on life and the glorious sunset, tension slowly building all the while. Finally, with all their preparations deployed with nerveless patience, Shears leaves Joyce to his job to set off the explosives, which has been deigned will go off as the first train crosses the bridge and must be detonated from the only good cover within reach, located on the other side of the river from where his fellows take up position. When dawn breaks, the commandos realise to their cringing horror that the water level has dropped and the wire to the charges is visible at points. Joyce does his best to conceal the length closest to him, whilst Shears gives a smile of something like pride when Nicholson's men march out over the bridge, again whistling "Colonel Bogey." Whatever else he's done, Nicholson certainly helped his men survive.



The climax of *The Bridge on the River Kwai* is one of the greatest in narrative cinema, charged with dizzying, bone-jarring physical force and tragicomic wildness, the long and patient build-up justified as the many threads of story and character collide in a spasm of apocalyptic violence. Nicholson spots the

explosives wire as he again bestrides his precious bridge, and he and Saito descend to puzzle it out. As Warden and Shears both from their positions cringe in agony as they near Joyce and realise their own man is about to foil the operation, Joyce works up the nerve to spring out of cover and knife Saito, but it's Nicholson's panicked reaction to Joyce's explanation about what's happening, grabbing the young man and trying to hold him down, that attracts the guards' lethal attention, and bullets start flying. Shears, screaming out for Joyce to kill Nicholson, leaps into the river and swims across to aide his pupil, only to be wounded by bullets, whilst Joyce is also shot by the advancing guards. Nicholson's look of pure shock upon recognising Shears as he crawls out of the river, knife in hand, face twisted in warlike grimace even as he dies, completes the circuit.



Meanwhile Warden rains mortar bombs down on the area, through his own, traumatised conviction they're all better off dead than captured and tortured, at the cost of having the village women retreat from him in fear. Lean's control over the eruption of frantic action and the dovetailing of so many narrative and thematic strands into a singular sequence remains quite remarkable, utilising the widescreen expanse to encompass multiple planes of action with a blend of ferocity and grace, ironic distance and immediate furor, building to the epic close-ups that ram home the drama – Nicholson's look of profound surprise at recognising the wounded Shears as he stumbles ashore, his exclamation of "You!" answered by Shear's own, enraged, agonised utterance of the same word before collapsing. Boulle pointedly did not have the bridge blown up in his book, leaving it as an ironic monument to war's madness. The film needs the bridge destroyed, both for the sake of climactic showmanship, of course, but also because the story of the film as opposed to the book demands it, particular in Lean's private moral scheme, which emerges in harkening back to *Great Expectations* where Miss Havisham murmured "What have I done?" when she realises she's destroyed people's lives.



Lean again (and if he did actually contribute anything to the script, it's hard to doubt this was it) puts this question in Nicholson's mouth as he experiences a moment of devastating clarity even as all hell breaks loose about him, the proof of his own blinkered convictions littered about him and bleeding out. Nicholson sets his sights on the plunger and moves for it, only for one of the mortars to land behind him, killing Shears and Joyce and leaving Nicholson with a gouge wound in the back of his head. Nicholson stands and once more makes a controlled effort at recovering his soldierly bearing before resuming his advance, only for him to collapse dead. Fortunately, he falls on the plunger, and the bridge blows apart in a thunderous calamity, train plummeting into the river. Lean was apparently bothered until he died that he didn't make it clear enough that Nicholson intended to destroy the bridge and the explosion wasn't just dumb luck. I've never doubted it, as Lean's careful scene grammar plus that crucial line makes Nicholson's chain of thinking very clear, but I can see why some didn't. The fact that Nicholson doesn't quite set off the blast with his last breath, but instead stumbles towards his final, redemptive act of refutation, is nonetheless just as important, taking the moment out of the realm of melodrama and placing it rather in the absurd.



The destruction of the bridge that takes the train with it provides the orgasmic moment of destructive carnage and spectacle, amplified immeasurably by the undeniable reality of the staging, the wonderful bridge, a real, strong thing, and the train crashing into the river, huge logs and rigid iron crashing and breaking, waves of smoke and steam wafting. Cinema staging had scarcely been so immediate, so

wantonly mighty and reckless, since the silent era. The visuals underline the descent of all art and pretence into pure chaos, but the final gestures retain meaning. Warden hurls his mortar away into impotent frustration before retreating, successful yet chagrined, back into the forest. He has succeeded in the letter of his mission, but what he stood for has gone bust, failed to reclaim his creed as the locus of stability and sanity in the world, and now the village women are afraid of him, the first flutters of the post-war, post-colonial wind. Meanwhile Clipton's immortal, stunned, cringing cries of "Madness! Madness!" as he surveys the scene of carnage became the essential viewpoint of an entire generation still children watching the film but soon to be all too aware of the knife-edge that was the post-war, atomic-age world. And that last shot, sailing endlessly up into the sky, leaving the follies of humanity in splinters on the ground, the ghost army still marching.

## Dr. Cyclops (1940)



Reportedly the first Hollywood fantastical genre film shot in full Technicolor, *Dr. Cyclops* conjures a beautiful, iconographic mystique as it translates the kinds of vivid, colourful, exotically hyped illustrations magazines like *Amazing Stories* and *Astounding Magazine* sported on their covers and on their pages into moving pictures. The very first image is the silhouette of the title scientist, real name Thorkel (Albert Dekker), projected onto a wall by eerily flickering green light. The camera pans and reveals the scientist himself, peering into a vacuum tube containing the light source, blazing with baleful power. Thorkel's bald head and thick pebble-lens glasses present a veneer of strangeness that makes him seem at once embryonic and post-human, damaged and enhanced. He's the design classic of the mad scientist, the wicked brainiac tinkering with the stuff of creation in his jungle abode linking the ancient traditions of alchemy with the hypermodern realm of nuclear physics, still vague and theoretical to the mass audience but only a few years away from becoming all too immediate. Thorkel is "the greatest living expert on organic molecular structure," who's been invited by his former student Dr Mendoza (Paul Fix) to scientifically exploit a massive pitchblende deposit he's found deep in the Peruvian jungle under the Andes.





But Mendoza is horrified when Thorkel declares his new line of research is bearing fruit, and when Mendoza announces he wants Thorkel to stop and leave, Thorkel kills him by shoving his head into the tube, cosmic rays flitting in hallucinogenic hues across his tortured face. Months later, Thorkel sends a request to a US research institute requesting three specialists to come and help his research. Dr Rupert Bullfinch (Charles Halton) puts together a team including microscopy expert Dr Mary Robinson (Janice Logan), but has to find a replacement for his ailing geologist of choice once in South America, so they blackmail the young and happily dissolute Bill Stockton (Thomas Coley) to take his place by buying up all his IOUs. They gain a fourth member of the party when the owner of the mules they need to traverse the jungle, Steve Baker (Victor Kilian), insists on coming along to look after them. When the party arrives at Thorkel's compound they find themselves conscripted to take a few brief, cursory glances in a microscope to describe what they've seen before being thanked and wished a safe return home.



Of course the scientists don't take at all kindly to such treatment, and when they detect the presence of the pitchblende, their curiosity is sharpened, with Bullfinch and Mary imagining utilising it for scientific wonders and Bill and Steve seeing riches. But Thorkel has no intention of sharing in either the lode or his other discoveries, as they eventually learn too late that Thorkel is using the channelled radioactive energy to power a device that miniaturises living organisms. Along with Pedro (Frank Yakonelli), a porter who supplies Thorkel with test animals only to get caught up in the confrontation, the interlopers are trapped by Thorkel and shrunk to only a few inches in height. Thorkel initially assumes his small "uninvited guests" to be readily pliable to his will, but soon finds that in their perfect reduction they've retained all their human determination to foil him. A battle of wits begins that gains real urgency when Thorkel realises his subjects are beginning to grow back to their proper size: Thorkel captures and kills Bullfinch, and begins the hunt for the others, whilst they look frantically for a way to escape without falling prey to the jungle.



*Dr. Cyclops* was made by Ernest B. Schoedsack, who had co-directed *King Kong* (1933) with Merian C. Cooper and *The Most Dangerous Game* (1932) with Irving Pichel. *Dr. Cyclops* can be said to remix both of those hits, with *King Kong*'s essential visual and dramatic dynamic of the very small at the mercy of the very large combined with *The Most Dangerous Game*'s theme of humans being treated and hunted like animals. After the failure of *She* (1935) Schoedsack had decamped from RKO to Paramount, and *Dr. Cyclops* certainly benefits from that studio's customary gloss also imbued upon George Pal's sci-fi films a decade later. The basis was a short story by the influential sci-fi writer Henry Kuttner, and the script by Tom Kilpatrick has a straightforward sufficiency matched to the magazine illustration or comic book-like visual lustre of Schoedsack's visuals. Characters are sketched in swift, bold strokes – "Which would you rather do, go to jail or go to work?" Mary asks Bill whilst slapping his IOUs in her palm, saying a lot about them both. Well within ten minutes of running time the protagonists have arrived at Thorkel's compound, their journey described in a dissolve from the spinning wheel of an old car to that of a wooden wagon, before suddenly they're up amongst the matte-painted snow-clad peaks of the Andes, and then deep in lush studio setbound forest, ancient Incan architecture abutting Thorkel's laboratory where the future vibrates with menacingly suggestive light and noise. Such economy is badly missed in modern cinema.



Thorkel's little world is a carefully described environ, explored throughout from both the perspective of normal size and as a monumental space for the shrunken, replete with flavourful touches, like the bottomless pit behind Thorkel has in his yard with a creepily creaking windlass and impressive-looking if obscure devices used to channel the radioactivity into Thorkel's laboratory. Thorkel himself lurks there often wearing a containment suit with a cylindrical helmet, which when donned makes him seem robot-like, a prototype for generations of sci-fi fusions of man and machine from the Cybermen to the Borg. Entirely normal and mundane things suddenly become either dangerous or helpful as the shrunken heroes flee their tormentor. Torkel's black cat, a singular threat, is piquantly named Satan, and a note of disquiet is sounded early on when Pedro tells the scientists that all the animals he brought up have vanished but Satan has only seemed to get fatter. What happened to all those shrunken test animals soon becomes abundantly clear as the cat chases after the heroes for lunch, only for them to cower within the spiny fronds of a cactus growing in a corner, the plant becoming a defensive fortress until Thorkel smashes it apart in his frantic effort to corner his subjects.



Thorkel protects their modesty and the audience's eyes by dressing them in scraps of cloth before they awaken after their ordeal. "I can imagine Dr Bullfinch saying 'impossible' when he awakes to find himself fully dressed in a pocket handkerchief!" Thorkel chuckles as he bundles up all their discarded clothes, and later they swap such crude tailoring for more colourful apparel (although for some reason keeping the same basic costume, such as poor Pedro, wearing only a diaper). Whilst Schoedsack's aesthetic here is lively and bold and concentrates mostly on the adventurous aspects of the concept, there's a peculiarly insidious punch to the film nonetheless that nudges it towards a horror movie-like tone. This quality is present in the screams of his trapped victims as Thorkel seals them in his shrinking chamber, suddenly silenced as he steps up the energy, and more generally in the inherently uncanny notion of a man perverting organisms at will, illustrated when Pedro finds his horse shrunken and kept in a box.



The film's most famous scene comes when Thorkel murders Bullfinch, the jocular and indulgent doctor making a slow turn towards grimness as he subjects his captive to tests. Bullfinch angrily and proudly refuses to act small, repeatedly declaring "I will not!" to his orders, only to be deftly scooped up (in an animatronic hand) and smothered as Thorkel would a prize specimen, with a cotton ball soaked in cyanide. There's something interesting and disturbing in the image of a man killed so mercilessly and banally, with the victim an exemplar a certain kind of educated and civilised man, one that connects with Thorkel's appearance which seems to be pitched in the median of Heinrich Himmler and Hideki Tojo. Whether consciously or not, there's an awareness of fascism lurking around the margins of *Dr. Cyclops* and a seer's sense of where it was all heading, the wilful extermination not just of populaces but with particularly contemptuous attention to holders of knowledge and culture, as well as the more obvious dig at might-makes-right bullying. This in turn feeds back to the nascent evocation of atomic-age angst.



Dekker's performance as Thorkel is very much the engine of the film, creating the ideal mad scientist by resisting always playing him as that. Thorkel is often personable and wryly humorous, entertained by the wits displayed by his revisions of nature and often enjoying their challenges to what he considers his godlike stature. He's also touched with faint pathos by his general air of physical and mental enervation, shuffling about in his dirty, baggy suit, and particularly his damaged eyes, which are smartly used as both the initial spur of the story and a crucial element in how it resolves. Thorkel sinks into sleep after overseeing his captives' shrinking, even after taking a strong stimulant, as if only his sheer obsessiveness is keeping him moving, breathing, thinking, when he should have collapsed from exhaustion weeks ago. His sardonic persona persists until his singular point of mania is provoked, his unyielding fixation with perfecting his process so that "I can control life absolutely," whereupon he becomes a murderous force, sometimes cold and delicately savage, other times frenzied and arrogant.



The title comes from Bullfinch's comparison of him with the monster from *The Odyssey*, an echo of myth that echoes unpretentiously but acutely throughout: late in the film Thorkel notes the irony with rueful humour when his foes' efforts to smash all of his spectacles leave him with just the one lens. After witnessing Bullfinch's death the other shrunken folk flee into the jungle and look for a way to escape, trying to launch a canoe with hastily improvised tools, and fighting off an attacking crocodile (played by an alligator) with blazing twigs from their campfire. The human drama doesn't need to be complex and it isn't, as the heroes find themselves isolated and vulnerable in a hostile universe (albeit the prim studio kind), forcing them all to reveal their best traits, particularly Bill who finds his heroic streak ironically when he's provoked to a murderous intensity equal to Thorkel's. Pedro dies distracting Thorkel, who uses Pedro's dog Tipo to track them and then sets fire to long grass where they're hiding. Bill, Mary, and Steve outwit Thorkel by sneaking into the box he intended to keep them captive in and letting him carry them back into his house.





The edge of ingenuity to the heroes' efforts to stay alive and defeat their colossal foe is matched by the generally simple but extremely effective special effects and set design, delivering marvellous moments like a long shot of them all at work on different tasks including Pedro using a knife like a huge saw to slice off a piece of sausage and Mary fashioning shoes whilst Bullfinch lies sprawled on Thorin's open notebook. Finally they labour to line up a shotgun to shoot him when he lies down to sleep. An impressive air of frenzy ramps up as Thorkel begins ripping his little world to pieces to find the heroes who have become actualisations of psychosis, little beasts scuttling in the corners with their own murderous designs. But Thorkel eventually gets his comeuppance literally through his own overreach, and he finishes up plunging into the mine shaft. Obvious descendants include *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1956) and *Honey, I Shrunk The Kids!* (1989), which took the film's divergent dark and fun tones and ran in opposite directions.



## The Keep (1983)



**Director / Screenwriter: Michael Mann**

*The Keep's* very first shot, as if tracing the path of a falling angel, describes a seemingly endless downwards pan, descending from grey, storm-ridden sky to jagged pine forests clinging to the flanks of soaring mountains, before finally settling on a convoy of grey-painted Wehrmacht trucks labouring their way up a narrow mountain pass, set to the throbbing, alien textures of Tangerine Dream's score evoking both the roll of thunder and the chugging of the straining motors and mimicking the narcotising effect on the German soldiers rolling up the road. A cigarette lit in ultra-close-up, a shot of caterpillar tracks churning along the gravelly road, swooning visions of the mist-draped mountain peaks. Immediately, director Michael Mann, making his second feature after *Thief* (1981), deposits the viewer within a dreamlike space, offering a classical Horror genre setting and motif in journeying from the mundane world into one of oneiric remove, but wrapped not in traditional genre style cues, but a hard shell of burgeoning 1980s high style cinema. The year, a title card informs us, is 1941, with the Nazi onslaught reaching its climax with armies closing in on Moscow. In this place, the Dinu Pass in the Carpathian Mountains, Captain Klaus Woermann, embodied in rugged, sagging melancholy by Jürgen Prochnow, leads his men into a tiny Romanian hamlet clinging to the jagged walls of the pass's highest reaches, to occupy and garrison an enigmatic medieval fortification there.



Actually entering the village, penetrating a veil of mist to behold a medieval hamlet, sees Mann shifts to slow motion and the score to spacy, mysterious strains as Woermann surveys this piece of another, older world cut off from the sturm-und-drang of the warlike moment and, seemingly, whole other intervening centuries. And the Keep itself, a featureless trapezoidal block of grey brick, looming over the village and a deep gorge. One of Woermann's men complains about this unimportant detail when Germany's soldiers are near to total victory, but Woermann assures him the real fighting is over and Germany is now master of Europe: "Does that enthral you?" he enquires with theatrical enthusiasm. Woermann's own ambivalence over fighting in a war that most certainly does not enthrall him is something that resolves even as his situation becomes ever more mysterious and terrible. Woermann and his men enter the Keep and begin setting up their garrison. But Woermann notes, however, the building is not a defensive structure, but designed like a prison. The walls are lined with 108 silvery, crucifix-like markings that the Keep's caretaker, Alexandru (Morgan Sheppard), warns are not to be touched, a taboo he insists upon with deadly seriousness although he doesn't know why and can't report any bad events in the Keep save the general refusal of visitors to stay through the night: "Then what drives people out in the middle of a rainy night?" Woermann questions. "Dreams?" the caretaker replies.



Since the time of its release, *The Keep* could scarcely seem more benighted. Despised by F. Paul Wilson, author of its source novel, it was also soon disowned by Mann, furious at the way Paramount Pictures threw the film away after losing faith in the project. Special effects master Wally Veevers died during production, leaving the planned spectacular finale in uneditable disarray. Finally the film proved a calamitous bomb at the box office and was generally dismissed by critics, although many Horror genre fans and scholars grasped its unique and fascinating aesthetic. Mann's active role in keeping the film hidden away, refusing to let it be released on DVD for many years, only helped its slow accruing of near-legendary mystique for anyone who could catch it on TV or had access to its early VHS and laserdisc releases. *The Keep* has evolved into one of my absolute favourite films, and its evident flaws are an indivisible part of its compelling makeup. After success with the telemovie *The Jericho Mile* (1979), Mann made a terrific debut as a feature filmmaker with *Thief*, a movie that commenced Mann's career-long aesthetic preoccupation with trying to blend classical genre cinema with a hypermodern, dramatically distilled approach, trying to place as much of the weight of the storytelling and ambience fall on his rigorously constructed imagery that often nudges a kind of neo-expressionistic minimalism. This approach generally suits his preference for tough, stoic heroes, beings who still have some of the toey instinctiveness of forest animals even in the densest urban jungle.



When, for his second film, Mann chose to make a Horror movie, he took a similarly essentialist approach, trying to make a movie describing the idea of a Horror movie as much as the thing itself. He stripped out almost all of the background lore of Wilson's novel and trying to convey a sense of dread and lurking menace through careful visualisation, to make a fable of pure menace and mood. Mann shot most of *The Keep* in Shepperton Studios whilst building the Romanian village and the Keep's exterior in a Welsh quarry, but Mann's notorious later habit of causing budget overruns with his exacting shooting style was apparently already emerging. But, again as he would later, Mann's exacting reach for effect justifies itself. The early shots see him weaving his style in a series of elusive directorial flourishes: that opening shot conveys place and time but relentlessly pushes the eye down a vertical access, giving little sense of the surrounds. A lake surface mirrors back the sky, turning the grand space into a trap. Woermann's first glimpses of the village are dreamy, punch-drunk, barely liminal. The Keep itself is hardly glimpsed apart from the looming grey gateway, with only two proper wide exterior shots of the structure in the whole film. This approach lets Mann skirt location and special effects shortfalls, of course, but also conditions the viewer to a zone unmoored from any sure sense of geography and spatial stability, just as Woermann beholds a scene out of the Middle Ages, unmoored in time.



The Keep itself presents a cultural, architectural, and military conundrum: the locals who maintain it have no real idea of how old it is, who pays for its upkeep, or what its purpose it ever served. Woermann's soldierly eye notices that for what seems to be a defensive structure it's built inside out, with easily scalable exterior walls and the largest, strongest stone blocks inside, more like a prison. Rumours start to grip Woermann's more avaricious men, including Pvt Lutz (John Vine), that the crosses are made of silver and other treasures might be hidden in the Keep: Lutz tries to break off one of the crosses only to receive watch detail for a week from the irate Woermann. During the night, as Steiner stands bored and lonely watch, one of the crosses begins emitting an eerily bright blue light, and looking closer at it Lutz realises that this cross does indeed seem to be silver. He fetches another man on watch, Otto (Jona Jones), and the two men claw out the great granite block the cross is affixed to, revealing a narrow tunnel that Lutz crawls into. Mann's stylistic oddness continues in this sequence, as he distorts the avaricious frantiness of the two soldiers with slow-motion shots of them running to and fro amidst hazily backlit shots, all bound together in strange manner by the use of Tangerine Dream's theme "Logos" on the soundtrack, imbuing a propulsive mood, if retaining a spacy, alien texture inherent in that classic synthesiser sound, of a unit with Mann's recurrent passion with intensely rhythmic image-audio match-ups, the flagrant anachronism of the scoring heightening the disorientating texture.



Lutz crawls into the passage and dislodges a block, only to almost fall into a vast, dark space beyond, saved because he had Otto tie a strap to his waist. In one of the greatest shots in all of fantastic cinema, Mann's camera retreats a seemingly infinite distance away from the soldier's dwindling torch into the furthest depths of the abyss, a space which contains mysterious ruins of some ancient structures. Once the long pullback shot finally concludes, a surge of light swoops into the frame and coalesces into ball of light that rises up to meet the faint torchlight. Otto is almost pulled into the tunnel by a sudden, violent jerking, and when he drags his comrade out, finds only a steaming, headless trunk, before being flung away with bone-shattering force as a mysterious power floods out of the shaft and infests the Keep. Mann cuts with headlong force to the antipathetic force stirred to action: Glaeken Trismegestus (Scott Glenn), awakening in a bed somewhere in Greece, eyes glowing and surging energy drawing into his body, stirred by the eruption of the entity in the Keep. Glaekus rises from bed, packs his belongings including a long wooden case, and heads to the docks of Piraeus where he bribes a fishing boat captain to take him to the Romanian coast: Mann films the boat's voyage into dawn light in a languorously beautiful vignette.



Walking the line between intriguing hints and frustrating vagueness is always a tricky art, and for many Mann went too far with *The Keep*. But it's precisely the film's allusive sense of arcane and ageless struggle, and its near-ethereal, carefully reductive vision of perfect forms of good and evil, that makes it something unique, the hints of cosmic battles and unknowable history at the heart of the story, a vast mythic-emblematic Manichaeism pointedly set against the more immediate and definable evil of Nazism, the heart of darkness nested inside the European übermensch dream. Paramount might well have hoped the film would prove a Horror movie variant on the supernatural anti-Nazi revenge fantasy of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981). Most broadly and obviously, the film presents a variation on the classic motif of a haunted castle. Wilson's novel presented a Lovecraft-tinted rewrite of that founding tome of modern Horror, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, a work that's retained much of its popularity for the way, published just before the dawn of the 20th century, it charted so many of the oncoming age's faultlines. Wilson made more literal the connection between *Dracula* and the paranoid impression of dread power and evil rising in the east of Europe it articulated, by moving the setting to World War II and drawing together crosscurrents of folklore and politics at the moment.



Mann, whilst divesting much of the novel's superstructure, had his own take on the same idea evidently in mind. In particular, Mann seemed interested in investigating through visual and thematic refrains the link suggested by German film historian Siegfried Krakauer in his book *From Caligari to Hitler* between the psychic anxieties communicated in the imagery of classic German Expressionist films and the oncoming fascist mentality. The German Expressionist era was replete with contradictions, like future Nazi Paul Wegener's obsession with the Jewish myth of the Golem that caused him to make two films on the subject, and the Nazi leaders' worship of the monumental aesthetic laid down by the half-Jewish Fritz Lang. Krakauer's ideas had their highly dubious aspect, but Mann found how to put them to dynamic use, making *The Keep* perhaps the closest thing anyone has made to a truly modern take on the Expressionist Horror style, and tethering it to a story that specifically offers meditation on the Nazi mindset and questions of how to resist it. The story purposefully unfolds simultaneous to WWII's supreme tipping point of the furthest Nazi advance during the invasion of the Soviet Union, and the drama enacted in the *Keep* is both far more intimate than the war and far larger, a confrontation of primeval forces.





Mann's casting notably has the Eastern European characters speak with American accents, to emphasise their distinctness from the Germans, who are played by a mix of British, Irish, and German actors. Mann also shifted away from the novel's use of vampirism, which he found silly: once the entity trapped within the grand cavern is unleashed into the Keep, it begins killing Woermann's men by absorbing their life essence, leaving charred and withered corpses. The entity, appearing after a time as a writhing pillar of fog around a stem of skeletal parts and blood vessels, builds substance out of its harvested victims. The idea of a monster slowly assembling itself a physical form echoes back to Piers Haggard's *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971) and would be used again in Stephen Sommers' *The Mummy* (1999). Woermann's messages of distress soon bring not relocation as he hopes, but an SS Einstaz Kommando detachment under the command of Sturmbahnführer Kaempffer (Gabriel Byrne), which steams into the village, takes a number of hostages, and shoots them before their horrified fellow villagers. Kaempffer promises of more retaliation against them if any more Germans are killed. The irate Woermann, who is ordered by Kaempffer not to interfere, points out that Kaempffer has just killed citizens of an allied state.



Kaempffer nonetheless begins using all his arrogant prowess as a bully and killer to get to the bottom of the mystery, using terror tactics to root out presumed partisans. "Something else is killing us," Woermann states in riposte: "And if it doesn't care about the lives of three villagers? If it is like *you*? Then does your fear work?" When some mysterious words appear carved in a wall of the Keep near another dead soldier, the village priest, Father Mikhail Fonescu (Robert Prosky) recognises that the words are not written in any living language, and suggests the only way Kaempffer might get them translated is to find Theodore Cuza (Ian McKellen), a scholar and expert in Romanian history and linguistics, who grew up in the village and once made a study of the Keep. Problem: Cuza is Jewish, and has recently been rounded up for deportation. Cuza and his daughter Eva (Alberta Watson) are at that moment sitting in a depot with other Jews, Gypsies and sundry undesirables awaiting transportation. Cuza is crippled by a degenerative disease that makes him look far older than he really is, and Eva acts as his carer.



Kaempffer's command brings them both to the Keep, where the SS commander taunts Cuza with talk of place he was just about to be taken to, a place with two doors out, one of them a chimney: "So you had better find a way to be of use to me in three days." Cuza recognises the language of the writing on the wall as a language dead for 500 years, and reads, "I will be free," a message Kaempffer immediately interprets as a rebel declaration. Woermann tries to assure the Cuzas that he might be able to sneak them out of the Keep to a safe hiding place if they can buy enough time by keeping Kaempffer satisfied: "But then again you may not," Eva comments sceptically. Eva soon attracts the lascivious eye of a couple of the German soldiers, who track her through the Keep after she comes to get food in the mess, and assault her in a dark, lonely corridor. Mann pulls off another of his weird yet potent visual flourishes as he pans down from Eva's body, suspended between the two would-be rapists, to the leather boot of one soldier, an almost fetishistic contrast of the soft and feminine with macho brutality. As with the appeal to greed that helped set it free, the assault on Eva only stimulates the entity's appetite as well as its cunning: the entity, now a ball of fire and smoke reminiscent of the one that pursues the hero of *Night of the Demon* (1957), surges through the Keep's innards and falls on the soldiers, who disintegrate messily as the entity absorbs them.



Mann lingers on the image of the entity, now with two burning red eye-like orbs attached to a glowing brain stem, peering out of a writhing pillar of mist, carrying Eva with tender-seeming care back to her and her father's room, a particularly strange distillation of the classic image of the monster and the maiden, whilst the scoring imbues the vision with the overtone of angelic deliverance. The stunned Cuza nonetheless retains his wit and will sufficiently to tell the entity to release his daughter. The entity speaks to Cuza, accusing him of collaborating with the Nazis: Cuza responds vehemently that he'd do anything to stop them, so the entity reaches out and touches him, giving him a shock of energy. When he regains consciousness, Cuza finds that he's been restored to full health and mobility, and he realises why quickly enough: the entity wants his help to escape the Keep, which still entraps him. When he again encounters the entity, whose name, Molasar (Michael Carter), is only uttered once in the film, the mysterious being refers to the Jews as "my people" and vows to destroy the Nazis if Cuza will help him escape the Keep: Cuza agrees to find a mysterious energy source hidden in the grand cavern, an object Molasar describes as the source of his power and must be removed if he is to leave the Keep's confines.



Mann's enigmatic approach to the entity and the supernatural drama emphasises the humans in between ultimate good and evil as enacting gradations. "You believe in Gods, I'll believe in men," Cuza tells Fonescu, and yet both material and emblematic conflicts have to play out to their bitter end. Where *Thief* had mooted Mann's fascination for self-enclosed, self-directing protagonists, *The Keep* introduced his other career-long obsession, one with doppelgangers, characters sharing similar traits and characters who often find they have surprising kinships, yet are doomed to clash violently because they've become, or were born, disciples of opposing creeds. It's a preoccupation Mann would notably take into *Manhunter*, which revolves around the hero's capacity to enter into the mindset of his repulsive quarry, and *Heat* (1995), where the cop and criminal have more affinity for each-other than anyone else, as well as *The Last of the Mohicans* (1991), where the heroes and villains are linked but also perfectly distinguished by their responses to loss of home and habitat. Mann would extend his recurrent imagery and implications to the point where he'd shoot Chris Hemsworth in *Blackhat* (2015) in a way that would make him look strikingly similar to Glenn in this film. In *The Keep* Mann's preoccupation is presented in a set of generically rigid yet unstable binaries: Woermann and Kaempffer, representing Nazi Germany's armed forces and yet divided by completely different characters and philosophies, contrasted with the atheist Cuza and Orthodox priest Fonescu, who's desperate to do anything to keep his learned friend safe, and gives Cuza a crucifix as a gesture of protective feeling: Cuza hands the cross on to Woermann. In the course of *The Keep*, the link between the overt evil of the Nazis, particularly Kaempffer, and the entity as manifestation and overlord of their diseased ideals, is constantly reiterated; Woermann likens the twisted psyches of the Nazis to the

illogical forms of the Keep's architecture, and the entity itself no mere stand-in for their sick fantasies but the secret source of them.



As the film unfolds the affinities evolve and twist: Fonescu, under the influence of the evil in the Keep, degenerates into a ranting fanaticism for his creed like Kaempffer, whilst Cuza's physical prostration is mimicked by Woermann's moral impotence. At the same time the shaded oppositions cast Woermann as a pawn of the necessities of patriotism in the same way the entity turns Cuza into his Faustian representative: Cuza's desire to smash the Nazis is realised but as he flexes his fist in his new strength he unconsciously mimics a fascist salute. Behind each set of mirroring protagonists, the eternal champions of light and dark, converging in the Keep. Glenn's Glaeken is glimpsed making his way to the Dinu Pass, frightening and intimidating a pair of Romanian border guards at a checkpoint when his eyes again flash with brilliant energy as he warns them not to touch the case he has strapped to his motorcycle, a marvellously eerie vignette. Fittingly for a character intended as the pure incarnation of good, the otherworldly Glaeken is also presented as the *ne plus ultra* of Mannian hero figures: mostly silent, he dominates purely by corporeal presence and baleful charisma, communicated by a stare that seems to x-ray people even when not radiating supernatural energy. Mann had Glenn base his character's odd, halting, ritualistic speaking style on the vocalisation of electronic musician Laurie Anderson. Glaeken turns up in the village at last making claim to a room in the inn which has been promised to Eva, after Woermann and Cuza outmanoeuvre Kaempffer in getting her out of the Keep. Glaeken the eternal warrior seems to have been left to wander the earth until needed to exterminate Molasar once and for all, and he quickly seduces Eva.



Mann's debt to William Friedkin as a source of influence on his style – one that would reverse for *To Live and Die In L.A.* (1986), much to Mann's displeasure – is apparent in *The Keep* through borrowing of Tangerine Dream's pulsing, estranging sonic textures and a visual preoccupation with machines in motion from *Sorcerer* (1977), and subsuming that film's subtler sense of atavistic powers working behind the mask of inanimate yet strangely motivated things. Mann's style is its own thing, that said, to a radical degree. Mann contrives glimpses of grotesque and perplexing things, like the discovery of a dead soldier under the carved words comes in an obliquely framed glimpse of the man's head fused into the wall, one staring eye amidst a charred black face, and Eva realising she can't see Glaeken's reflection in a mirror in what seems a perfectly intimate moment. The colour palette of Alex Thompson's brilliant photography is mostly reduced to a sprawl of slate greys and blacks and misty whites, tellingly broken up only by the red of the SS Nazi armbands and the glowing eyes of Molasar. The film is full of disorientating jump cuts and discordant camera angles, work to sever a clear sense of chronology and context, as precise measures of time and place cease to be relevant as if within an explosion of the innermost Id, whilst relating back to classic genre cinema and the sense imbued by works from Lang through to Val Lewton of a world gone mad: indeed the cumulative sense of isolated paranoia closely resembles *Isle of the Dead* (1945), with which it shares a wartime setting and invocation of imminent doom in an isolated locale that seems to have slipped off the edge of the world's physical and psychic maps.



Molasar meanwhile poses as a saviour to please and manipulate Cuza, who's desperate to find a way to halt the Nazi onslaught: the Molasar costume, designed by Enki Bilal, an artist for the storied sci-fi and fantasy comic book *Heavy Metal*, was designed to be reminiscent of Wegener's Golem with its dark, lumpen, bulbous, stony form, and Molasar, like the Golem of myth, promises to be a righteous weapon defending the faithful and victimised, only to prove a destructive monster. Molasar needs a man like Cuza to release him because, as Glaeken later mentions when he confronts Cuza, only an uncorrupted soul can even approach the imprisoning talisman. McKellen, who after playing D.H. Lawrence in *Priest of Love* (1981) was having a brief moment as a major film actor long before his eventual resurgence in the mid-1990s, wields a noticeably plummy American accent, but ultimately gives a galvanic, impressively corporal performance in playing an intellectual hero who nonetheless experiences his world physically in his relationship with his wrecked body and frustrated will, and whose transfiguration from angry cripple to empowered and determined avenger has suggestions of both spiritual and erotic overtones – “He *touch*ed my *body*!” he tells Eva in describing his encounter with Molasar. This echoes again in Glaeken's seduction of Eva, an act that has the flavour of ritual, the lovers become vessels connecting the immortal and mortal, sacred and earthly, flesh and alien substance, culminating in the couple forming themselves into a cruciform.



Prochnow was undoubtedly handed the part of Woermann because of his similar role as the intelligent and humane U-boat captain fighting for an evil cause in Wolfgang Petersen's *Das Boot* (1981), although Woermann's ultimately quite a different character, and Prochnow gives a subtly apposite performance. Where the captain was endlessly tough and resourceful in defence of his men and his command whilst maintain open cynicism for their cause, Woermann is already bursting at the seams when he arrives at the Keep, haunted by witnessing SS men slaughtering people in Poznan, and by the wish he'd fought in the international brigades in Spain and had taken a stand against Nazism before it consumed his and everyone else's lives. His punishment for his failures of nerve is to be stricken with ineffectiveness in protecting his men, relieved only by upbraiding the icily revolted Kaempffer, who ultimately diagnoses Woermann in turn with “the debilitating German disease – sentimental talk.” Woermann describes Kaempffer's version of strength as having become literal in the Keep, a force of evil beyond imagining, the manifestation of all the sick psyches that have been given guns and carte blanche to slaughter. The clashes between Woermann and Kaempffer are unusually potent rhetorical vignettes thanks in part to the intensity of the two performers, inhabiting archetypal roles, the classic liberal and the perfect fascist: Woermann ferocious in his denunciations of evil but lacking the necessary edge to be truly

effective, Kaempffer all too willing to do anything to make the Nazi ideal real, and willing to murder anyone who stands in opposition, including, ultimately, Woermann.



Their clash reaches its climax when Kaempffer furiously shoots Woermann in the back, just as Woermann, hearing his men screaming as Molasar assaults them, grabs up Fonescu's cross, and he dies with it in his bloody hands. Kaempffer, plucking the cross from Woermann's bloody hands, heads out into Keep's atrium only to find all the remaining Germans killed, some fused into the walls, others scattered in smouldering chunks across the floor, their war machines twisted and melted, as if Molasar has become some Picasso-like modern artist working in the medium of stone, steel, and flesh to create mangled interpretations of warfare. Kaempffer is confronted by Molasar, causing him to drop to the ground wailing for Jesus to protect him, brandishing the crucifix. Molasar seems momentarily afraid of the icon, which resembles the talisman that holds him in the keep, so Kaempffer gathers up enough of his customary arrogance to stand and face the thing. "What are you?" he demands. "Where do you come from?" the amused hulk asks: "I am you." He takes the cross from Kaempffer, crushes it, and casually sucks the life from him with the same pitiless ease with which Kaempffer murdered, the Nazi releasing a bone-chilling shriek as he does. This is a brilliant moment where even the utterly despicable Kaempffer earns a flash of cringe-inducing empathy in the face of such pure, inhuman malevolence.



Mann's hope to make a parable about fascism might well have been a tad pretentious, but he succeeds within the film's dream logic as Mann paints in visual textures the symbolic drama he's describing. Molasar literally feeds off the darker desires in the men who release him, and in turn stirs people to more and more destructive acts. Kaempffer's total embrace of Nazi ideology and methods makes him the human equivalent of Molasar, aiming to build "the next thousand years of history" on the bones of necessary sacrifice, but Molasar even uses Cuza's own best qualities against him by posing as a messianic saviour figure simply by appealing to his righteous anger and hunger for revenge. The blackened, shrivelled, charred bodies of the Germans ironically resemble holocaust and atomic bomb victims, the casual victims of the war's unleashed apocalyptic logic. Mann's depiction of the Keep's architecture, a strange space of uncertain angles and spaces above the mammoth, black, atavistic cavern, presents an ingenious visualisation of what Woermann describes as "twisted fantasies" of Nazism, growing out of the Nietzschean abyss, the abyss that looks back and sees right through all civilised and intelligent pretences. In this manner, Mann expands on Kracauer's key concept of the Expressionist cinema movement as directly expressing the collective neurosis gripping Germany after World War I, which finally malformed into susceptibility to Nazism.





Mann's concept of the Keep nods then back to the *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (1919) and *Metropolis* (1926), films that offered their stylised physical world as discrete emanations of human will and mind, beset by insane and sclerotic sectors. The Keep's interior recalls the cavernous zones of Paul Leni's *Waxworks* (1923), and the windmill in James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931) where the good doctor performed his experiments, with alternation of spaces vast and cramped, soaring and warped, fashioned with rough and inhospitable brickwork. In most classic Expressionist Horror the weird world presented in them was the world nonetheless for the characters who exist in them, except notably in *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* which laid down the template but also revoked it by presenting the key drama as the ravings of a madman. Mann does something similar in the opening moments of *The Keep* by emphasising Woermann's act of seeing the village and the Keep, presenting his drama as subliminal, with a sense of passing through a discrete veil between waking and oneiric states, and everything encountered beyond there is operating on an unreal level. Whilst Kracauer's thesis that *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* expressed a collective wish for a paternal dictator to restore shape to reality remains largely unconvincing, Mann puts it good use, correlating the perverse mental projections of the Expressionist style with the reality-distorting influence of Molasar. At the same time *The Keep* is also a movie that was, in 1983, a work defining a stylistic moment in moviemaking, which it quite obviously belongs to with its obsessive use of diffused lighting effects and backlit shots, as well as the dreamy slow motion and music: Mann follows *Das Boot* not just in casting Prochnow but in annexing its blithely anachronistic electronic score.



It's often hard to exactly pinpoint in a compromised work like *The Keep* where exactly directorial intention and jarring interference diverge: what is apparently true is that Mann was forced to cut the film down from two hours to just over an hour and half. Eva's swift seduction by Glaeken is often taken to be one sign of editing, but frankly it seems to me like one of the more purely Mannian elements of the film: near-instantaneous fusion of lost and needy souls is common in his movies, like John Dillinger's swift claiming of Billie Frechette in *Public Enemies* (2009). There are however snippets of interaction between Eva and Glaeken in the film's trailer that certainly suggest their scenes were cut down. The rough transition around the one-hour mark more clearly demonstrates interference. What's presumably supposed to be the insidious infiltration of the village by Molasar's influence comes on far too suddenly, particularly Fonescu's pivot from kindly, good-humoured friend of Cuza to a ranting loony who barks zealous scripture at him. Soon after, in a moment difficult to parse on initial viewings Eva goes to Fonescu for aid only to find he's sacrificed a dog on the altar of his church and is drinking its blood from a goblet. There was also a scene of Alexandru being murdered by his sons with an axe.



Given Mann's stylisation, however, the jagged editing and resulting elisions really only reinforce the generally unmoored mood of the tale, the sense of obscene things lurking in the corner of the eye and numinous forces working relentless influence on the merely human. What was lost from the film through cutting, as well as some of the integrity of the last act, was Mann's attempt to film the idea of evil as a miasmatic influence, meant to mimic the fascist sway picking at the stitches of society and stampeding the world towards barbarian ruin. On the other hand, most of that stuff is supernal to the essential drama: Kaempffer and Woermann's deaths transfer the weight of the story on Cuza and Eva. Moreover, it's apparent that when faced with cutting the film, Mann often chose to jettison plot sequences to concentrate on moments commanding his bleary and submerged sense of atmosphere – that long shot of the fishing boat sailing into the dawn, for instance, kept instead of a moment taken from the book where Glaeken kills the captain of the boat who tries to doublecross him. Glenn, the top-billed actor, is nonetheless barely in *The Keep* for most of its first half, and even when he does arrive at the Keep he remains detached, ambiguous: authentic good is as alien as pure evil.



Glaeken seems to wield some sort of psychic power over Eva, brushing a hand over her eyes to make her sleep as they together in bed, a subtler but equally coercive force to the one Molasar wields. Glaeken senses through Magda the nature of her father's compact with Molasar, and when Cuza takes a chance to leave the Keep with the German guards insensible under Molasar's influence, Glaeken warns him about Molasar's true nature and need. Cuza refuses to believe him, and drops hints about his presence to Kaempffer, who immediately sends some of his men to bring him in. When Eva frantically protests the arrest and gets into a tussle with the soldiers, Glaeken, to protect her, begins tossing the soldiers about like nine-pins, only to be machine-gunned: splotches of luminous green blood appear all over his torso and he refuses to die, until he plunges into the ravine and finishing up sprawled on a ledge where the Nazis presume him dead. Molasar's subsequent slaughter of the remaining Germans clears the way for Cuza to descend into the cavern and locate the talisman, which he then carries back to the surface, whilst Glaeken revives and begins climbing the jagged ravine wall.



Mann offers one of his signature sequences here, a mesmerically constructed climactic running montage set to intensifying music, later exemplified by the likes of the hero's Iron Butterfly-scored dash to the rescue in *Manhunter* and the cliff-top chase in *The Last of the Mohicans*. Mann cuts between Glaeken hauling himself up the ravine face, still covered in glowing green blood (a touch notably recycled by *Predator*, 1986), whilst Cuza retrieves the talisman, which Molasar can't even look at. Cuza climbs up through the cavern, a vast, eerie space filled with unknowably ancient ruins and signs of mystique-ridden history, all set music sampling operatic choruses and a church bell-like propelling rhythm. Striding down a corridor as he re-enters the Keep, Cuza's progress is marked by the crosses on the wall glow in reaction to the talisman's passing. Glaeken, after escaping the ravine, opens the case he carried to the Keep and removes what appears to be a simple metal tube, actually a weapon capable of destroying Molasar. This passage is one of Mann's greatest units of filmmaking, and reaches its apotheosis as Cuza reaches the atrium, only to meet a dazed Eva, who tries to stop him removing the talisman. Molasar, watching on as the two struggle, commands Cuza to kill her and continue out.



As if in humanistic rewrite of the Abraham and Isaac myth, Cuza turns on the monster and demands of it, “Who are you that I should prove myself by killing my daughter?” before insisting that if the talisman is Molasar’s, he should be able to take it out himself. This marvellous climactic moment closes the loop on the moral drama before the supernatural battle can occur, as Cuza’s faith in men is proven right by his own deed, refuting the famous test of Abraham’s faith whilst sticking up for the nobility of the reasoning person. McKellen’s challenge to the monster, shouting “Take it!” with the ferocity of hero facing down a demon, is every bit as epic as McKellen’s confrontation in the guise of Gandalf with Balrog in *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* some seventeen years later. Infuriated, Molasar reduces Cuza to his crippled state again, but before he can kill Cuza and Eva, Glaeken walks in with his cosmic bazooka, fitting the talisman into its muzzle and unleashing energy rays that charge the crosses and drive Molasar back into the Keep. Of all the sequences in *The Keep* the finale was the most crudely curtailed by Veever’s death, production quagmire, and Mann’s own creative uncertainty. What was intended to be an epic showdown was reduced to a straightforward scene where Glaeken, despite knowing that “when he goes, I go,” as he tells Eva earlier, nonetheless confronts Molasar with the intention of annihilating him.



Mann interpolates flash visions that hint at alien origins for Glaeken, whose physiognomy changes to match Molasar's (Molasar already resembling Glaeken in turn in his complete form, nudging the refrain of dualistic kinship), and a close-up of his eyes as he wields the energy weapon sees a kind of mesh grid has been exposed on them. When Molasar tries to hit his foe with an energy pulse as Glaeken glances to make sure the Cuzas are safe, Glaeken responds by blasting a hole through Molasar, who returns to a formless state and is sucked back into the cavern. Glaeken, after giving a last, forlorn gesture to Eva, is then sucked in after him, disappearing through the cavern door amidst blinding white light. And yet, once again, apart from the rather jagged edit in the brief combat of the two beings, the climax feels more consistent with the movie as it stands than a more drawn-out fight would have. The proper climax of the story we've been told is Cuza's challenge to Molasar, proving that Molasar cannot ultimately corrupt everyone. Glaeken's arrival merely delivers the coup-de-grace, although this comes complete with a memorable vision of his weapon gathering power, pulling in energy with a rising whirl before unleashing primeval force.



Mann instead, typically, places the weight of the scene's power and meaning on the intensity of the gestures and visuals, particularly in Glenn's deliberately stone-faced yet delicately plaintive characterisation as Glaeken finally proves he's a true white knight, fearlessly eliminating the evil despite knowing it will cost him everything, leaving behind Eva screaming in dismay. A TV reedit of the film, screened a few years after *The Keep's* theatrical release, sported a restored coda based on the novel's ending, in which Eva descends into the cavern and finds Glaeken still alive there, restored to mortal form. This was excised from the theatrical release, an odd move in itself, as presumably movie studios would usually take the more clearly upbeat ending. The movie proper instead concludes on an enigmatic note, as Fonescu and other villagers, now free of the evil influence, rush to help the Cuzas, and Mann offers a final freeze frame of Eva staring back into the Keep, as if hoping, or sensing, Glaeken is still within, still existing in some form. Again, Mann's choice here prizes evocation over literalism, with the surging, soulful music and the image of Eva capturing an iconic impression, of triumph bought at a cost, and love as strong as death. *The Keep* is undoubtedly an untidy, misshapen work, but it's also a uniquely potent and densely packed work of brilliance, and to my mind close to ideal of what a Horror movie should be.

## From Dusk Till Dawn (1996)



The pitch for *From Dusk Till Dawn* still sounds as generally awesome today as it did in 1996: a self-conscious trash epic rudely conjoining scuzz-noir thriller and hyped-up horror movie in a neo-drive-in hootarama, made by Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino when both men were in the first flush of popularity. Tarantino's script was his first paid writing assignment, hired by producer Robert Kurtzman to make something of a basic story he'd dreamt up, and he finished up also playing one of the lead roles, whilst Rodriguez came aboard to direct having swiftly risen to fame with his no-budget wonder *El Mariachi* (1992) and its sequel *Desperado* (1995). And yet *From Dusk Till Dawn* is still, again as it was upon release, something of a disappointment. The opening introduces one of Tarantino's favourite recurring characters, although it's actually the end of the line for him: Texas Ranger Earl McGraw (Michael Parks) enters a gas station in the middle of nowhere and chats amiably with the clerk Pete (John Hawkes), mentioning that he's on the lookout for nefarious fugitives Seth and Richie Gecko, brothers who have recently robbed an El Paso bank and have a cashier captive in their car trunk. McGraw hasn't noticed that two men also in the store are actually Seth and Richie (George Clooney and Tarantino), trying to wait out McGraw's visit. Richie keeps swearing that he spied the clerk trying to signal McGraw, and the brothers finish up killing McGraw and Pete and lay waste to the station, after one of Pete's wild shots back blows a hole through Richie's hand.



Back on the run, the brothers book into a low-rent motel where Richie seems to be kind to their hostage (Brenda Hillhouse), but when Seth returns from scouting around finds Richie has brutally raped and killed her. A neat solution to the problem of eluding police and getting to Mexico presents itself when former minister Jacob Fuller (Harvey Keitel) and his children Katherine (Juliette Lewis) and Scott (Ernest Liu), heading that way on vacation, roll in to the motel car park in their RV. The Geckos take them captive and force them to take them along for the ride over the border. Thanks to Jacob and Katharine's smarts under pressure the brothers remain undetected, and once in Mexico the criminals and their captives head for the remote trucker bar called Titty Twister, where the Geckos will rendezvous with a contact who will take them on to the gangster hideout called El Rey. The bar proves to be a spectacularly sleazy den crammed with drinkers, topless dancers, and a rockin' band, but the undercurrent of subtle menace that sets Seth's blood boiling soon manifests as the bar staff all turn out to be vampires who take their prey from the bar's denizens. The Fullers and Seth survive the initial onslaught in the company of two random patrons who prove to be excellent fighters, Sex Machine (Tom Savini) and Frost (Fred Williamson), but Richie and Jacob are both bitten. The remaining humans prepare themselves for battle as a swarm of bats circling the bar promise a coming invasion of the undead.



Tarantino and Rodriguez have revisited this well several times in their careers, collaborating on the 2007's *Grindhouse* with its twinned horror flicks *Planet Terror* and *Death Proof*, both of which I tend to cite as my favourites by the two directors, particularly the Rodriguez, and in turn gave birth to Rodriguez's rather less inspired *Machete* films. Tarantino's obsessive, artisanal approach to genre mash-up and Rodriguez's messy enthusiasm for kinetic schlock ought theoretically to make for a great ride, but something about their first collaboration refuses to work. It's the entry that might most answer to the general caricature of Tarantino's oeuvre, with its liberal film quotes, cruel violence, contempt for straight-laced movie morality and how it often ties to basic story prerogatives, and general air of self-conscious trashiness. It shares with Tarantino's other early scripts taken up by other directors a fascination with rootless and wandering rogues, also evinced in *True Romance* (1993) and *Natural Born Killers* (1994), as well as offering the Geckos as versions of his habitual fraternal criminals, also including the Vic and Vince Vega and Bill and Bud.





The nod to Jim Thompson's novel *The Getaway* in quoting its concept of El Rey, the hideout for cashed-up gangsters, has some substance, as it could be argued the film counts as an adaptation of that novel's last portion, excised from both Sam Peckinpah's and Roger Donaldson's versions, in portraying the end of the line for the fugitives as a stygian nightmare. The Geckos are disparate ratbags whose bond survives even Seth's increasing exasperation with his brother's switches between seeming childlike innocence and malignant and delusional mania. Seth himself retains a code reminiscent of Mr White in *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) in doing whatever he must to stay out of the law's hands after Richie helped him bust out of prison, but with an added edge of bloody-minded savagery easily provoked whenever someone touches the raw nerve of his damaged machismo. Against such unruly avatars of primeval qualities the film pitches Jacob, whose faith lapsed after his wife died of cancer, but who retains the ethos of a peacemaker and has sufficiently sharp wits to help him help the Geckos in avoiding violent confrontations: there's a particularly good moment for Clooney and Keitel as Seth starts getting hammered after arriving at Titty Twister and planning to rumble with a bouncer who dared touch him, only for Jacob to call him on his petulance, finally impressing the hardened killer.



These two characters are great both individually and a pairing and are exceptionally well-acted. Clooney, making one of his first forays back into film stardom after his success on the TV show *E.R.*, is surprisingly good as a tight-wound badass, and he handles the Tarantino dialogue with all customary lip-twisting skill: it's a pity he generally chose more anodyne roles thereafter. Keitel, himself best-known for playing more visceral and wayward characters, is by contrast asked to play this film's most normal figure, only distinguished by his decency and subtle guile, stemming it seems from years of hiding from his own growing discontent, supplanted now by unsparing honesty even when it's dangerous, and his simmering sense of failure and anger. Jacob and Seth represent two distinct and interesting potential stories in the film, the struggling man of faith colliding with the criminal crucified on the cross of his one real loyalty and attachment, which should be the stuff of operatic grandeur once the film erupts. Like *Pulp Fiction* (1994), which played blackly comic games with the notion of a professional fiend suddenly finding an urge to redemption, the vampires force Seth to suddenly and unequivocally adopt a God-friendly attitude. The trouble is the film never really does anything with the motifs it sets in motion.



Early scenes are laced with truly disturbing aspects, in Seth's clever but grotesquely ruthless way of dealing with Pete, and the queasy flash cuts Rodriguez uses to suggest the carnage Richie unleashed on the hostage whilst keeping focus on Seth's deadpan dismay: "Richie, what the hell is wrong with you?" This moment remains pretty well my favourite moment of Rodriguez, directorially speaking, but it causes its own problems: it has an edge of authentic horror the rest of the film can't actually touch. The set-up is intriguing in proposing to set two ordinary monsters, in the form of the Geckos, against the supernatural kind. But once the film gets to Titty Twister it morphs into a Sam Raimi-style gore action-comedy and nothing comes of the disparity, killing Richie off just as things start rocking. The Fuller kids feel unnecessary and underdeveloped, with a note of threat sounded over Katharine when Richie hallucinates her making a come-on to him, but again this never resolves. Katharine survives the ordeal as a regulation final girl, but whilst there are flashes of something reminiscent of her role in Martin Scorsese's *Cape Fear* (1991) in playing a girl tempted by the dark side when the presumptions of normality fail, again, nothing is made of it, save for Seth to signal he has some standards when he refuses to accept her as a lover when she's alone and blood-splattered at the end.



Whilst the narrative offers payoffs to its notions, as Jacob is obliged to regain his faith through obvious necessity and various family members are forced to kill loved-ones George Romero-style, it does so in a peculiarly floppy, insubstantial manner: the jokey-ridiculous tone, with such touches as Sex Machine's literal crotch gun, doesn't mesh with the deeper sense of evil beheld. The ode to a hyperbolically macho, fetid Tex-Mex atmosphere is at least properly pungent, particularly once they reach the abode of the damned that is the Titty Twister with its pornographic neon signage and raving Emcee (Cheech Marin in one of three roles: he also plays a border guard and Carlos, the El Ray contact) who spruiks 57 varieties of pussy. The house band sings out wonderfully random lyrics about marijuana before swapping their normal instruments for ones made out of corpses and then self-immolating rather than submit to the stake. The bar, with its suggestively Aztec carvings and architecture, is revealed in the very last shot, a slow zoom out of a gorgeous matte painting, to be actually built on the top level of a buried Aztec pyramid surrounded by the detritus of centuries of preying on travellers: this lovely stinger gives the film a real jolt of mystique and visual elegance.



There's another great horror movie image too when the bats finally break into the bar and surge down around Frost as transforms into a bestially grinning vampire. Most frustratingly, the actual combat with the vampire horde is pretty stodgy in execution, despite such rowdy touches as Seth venturing into battle with a wooden stake on a jackhammer. There's no real sense of tension or excitement, and what should have been the *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976) of horror movies – an obvious touchstone as young Scott wears a shirt throughout emblazoned with "Precinct 13" – never comes close to evoking that kind of intimate and enthralling danger. Perhaps the film's most famous scene is the star-making cameo by Salma Hayek as the bar's headline act, an exotic dancer named Santanico Pandemonium who gyrates whilst wearing a real, albino boa as a boa, and reveals her true monstrous visage, promising to make Seth her undead slave. It's an indicator of the film's woozy, half-baked texture that Hayek is presented as such a strikingly envisioned and erotically potent icon of evil, only to be listlessly killed off a couple of minutes later.



Still, the film delivers a decent dose of good-humour wrapped in barbed wire, with nice ideas for cutting-edge vampire killing like water balloons filled with holy water, and a disco mirror ball on the ceiling becoming a Gatling gun of death-dealing when sunlight strikes it. Keitel gets a nice bit of character-exact comedy when he repeats the expletive laced vow Seth makes him take to get back in the minister business by humming the naughty words. Williamson and Savini are also very funny as the two crazy-braves, with Williamson hilariously echoing some of his old Blaxploitation roles as Frost recounts his Vietnam war experience with unseemly delight in old bloodshed, whilst Sex Machine tries in vain to suppress the vampiric transformation coming over him. What's finally undoubted about *From Dusk Till Dawn* is that it lacks the sophistication in shifting tones Tarantino would soon master whilst Rodriguez has remained a case of arrested development. Still, despite only mildly good box office, it's sustained a strong cultish subsistence since, inspiring a couple of low-rent sequels and a short-lived TV series.



## Freaks (1932)



**Director: Tod Browning**

**Screenwriters: Willis Goldbeck (uncredited), Leon Gordon (uncredited)**

The Horror film and controversy have long been conjoined in general understanding, culminating in moments like the infamous “video nasty” debate in the UK in the 1980s. The concern that Horror movies are colonising minds with perverting images, unleashing barely-quelled inner demons, or lending some strange flesh to dark fantasies usually kept secret if not safe, is one that can still drive popular argument. Whilst there were undoubtedly controversial movies before it, Tod Browning’s *Freaks* is nonetheless the great antecedent of such debates. *Freaks* is the most fabled, notorious, and elusive of great Horror movies from the first half of the Twentieth century, and such a description could also be applied to its creator. Browning stands as likely the first true auteur of the Hollywood wing of Horror cinema, reaching his apogee of fame with 1931’s *Dracula* and its follow-up, *Freaks*. Browning, born in Louisville, Kentucky in 1880 with the real given names of Charles Albert, was the son of a successful builder. At age 16 did what many a youngster has dreamt of, and ran away to join the circus, which had become his obsession. After stints as a roustabout, a barker, a contortionist, a dancer and entertainer on Mississippi riverboats, a magician, a clown, and an acrobat, he achieved notoriety with his buried-alive act, “The Living Hypnotic Corpse,” before moving on to become a



vaudeville performer, and adopted his perennial nickname because it was the German word for death. Short leap then to acting in movies, making his debut at age 29, with a vast amount of life and performing experience already behind him. Browning joined D.W. Griffith's company. In 1915, Browning was involved in a car crash that cost a fellow actor's life and nearly killed him. The crash was the direct result of the drinking problem that would dog Browning throughout his life and ultimately foil his great talent.



During his recovery Browning started working behind the camera for Griffith, including as an assistant director as well as playing a small role in *Intolerance* (1916), but his previous speciality in comedy now gave way to a brooding obsession with physical deformity and ominous melodramas preoccupied with revenge, culpability, illusion, and social exile. Browning's early feature directing work is hazy, with some uncertainty whether some works he was credited with were ever even actually shot, but he was certainly on the move by 1917. He found success at Universal Pictures directing a string of exotic melodramas starring Priscilla Dean, one of the top leading ladies of the time. Whilst making *The Wicked Darling* (1919), in which Dean played a slum girl forced into crime, Browning met the star collaborator he's best-remembered for working with, Lon Chaney, who played Dean's victimiser in the film. Chaney was already well-known for his incredible feats of physical transformation, and within a few years he had become one of the biggest stars of the silent age, with his make-up and prosthetic effects often bordering on the masochistic, and he became the perfect living canvas for Browning to act out his dark fantasies with. Their true alliance began with 1921's *Outside The Law*, in which Browning cast Chaney in a double role as a slimy gangland villain and a kindly Chinese man, with one character murdering the other. Browning and Chaney owed much to the creative indulgence of young producing whiz-kid at MGM Irving Thalberg, and Chaney like Browning had an immediate personal grounding for his fascination with physical difference, as the son of deaf parents.



Browning and Chaney's work together included a string of successful, near-legendary movies including *The Unholy Three* (1925) and its 1930 sound remake, *The Unknown* (1926), the gimmicky vampire movie *London After Midnight* (1926), and the lurid exotic thriller *West of Zanzibar* (1928). Chaney's death from throat cancer in 1930 ended the partnership just as Browning was gearing up for *Dracula*, intended as another Chaney vehicle. Browning's huge success with *Dracula* carried multiple ironies. Chaney's death and pressure from Universal Pictures, obliging him to stick close to the template of the stage adaptation of Bram Stoker's novel once its star Béla Lugosi was cast in the lead, contributed to Browning's reportedly erratic involvement the shoot, with its director of photography Karl Freund gaining credit for rescuing the picture. *Dracula's* enormous, zeitgeist-altering success papered over many sins, and Browning was brought back to MGM, where he had made most of his Chaney vehicles: despite the studio's general resistance to making horror films, the genre's enormous profitability couldn't be ignored, and Browning, as a known quantity, seemed the man to make them. There Browning made *Freaks*, with proved another career-damaging fiasco, before his impudent, self-reflexive remake of *London After Midnight*, *Mark of the Vampire* (1935) and *The Devil-Doll* (1936), his last major horror movies, mixed in with other movies, before his last feature work, 1939's *Miracles For Sale*.



Today *Dracula's* reputation has shrunk greatly, perhaps a little too much: the film's aesthetic of eerie stillness and somnambulist dread convey much of the book's flavour in spite of the clumsy elements transposed from the stage. The central performances from Lugosi and Edward Van Sloan as Professor Van Helsing are still perfect, and even its oddly evasive approach to physical horror gives it a unique charge, as if grazing the edges of truly obscene things. *Freaks* is nonetheless easily Browning's best sound film, and very likely his masterpiece. Browning took inspiration from the short story "Spurs" by Tod Robbins, the tale of a circus bareback rider named Jeanne who marries a dwarf named Jacques for his money whilst actually loving her performing partner Simon. Browning kept little of Robbins' story except for the specific triangle mentioned above and the fateful act of the bride carrying her husband at their wedding feast. *Freaks'* calamitous reception from studio, censors, and eventual audience is an irreducible part of its legend: Thalberg backed the film right through filming but disastrous preview screenings made him cut half an hour from the 90 minute film, and when the film proved only intermittently popular it sold on to the infamous early independent exploitation filmmaker and distributor Dwaine Esper, who added a hyping moralistic scroll to the opening. Today the opening with the MGM logo and the single title card have been restored: the title card proves to be a poster torn through by a hand in a brusque and potent gesture that confirms this film will be something unusual.



The flashback structure harkens back to Robert Wiene's ever-influential *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (1919), and the films share a circus setting and inside-out sense of social reality. A sideshow barker (Murray Kinnell) entices an audience with the strange and shocking story of one of his human exhibits, offering a salutary message to the crowd of gawkers: "You laughed at them, shuddered at them, and yet but for the accident of birth, you might be even as they are," and notes that, "Their code is a law unto themselves – offend one and you offend them all." The barker then moves to the side of a pit wherein resides "the most astounding living monstrosity of all time,..she was once a beautiful woman." The twinned concepts of beauty and monstrosity are immediately tethered in the language of spectacle and showbiz, each necessary to the successful purveying of entertainment-as-business and which also provides a way of living to those who fall at either extreme of the dichotomy. The opening gives away the ultimate twist of the story, as Browning dissolves from the barker noting this particular former beauty was once called "the peacock of the air" to the image of Cleopatra (Olga Baclanova) perched on an acrobatic swing high under the circus big top. The peacock of the air eventually becomes the fowl in the pit in Browning's particularly savage and punitive take on the familiar tradition of dark storytelling, one built around a morality play climaxing with highly ironic punishment. Robbins' gleefully sadistic tale resolved with Jacques murdering Simon and forcing his wife to carry him right across France like the horses she used to ride, digging spurs into her back all the way.



The contradiction built into *Freaks* as a film, the simultaneous demystification and humanist embrace of the “freaks” themselves and the ultimate segue into their nightmarish eruption as a force of strange vengeance, is complex and not entirely free of qualms. But it’s also very much the film’s ultimate subject: the imagery of the freaks chasing down their prey with grim and homicidal purpose ought to be scarcely more disturbing ultimately than the many instances of contempt and verbal abuse turned on them throughout the preceding hour of cinema, with many of the “normal” people portrayed as attractive but loathsome and the “freaks” as a warm, proud, individualistic bunch. An early scene sees a gamekeeper, Jean (Michael Visaroff) leading his estate owner employer (Albert Conti) through forest, gabbling about glimpsing unnatural creatures dancing in stygian scenes in the depths of the estate, only to find the freaks picnicking and at play under the care of Madame Tetrallini (Rose Dione), their mother figure amongst the circus employees. When the intruders disturb their play the “children” as Tetrallini calls them scurry to her in fright despite her admonitions, and the estate owner contrasts the rabid offence of his gamekeeper by graciously giving them permission to stay and not acting at all perturbed. Browning quickly makes the freaks seem normal and defines them as innocents who have to buy their moments in the sun with an expected edge of risk of reviling and rejection.



Browning and his screenwriters Willis Goldbeck and Leon Gordon offer the stable of freaks in the unnamed circus, which is travelling through what seems to be rural France that is the setting for the entire film, as both a world apart but also as just another coherent working community, granted collective integrity and independence precisely and ironically because of their peculiarity. There's no interest in the circus folks' interactions with patrons, with the estate owner and the groundskeeper the only outsiders glimpsed, and they're sufficient to represent the world. Much of *Freaks* is indeed more an oddball, gentle sitcom rather than a horror-thriller, as Browning emphasises the interactions between the circus denizens, some of it encompassing the casual cruelty of the usual towards the unusual, but most of it mediated with the gentler by-play between characters, but with the actual plot simmering away from the earliest frames of the flashback, as Hans (Harry Earles), a midget in the circus, stares longingly up at Cleopatra as she dangles from the highwires, with his fiancé Frieda (Daisy Earles) gazing on helplessly as she registers his smitten distraction. Hans is one of Browning's most habitual character types, a figure who feels his humanity all the more ferociously despite not being perceived as an entire person. "They don't realise that I'm a man, with the same feelings they have." Hans reacts with aggrieved vehemence when he feels his sovereignty and his instinct for protectiveness have been offended, shrugging off the familiar mockery of most of the circus hands but standing up with unbridled rage when they extend the same mockery to Cleopatra when she's playing up to him.



Browning's films with Chaney fixated on figures who both invite and deal out mortification and whose perversities and neuroses are written in the flesh, most particularly the antihero Alonzo of *The Unknown* who elects to have his arms surgically removed so he can emerge from a life of hiding, an act designed to make real his extended performance, and Dead Legs of *West of Zanzibar*, whose physical paralysis is explicitly connected with his moral rot and desire to debase others, as he drives his adopted daughter into forced prostitution in a campaign of revenge. In *Dracula* he mostly passed off the imagery conveying such grotesquery onto the world surrounding the characters, particularly in the visions of Dracula's castle, alive with seething, crawling, scuttling animal life, a visual motif he repeated in *Mark of the Vampire* as well as proffering a multilayered, self-satirising joke about role-playing and the deceptive appeal of woolly-minded narratives. Later, in *The Devil-Doll*, Browning found a new metaphor for exploring the artist figure and his literal human puppets as vehicles of delight and menace. *Freaks* as traits in common with all of these but with an inevitable caveat: Browning's stars are entirely themselves, requiring no make-up or fakery, presenting a wing of show business ironically defined by inescapable reality rather than hiding from it or rewriting it at whim.



Hans also possesses another quality Browning constantly gave his protagonists, a grim need to ultimately confront the moment when he will be exposed and humiliated. Earles had played the leader of the gang in *The Unholy Three*, where he gleefully tore to shreds the enforced childish image for midget actors by playing a vicious, dictatorial master criminal (that film was also based on a Tod Robbins story). The relationship between Hans and Frieda is a core facet of the drama and one where Browning takes their emotional experiences with absolute seriousness and psychological attentiveness, allowing Harry both dignity in his transgressive passion, seeing nothing sick or aberrant about his erotic needs stoked by Cleopatra, even as he enacts the arc of a thousand chumps in noir films like, say, Elisha Cook in *The Killing* (1956), haplessly under the sway of a beautiful, heartless woman who nonetheless hooks him not just by appealing to basic erotic urges but to his complex, masochistic streak, the desire for aspiration and degradation constantly cohabiting. Frieda's maternally styled affection for Hans is the kind of selflessly suffering love that fuelled a thousand romantic melodramas in turn. Browning allows the couple a depth of pathos and emotional intricacy, and his shooting is attentive in visual language to such intensity and schismatic feeling, as when he has Hans abruptly turn from Frieda and walk out through a door where he hovers beyond the threshold, the two contained by frames within frames in their different spaces of angst and longing. "To me you're a man, but to her you're only something to laugh at." Ironically the casting of the two Earles, who were actually brother and sister, is just about the kinkiest touch in the whole movie.





Browning presents both authorial and audience surrogates in the clown Phroso (Wallace Ford) and performing seal trainer Venus (Leila Hyams), who form a quirky romantic coupling as the story unfolds and maintain an entirely equable friendship with the freaks. They contrast many of the other circus workers, like the two jerks who tease the “half-woman half-man” Josephine Joseph. Josephine Joseph fancies the circus strongman Hercules (Henry Victor), who is first introduced breaking up with Venus, who he kicks out of his trailer. In one of the film’s many, notable pre-Production Code touches, they’re depicted quite directly as being merely shackled up together. After storming out on Hercules, Venus pauses to launch into a rhetorical harangue at Phroso, who listens in bewilderment as he strips off his performing costume, before suddenly flaring up, chasing after her, and delivering his own by way of angry consolation. Phroso is Browning’s artist hero, granted an extra degree of awareness in some things but slightly too distracted by his creative process in others, as when he gets too absorbed in building a prop for a gag he thinks up to remember to go on a date with Venus – Browning offers a good visual gag as it seem Phroso is having a bath out in the open before the unabashed Venus, only to pull back and reveal Phoros has cut the bottom out of the bath and has mounted it on wheels, and is only stripped to the waist. This nonetheless segues into Phroso and Venus’ bashful first kiss. Phroso’s acts notably depend on him playing games with his own physical identity, making a quip, “You should’ve seen me before my operation,” and dressing in costume that allow him to suddenly seem headless. Rather than aspiring towards the appearance of strength and normality, his theatrical project is to be more like the freaks.



Much of the film's midsection is similarly given over to portraying the peculiarities of life in this subculture, laced with hints of perverse experience, particularly in the case of the conjoined twins Daisy and Violet (Daisy and Violet Hilton). Daisy is engaged to marry one of the circus performers, the stammering Roscoe (Rosco Ates), who regards Violet with the kind of pecking hostility many a husband would turn on a sister-in-law constantly hanging around, and it's made clear the sisters share sensations: Roscoe warns Violet off drinking too much because he doesn't want a hungover wife. Later, famously, when Violet becomes engaged to a lothario, he kisses her and Daisy quivers in shared ecstasy. This follows Phroso and Venus' kiss and precedes Roscoe and Phroso glimpsing Hans leaving Cleopatra's trailer, in a roundelay of vignettes grazing the edge of the peculiar erotic life of the circus denizens, although in one case of course the appearances are deceiving. Roscoe is introduced to the fiancé, who graciously tells his soon-to-be-brother-in-law, "You must come to see us sometime." Roscoe's anxiety about being unmanned by his unusual marriage is at once rich and understandable considering makes a living himself through blurred gender identity, dressing up every night as a "Roman maiden" in some act. The comedy of manners plays out simultaneous to the darker drama. Roscoe makes Phroso crack up when he comments that Cleopatra "must be going on a diet." In fact Hercules quickly catches Cleopatra's eye and becomes her conspiratorial lover, and when he glimpses Josephine Joseph gazing on in lovelorn disquiet, he punches them in the face, much to Cleopatra's amusement. This is actually the most overt and shocking moment of violence actually seen in the film.



The palpable physical reality of the performers makes *Freaks* as much an historical document as a movie. Some critics have theorised Browning intended *Freaks* as a riposte to the eugenics movement, then at a height in the US, by showcasing the ingenuity and physical genius of his performers, as well as their personalities. Certainly the film's general pitch counters the kind of thinking behind such a movement, seeing the specific worth in the variously abled performers, and comprehending their often amazing physical attributes, which provide Browning with much of his movie. One wry scene sees an acrobat yammer on about his act to Prince Randian, 'The Living Torso,' who has no arms or legs but patiently lights himself a cigarette purely with his mouth, after which he announces proudly, "I can do anything with my mouth." Johnny Eck, 'the Half-Boy,' born with sacral agenesis leaving him without legs, trots about on his hands with an astounding sense of motion and balance. 'The Armless Girl' Frances O'Connor, primly and precisely eating and drinking entirely with her toes whilst chatting with Minnie Woolsey, aka Koo Koo 'The Bird Girl'. Three people with microcephaly, or pinheads as they often were called at the time, appear in the film, including one marvellous vignette of Phroso jesting with the performer Schlitzie (who was male but is referred to in the film as female), in a scene that breaks down any barrier between the movie and capturing Ford and Schlitzie interacting, Schlitzie's bashful delight as Ford teasing her about her new dress before Schlitzie becomes mock-angry with him when he offers to buy one of the others a big hat, giving him a slap, and then a reassuring pat.



*Freaks'* European setting, despite the large number of very American actors in the movie and the strong aura they keep alive through the film from the American circus community Browning had known, situates it squarely in the emerging Hollywood gothic horror movement's air of displaced and cloistered reality. That thin wedge of divorcement allows *Freaks*, like the previous year's *Frankenstein*, to present a thorny commentary on social norms without seeming to. Like James Whale's film it revolves around communal rejection of the "abnormal" and climaxes with an act of mob justice, but where Whale at that point was could only signal a degree of empathy for the monster but had to ultimately side with the wider forces of society that sets out to destroy the destructive reject, Browning wholeheartedly embraces the outsider perspective with all attendant social and political meaning. His freaks are a community apart, both entrapped by the circus but also protected and allowed to be functional within it. That communal identity and integrity have appeal, and Hans, despite becoming independently wealthy thanks to an inheritance, still sticks with the circus because to leave it would be to leave society, a notion confirmed at the very end, although by then it's an act of choice. Once Cleopatra hears about Hans' inheritance, it encourages her to move from merely profiting from Hans' occasional gifts and gaining private entertainment from his ardour, to thinking about claiming his riches through marrying him and then killing him. Frieda accidentally reveals Hans' fortune to Cleopatra when she makes a pathetic entreaty to the willowy beauty not to play around with Hans.



The ready potential for a circus setting as a metaphor for moviemaking and the attendant industry of beauty-manufacturing is something other filmmakers haven't neglected, from Cecil B. DeMille's *The Greatest Show On Earth* (1952) to Sidney Hayers' *Circus of Horrors* (1960). *Freaks* goes deeper and bites harder in beholding the circus as the ideal amphitheatre for such preoccupations, taking to an extreme the negotiation between an audience fused from painful flesh and taunting dreams and its objects of illusory beauty, and the will to tear those objects to pieces when they prove human. For Browning, who had been a part of the larger but in many ways just as insular and segregated world of working entertainment for his entire life, the freaks are a particular example of a loving human commune, and obliges the audience to identify with them as surrogates in the midst of the Depression and the usual business of surviving in the world. Cleopatra and Hercules are mockeries of the usual business of movie stardom and its obliged identification with the usual winners in society, the strong and the beautiful, surviving like vampires off the figurative and literal theft of others' time, money, and aspirations, and repaying with contempt and violence. Baclanova's casting played on her other best-known role in *The Man Who Laughs* (1926), where she played the fetishist Duchess turned on by caressing the edges of ugliness. Here by contrast she plays a person pretending to indifferent to physical difference, but with a similarly extreme evocation of sensual cruelty and egotism.



The film's infamous apotheosis comes when Hans and Cleopatra are married and hold a celebration attended by the friends of the bride, which in Cleopatra's case is just Hercules, and Hans, being his sideshow pals. Browning even gives the episode a title card, as in a silent film, to give it special import: "The Wedding Feast." The circus folk all do their party piece for the sake of entertainment in the giddily cheerful moment, from Koo Koo doing a weird shimmying dance on the table-top, to a sword-swallower and fire-eater doing their bits. Cleopatra wastes no time in beginning her husband's slow death as she poisons the wine he's drinking, and gets swiftly drunk to the point where she scarcely conceals her passion for Hercules and treats Hans with patronising good-humour, pinching his cheeks and pouring him cups of poison. One of the dwarves, Angeleno (Angelo Rossitto), proposes they hold the ritual induction for a new member of their circular with a loving cup, which he passes around whilst trotting along on the feast table, and the freaks begin chanting, "One of us! One of us! Gooble Gobble, gooble gobble!" The song is both childlike and goofy but also nagging and perturbing in its monotone repetition, the sound of the community rejoicing in their own weirdness, a veil dropped. The amplifying rhythm of the editing, both vision and sound, blends the chanting with Cleopatra and Hercules' raucous laughter into a hysterical gestalt, until Hercules comments to Cleopatra, "They're going to make you one of them, my big duck!"



Squinting drunkenly to behold the proceedings more closely, Cleopatra's amusement abruptly wanes, as she stands and beholds the scene now as a stygian vortex threatening to consume her, and she reacts with sudden, noisy rage, bellowing, "You dirty, slimy freaks! Freaks! Freaks!" The horrendous force of Cleopatra's abuse and rage lands like a collective slap to the face, and she flings the contents of the cup at them, driving them out. When Hans protests she's made him feel ashamed, Hercules and Cleopatra compound the humiliation as the strongman scoops him up and deposits Hans on Cleopatra's shoulders, and as she forcibly piggybacks him around the ring Hercules grabs up a trumpet and begins blowing it merrily, at which point Browning mercifully fades out. This scene sees the film's uneasy aesthetic, with its observant, often wry tone interspersed with darker notes of mockery and bigotry, abruptly cohere. The way the feast builds in intensity into a spectacle of rejection and cruelty is almost without parallel, treading the finest of lines in evoking both sides of the equation, the group enthusiasm of the freaks in their ritual of acceptance and the repulsion of Cleopatra. She comprehends the ritual's meaning as a reversal, however malice-free, of the familiar power dynamic: suddenly the secret lode of force is not located in being superior to or even accepting of the freaks, but in their act of accepting, and Cleopatra experiences the moment as, in quintessential Browning fashion, deep humiliation. The party degenerates into a sickly mockery of family dynamics – Cleopatra and Hercules treat Hans as their child in order to reclaim their authority.



The next day, the two “normal” people make their apologies to Hans, using their drunkenness as an excuse and all but demanding acceptance of the apology because it was all “just a joke.” Which points to the key quality *Freaks* remains painfully relevant even as its setting and most of its particulars have faded into vague cultural memory and surreal hyperbole, in its comprehension of the little games of dominion and dominance involving things like who has the right to laugh at who enacted all day, every day in society, with the swaggering bullies playing the aggrieved parties in being obliged to act contrite. Hans, troubled and ill, soon collapses as Cleopatra’s poisoning takes effect, and a doctor only diagnoses ptomaine poisoning. Nonetheless the wedding feast has alerted the other freaks that something sleazy is going on, and they form a silent, attentive cabal who now focus their collective attention of proceedings, hovering with silent, boding interest. Their staring presence discourages Hercules from assaulting Venus when she confronts him about her suspicions. Nonetheless he and Cleopatra agree that Venus must be silenced. Meanwhile it becomes clear that far from oblivious to what the couple are trying to do to him, Hans is now aware he’s being poisoned, as Angeleno visits him as he feigns sickness, and Hans mimics Cleopatra’s assuring ministrations with a queasy smile. As the circus caravan heads on to another town along a muddy road amidst a thunderstorm, Cleopatra continues to poison the bedridden Hans whilst Hercules moves break into Venus’ trailer and kill her.





Here, Browning finally shifts into outright horror imagery and an eruption of action that, whilst hardly arbitrary, nonetheless presents a radical stylistic and thematic reversal appropriate to the theme of tables-turned vengeance. The idea of the “code of the freaks” as mooted by the narrating barker, whilst certainly codswallop invented for the film, nonetheless has the pricking insistence of a campfire tale, an idea promulgated to frighten the young and the foolish into being a tiny bit mindful of what they say and do, and might have had some roots in the real culture of the circus. The thunderstorm provides pummelling rain and flashes of lightning that nicely punctuate the dramatic pivot of the entire movie, when Hans suddenly sits up his bed as Cleopatra tries to ply him with poison and demands the bottle she has in her pocket. Browning weaves an increasingly odd, tense, eerie mood, as Hans’ friends hover and Angeleno blows a creepy tune on an ocarina, before the menace becomes overt, as the visitors unveil a jack-knife and a gun. Baclanova handles the moment when the penny drops with memorable poise, freezing with suddenly wide, glaring eyes and vanishing fake smile as Hans demands the poison bottle. Meanwhile Hercules slips out of his trailer and drops back to attack Venus in hers, whilst Frieda, having eavesdropped on Hercules and Cleopatra making plans, warning Phroso of his intentions. Hercules smashes through the door of Venus’ trailer, but Phroso manages to catch him and the two struggle in the mud. Hercules is skewered with a knife by a dwarf as he throttles Phroso, and the wounded strongman squirms away in the mud as the freaks advance on him. Cleopatra’s trailer hits a broken branch and breaks an axle. Cleopatra flees screaming into the rainy night, chased by Hans and the other little people.



*Freaky's* ploy of sustaining a tone to proceedings that seems at first to belong to a different genre but also calmly sets the scene for a radical shift, and eschewing overt terror and the stylisation of the Expressionist-style Horror film until an eruption of jaggedly ugly violence, has proven a source of real power over the intervening decades, power other genre filmmakers have channelled. Movies like *The Wicker Man* (1973) or *Audition* (1999) with their similarly jarring shifts from sustained eccentricity to hideous reckonings might still exist without it, but its influence feels crucial, as well as its less immediate echoes through art-house filmmakers like Ingmar Bergman and Federico Fellini, who would repeatedly pay tribute to its rarefied evocation of the circus as a place apart from society where social laws become both relaxed and microcosmic. Here too are inklings of David Lynch's *Eraserhead* (1978), with its complete entrance into a nightmare zone where the humanity of the misbegotten and mangled becomes too terrible to bear. The finale, discomfitingly, depends on the sudden reversal of the way the freaks have been presented until now: where before the film normalised them, suddenly Browning offers them scuttling through the rain and mud with insinuating motion, turned to pure nightmare fuel.



On the one hand, this seems to contradict the message of the film until this point, as Browning literally and purposefully makes the freaks dirty and slimy as per Cleopatra's words. But the real charge of the sequence is in the spectacle of the freaks' surrendering of their hard-won humanity for the sake of revenge, a spectacle consistent with Browning's other works: to suddenly see even the gentle Schlitzie as an armed and dangerous being is a genuinely disturbing spectacle. To be human is to also have a dark, dangerous, wilful side as well as a sense of justice, two innate qualities that can't always be easily separated especially with a group such as the freaks who are without recourse, and the freaks get things done as they will. The finale obviously suffered greatly from Thalberg's editing, as well as the postscript: the extant film dissolves from the sight of Cleopatra screaming as she's chased through the woods back to the wraparound sequence of the barker recounting the story. His concluding words embrace ambiguity, as if he's been an unreliable narrator: "How she got that way will never be known. Some say a jealous lover. Others, that it was the code of the freaks. Others, the storm. Believe it or not, there she is." Browning reveals what's left of Cleopatra, now scarred, with both her legs and perhaps her tongue cut away and possibly left insane, making some sort of living jammed into a duck costume for the amusement of the crowd, left subsisting at the nexus of human and inhuman, sense and nonsense, served as erotic travesty.



Originally, it was supposed to be made clear that this was taking place in a dime museum called Tetrallini's Freaks and Music Hall, suggesting a move from Madame Tetrallini to give her stable a permanent home. It was also made clear that Hercules survived the freaks' vengeance but was glimpsed singing in a high voice as another act in the museum, hinting he had been castrated. As it is, *Freaks* elides such clarification, and indeed, the glimpse of the mutilated Cleopatra suffices as a punch-line, with all its grim and perverted implications and final embrace of a total, hysterical devolution into dream-logic and sadistic fantasy. In some prints, the film ends with this as the appropriately ghastly last image, but there's a coda in others depicting Hans now living in a mansion, having cut himself off from other people, only to be visited by Phroso, Venus, and Frieda. Where the barker's narration hints at unreliability, the possibility that everything seen and heard in the account of the duck-girl's creation is phooey, the coda renders it inarguably true. It also tries to mitigate the fact that Hans is seen amidst one of the cabal chasing Cleopatra down. Frieda assures him she knows he tried and failed to turn his friends from their dreadful punishment, and his current isolation is driven by guilt, eased finally by the couple reconciling. The coda might well have been shot by Thalberg in an attempt to mitigate the bleak splendour of the climax with a note of reassurance, and it does work to an extent, in that it gives the romantic triangle that was at the story's heart a nominally happy ending. But nothing can quite win out over the image of the twisted, feathered Cleopatra squawking away in the sawdust...

## Wolf (1994)



Mike Nichols' name isn't usually associated with horror movies, acclaimed as he was for insouciant comedies and elegantly barbed dramas. Jack Nicholson, for his part, had generally avoided horror since his bravura but divisive black comedy performance in *The Shining* (1980). Nonetheless the two men collaborated on *Wolf*, a high-class star vehicle that's also a detour into a genre that was, thanks to the success of films like Martin Scorsese's *Cape Fear* (1991) and Francis Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), suddenly acceptable fare for major mainstream directors. Nichols emerged from this brief movement with the most accomplished movie, eschewing empty spectacle in favour of a well-written and intelligently layered character study wrapped in wolf's clothing. Nicholson plays Will Randall, editor-in-chief of major New York publishing firm MacLeish House. Driving home along a remote and icy road from Vermont after sealing a substantial deal, Will hits a wolf on the road, and thinking it's dead tries to haul it off the road, only to be bitten by the animal, which rejoins a pack that glares eerily out at Will from the fringing forest.



Animal bites it seems are little nothing compared to the ravaging of the encroaching corporate world. Will and his wife Charlotte (Kate Nelligan) are invited by Alden to a party at his upstate mansion only to tell Will he's being shifted into a lesser role: "You're clearly a man of taste and individuality," Alden tells him with not-quite-ravishing honesty, "You're a nice person Will. Thank god I replaced you." Will realises he's been screwed over by his seemingly loyal protégé Stewart Swindon (James Spader), who campaigned relentlessly to get his job. Suffering a panic attack, Will encounters Alden's daughter Laura (Michele Pfeiffer), who despite her air of carefully cultivated scepticism helps him regain his dignity and takes a shine to his old-school qualities. Charlotte displays anger at news of Stewart's treachery, but as Will finds his senses starting to become superhuman, he realises his wife is having an affair with Stewart by catching his scent on her clothes. He catches them together, Will snapping at Stewart's hand when he tries to keep him from entering his apartment building. Suddenly charged with aggressive and wily passion, Will successfully concocts a scheme to force Alden to rehire him and then fires Stewart, whilst also making a play for Laura. But the price he's paying for his new lease on life becomes apparent as he keeps finding evidence he's been up to troubling and possibly murderous things at night, and he consults an expert in animism, Dr Vijav Alezais (Om Puri), who tells him he might be becoming a wolf.



Nichols' only real previous foray into genre film before *Wolf* was the oft-derided thriller *Day of the Dolphin* (1974). *Wolf's* offbeat, character-driven, almost relaxed approach to horror fare fits Nichols far better. Subtracting the lycanthropic aspects, *Wolf* is largely a droll and intimate comedy about a menopausal male who gets his mojo back and learns to negotiate a new world full of predators, filled with intimations of wry parable for Nichols' and Nicholson's fight as heroes of the 1970s New Hollywood trying to weather the corporatizing storm in the '90s town. It's also not that far from the preoccupations of Nichols' other films: a study in brutality in genteel settings like *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966) and the crassness of modern American power as explored in *Catch-22* (1970), and a meditation on an alienated hero's social and sexual volatility a la *The Graduate* (1967) and *Carnal Knowledge* (1971), whilst voting Will more sympathy than Nichols and Nicholson did in the latter film. Like *Postcards From The Edge* (1991) it's a tale of a protagonist in urgent search of a life second act and battling unruly hungers. Unsurprisingly, Nichols prizes interaction and mood over horror movie thrills, which when they come are fairly mild in terms of gore but delivered with real zest. Nichols' approach to the idea of a wolf man running around modern day Manhattan takes some inspiration from other contemporary werewolf movies like *An American Werewolf In London* and *Wolfen* (both 1981). The setting in publishing is deftly and cosily kidded by Jim Harrison and Wesley Strick's screenplay: Will's self-knowledge as an anachronism in mass-market art is made plain when he notes his judgement's been under questions since he thought no semi-literate teenager could stomach Judith Krantz's work, whilst his newly keen nose allows him to pick out coworkers who like to tipple in the morning. Alden agrees Will's attempt to filch away his top writers is an obvious disaster in the making but the writers being writers are too dumb to know it. Prunella Scales has a vivid cameo as one of Will's top writers, an eccentric but no-nonsense force who declares "I cannot write for a conglomerate" and plans to write a book on her favourite restaurants as a contract-fulfilling kiss-off to the new regime. Eileen Atkins and David Hyde Pierce are marvellous as Will's loyal crew, particularly Pierce as he utters, in response to Will's declared intention of talking a line of bullshit to get his rebel action off the ground, "You're my god." Plummer, settling into his late career phase of playing crusty plutocrats, is also terrific playing man who usually tries to drape his easy brutality in smiling roguishness and makes and breaks lives with casual gestures.



Thanks to roles like *Terms of Endearment* (1982), *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987) and *Batman* (1989), Nicholson's star persona was leaning towards cartoonish showmanship and outsized rakish charm, outweighing some of his finer work like *Hoffa* (1992). *Wolf* allowed him to play games with his image whilst offering a fine-grain portrait of a very different sort of man, one who slowly gets in touch with his inner beast, tugging off his wife's bathrobe sash with his teeth, and editing books at high speed without his glasses, but then sweats through a growing fear of where his path is leading. Spader is more obviously cast, having already cornered the market in playing slick rich kids and creeps at this point in his career to a degree he was never quite able to shrug off despite his talent and early propensity for playing likable bad boys, but he gives a great performance in his initial registers of smarm like a snail leaving its trail behind it. Stewart constantly swears fealty to Will as one operation in his all-conquering charm offensives whilst busily undermining him and acquiring what Will has because the predatory instinct is part of his genetic programming, long before he catches Will's taint. He tries to keep up his act even when he knows Will knows what he is ("So why did I say I would?" he muses with fake contrition after Will calls his bluff over his promises to turn down his job), well before he becomes a true monster that could still be considered interchangeable with any cocaine-flushed yuppie, with his feral grin and unsheathed entitlement. The film's comic streak hits its broadest but also most triumphant moment when Stewart confronts Will over his sacking in the men's room only for Will to turn and piss on his suede shoes with the deathless quip, "Just marking my territory."





Special make-up artist Rick Baker gives Nicholson and later Spader perhaps the most minimal werewolf make-up since Henry Hull and Warner Oland in *Werewolf of London* (1935), perhaps because Nichols wanted to avoid familiar hype and allow Nicholson to still be relatable. The approach is also in keeping with a take on the familiar mythos that emphasises the fight for supremacy between the human and wolf. Alezais advises Will in a take on lycanthropy bypassing the usual demonic Manichaeism, with the elderly scholar explaining that “damnation is not a part of my system of beliefs” and that a man’s character will determine what kind of wolf he becomes once the “analogue of the wolf” latches on. Alezais is so taken with the appeal of such transformation in the light of his own imminent mortality that he asks Will to bite him, only for Will to demur with a queasy laugh. Will develops a habit of descending into Central Park and howling the moon, ripping the fingers off a mugger and later finding this gross keepsake in his jacket pocket. There’s the added, small, witty touch of wish-fulfilment as Will’s ravaged hairline steadily thickens throughout the film as he becomes more virile. *Wolf* can be read as a missing link between movies like *The Gambler* (1974) and *Fight Club* (1999) in studying modern disaffection and a need for primal experience lingering in men who feel as if modern life has become a killing cage, with a touch of *Death Wish* (1974) fantasy in suddenly becoming the wildest animal in the urban jungle. More clumsy is a nod to *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1990)-like satire as the family of a black mugger laments lack of police action into their son’s mauling.



The sociological dimensions aren't overemphasised, all things said, as Nichols prefers instead to explore Will's personal experience as one of both liberation and anguish, whilst stopping short of the full-blown angst of classical werewolf movies or David Cronenberg's cruel transformation sagas. Will breaks off with his wife and is drawn into Laura's orbit, a tentative connection given some initial propulsion when the elder Alden makes clear he doesn't approve of Will, sparking Laura's insistently rebellious aspect, as she remains in her father's orbit but keeps a wary distance. With her blend of honed, cynical intelligence and a damaged aspect she likes to fly as a personal flag, including tragic awareness following her miscreant youth and her borderline brother's recent suicide, Laura is one of the more engaging love interest characters in a horror movie, one who embraces playing the rich and beautiful fuck-up and easily outmanoeuvres Will's tilts at her windmill whilst still enjoying them. Pfeiffer, at her career height following her bravura turn as Catwoman in *Batman Returns* (1992), gives a subtler twist on that role as a woman who's a wounded by-product of plutocracy tempted by a scent of the wild as one true path of both rescue and abandon, with one excellent moment when she talks about her brother with Will as he studies his photo: her coltish physique subtly withers, and suddenly she's a sad and fidgety latchkey kid again for a few exposed moments.



Nichols helped create modern Hollywood style with his work on *The Graduate*: his dynamic helicopter-mounted shots, so innovative then, were thoroughgoing cliché by the mid-90s. But they still have effect here as Nichols surveys the nocturnal Manhattan landscape from on high with a lingering, dreamy quality, connecting them with Will's demi-life, the cityscape a wild veldt to stalk prey and find trouble in. Nichols frames Alden and Stewart under a painting of a pair of hunters encouraging a cheetah to fall upon a deer, whilst flecking the film with little moments of observed comedy and detail, from Will waking up to Laura lightly snoring to Alezais offering his choice of sweeteners for his tea including Sweet 'n' Low. Oddly enough, Nichols worked with two major figures from the Italian film industry on the film, with Giuseppe Rotunno photographing and Ennio Morricone providing the score which alternates elegiac brass and pulsing keyboard sounds, and their work imbues a lush aesthetic, hampered a little by dated touches like clumsy early CGI shots of bats winging across the moon.



The storyline finally takes off when, not long after making a pathetic appeal to Will to take her back, Charlotte is found savagely murdered. When two detectives (Richard Jenkins and Brian Markinson) visit Will in his Mayflower Hotel suite where Laura has spent the night, she provides his alibi, but becomes unsure about this as she notices signs Will might well have snuck out. Jenkins, one of several character actors in the film soon to go onto bigger things (also including Allison Janney and David Schwimmer), does his expert job of playing a cop whose body and personality seem to conform to the slouchy wrinkles in his overcoat. Fleeing investigation, Will gets Laura to lock him up in a horse pen in the Alden estate stable and dons an amulet Alezais gave him to repress and cast out the wolf elemental. The main fault of *Wolf* is structural, with Charlotte's death coming a little late in the narrative, and the resulting charge towards the finale as both the cops and the vengefully transformed Stewart hunt down Will is a touch rushed, as if the movie suddenly realises it needs a plot to deliver a fittingly punchy finale.



Despite this, and the slightly goofy wire-fu antics between Nicholson and Spader in their ultimate fight as raging manimals, Nichols does nonetheless build to an exciting and vigorous climax as Will is forced to throw away Alezais' amulet and give up his shot at retaining his humanity to break free and save Laura from Stewart's attempts to rape and maul her: the fight sees Will victorious only for Stewart to resort to a final, literal attempt to stab him in the back, only for Laura to gun him down. The film leaves off with Will now entirely a wolf lurking in the woods and a signal that Laura has caught the taint and will soon join him, communing with him in the deep forest. *Wolf* isn't quite a thoroughgoing genre classic, as it dodges some of the potential in its storyline, but it's so enjoyable and well-done it's hard to dispute the difference. And the very end is perfect: the final close-ups of Pfeiffer are almost cabalistic in the intensity of their faith in both her transfixing, vulpine beauty and its power as a visual lodestone for the call of the wild.



## The City of the Dead (1960) / Night of the Eagle (1961)

*aka Horror Hotel / aka Burn, Witch, Burn!*



**Directors:** John Llewellyn Moxey / Sidney Hayers

**Screenwriters:** George Baxt / George Baxt, Charles Beaumont, Richard Matheson

*The City of the Dead* and *Night of the Eagle* present two small gems of horror cinema, closely connected by the moment of their making and their basic genre film business. Both are products of the flourishing horror cinema in Britain inspired by the success of the Hammer Horror films. Each was directed by an interesting filmmaker well-known to genre fans but few others. *The City of the Dead* was written by the mystery writer George Baxt, who went on to co-author the script of *Night of the Eagle* with Richard Matheson and Charles Beaumont. Both films offer horror narratives set firmly in the present day and involving witchcraft. Both are partly set in academia, hardly the usual location for horror apart from the reaction of the odd flunked student. Both are evidently influenced by other, recent great and popular films but have their own specific charm. Both were awkwardly retitled for American release. But the two films are quite distinct in other ways, exemplifying how movies can be both very similar in their basics and yet divergent in approach: *The City of the Dead* is a lesson in making the most of a miniscule budget to weave a classical brand of atmospheric dread, whilst *Night of the Eagle* is a study in psychological tension and metaphorical power.



*The City of the Dead* represented an early foray into producing British genre cinema by the entrepreneurial American producers Milton Subotsky and Max J. Rosenberg, about to become two of the more consequential figures in that rarefied realm. The duo first collaborated in the US on the rock'n'roll craze-exploiting film *Rock, Rock, Rock* (1956) and a handful of other B-movies. The duo reached out to Hammer Films honcho Michael Carreras, trying to entice his involvement with a new version of *Frankenstein* Subotsky had written. Carreras became interested but eventually cut out Subotsky and Rosenberg, and his *The Curse of Frankenstein*, upon release in 1957, proved an earthquake that permanently revived horror cinema as well as, in the short term, making the UK the epicentre. Subotsky and Rosenberg moved to avenge themselves by moving to Britain and forming the production entity Vulcan Films, which would eventually be reorganised into the better-known Amicus Films, which tried thereafter to be a rival to Hammer. Amicus would produce an enjoyable if interchangeable series of anthology horror movies like *Dr. Terror's House of Horrors* (1964), *The House That Dripped Blood* (1970), and *Tales From The Crypt* (1972), and sci-fi flicks like *Dr. Who and the Daleks* (1965) and Kevin Connor's Edgar Rice Burroughs trilogy. Baxt had originally written the script as the intended pilot of a TV series to star Boris Karloff, and when Subotsky took it over he performed rewrites, adding a subplot and giving himself story credit, whilst the film's stringent £45,000 budget was partly obtained from Nottingham Football Club.





For a director, Subotsky hired John Llewellyn Moxey, who at 35 had recently become a TV director. Moxey's knowledge of how to conjure a convincing drama out of the most stringent needs definitely helped with *The City of the Dead*. The film kicks off with a prologue that's intriguingly similar to the beginning of the same year's *La Maschera del Demonio*, and anticipates the like of *Witchfinder General* (1969) and *The Devils* (1971) in evoking the bleak history of witch hunts and executions as a gruelling and gruesome social phenomenon. Moxey opens with the townsfolk of the small Massachusetts village of Whitewood in 1692 dragging Elizabeth Selwyn (Patricia Jessel) to be burned at the stake as a witch. Selwyn screams out for help to one of the men in the crowd, Jethrow Keane (Valentine Dyall), but when asked by the town elder supervising the execution (Fred Johnson), if he consorts with her Jethrow denies it. When Selwyn is tied to the stake and set on fire, she and Jethrow both make appeal to Satan to help her, and Selwyn begins to laugh with pleasure as thunder rings out as if answering her prayer, whilst the baying crowd chant, "Burn witch, burn!"



Moxey cuts to history professor Alan Driscoll (Christopher Lee) enthusiastically repeating the same chant as he instructs his students on the event in contemporary times, to the rapt fascination of prize pupil Nan Barlow (Venetia Stephenson), and the wry lack of interest of her boyfriend sitting in on the lecture, Bill Maitland (Tom Naylor), whose quips infuriate the teacher. Nan's brother Richard Barlow (Dennis Lotis), who is himself a teacher at the college, quickly gets into an argument with Driscoll, as his own hard-headed lack of credulity and interest in the historical events clashes with Driscoll's preoccupation, as Driscoll notes the historical record suggests the lingering influence of malefic forces in Whitewood, which also happens to be his home town. Nan is despite Bill and Richard's scorn so interested in the seemingly irrational subject that she tells them and Driscoll she wants to travel through New England during the term break and collect independent research on the topic, including a visit to Whitewood. Driscoll gives her directions and the name of a hotel in the town to stay at, and Nan heads off after promising to meet them at a cousin's house in two weeks. On the rough and misty road to the town, Nan picks up a hitchhiker, a tall, plummy, sardonic man heading to Whitewood and who just happens to look just like the long-ago Jethrow Keane.



Nan is briefly perplexed when, upon arrival in Whitewood, Jethrow seems to slip out of the car without her noticing, but she soon books into the hotel, The Raven's Inn, run by Mrs Newless, who also happens to look rather like Elizabeth Selwyn. The hotel has a plaque announcing it stands on the spot where Selwyn was burned. The town of Whitewood is a quiet, fog-shrouded place with a neglected church, a blind and ominously advising pastor, Russell (Norman MacOwan), and silent, glaring citizenry. Nan does encounter the blessedly normal Pat Russell (Betta St. John), the granddaughter of the pastor, who's just recently returned to the town and opened an antique store. Pat digs out a book from her collection entitled *A Treatise on Devil Worship in New England* in trying to satisfy Nan's researching needs, and Nan arranges to borrow it for the duration of her stay in town. Back in the hotel, however, Nan begins noticing strange incidents, as bracelet she likes to where vanishes, a dead bird skewered with a pin turns up in a drawer, and a sprig of woodbine appears on her door, all details that happen to recur in the historical documents recounting the human sacrifices Selwyn and her coven liked to perform. And there's also the little matter of some eerie singing emanating up through the floorboards. When she finds the key to the old hatch in the floor of her room dangling from her window, Nan descends into a labyrinth under the church, where she's suddenly grabbed by some robed and hooded figures and dragged to a ceremonial altar, where she's laid prostrate and stabbed to death by Mrs Newless, who confirms she is actually Selwyn.



The pleasures of *The City of the Dead* walk a line that can strike many as campy, with its air of threadbare charm and almost comically oblivious characters. A brief vignette of Stephenson parading about in 1950s bodice and garters is a flash of sexploitation that's both amusingly obvious as a ploy and dated in that women often wear less on the main street of my town these days. But it's the kind of movie that's held together by the conviction everyone involved wields. The ploy of setting up Nan as the apparent heroine of the movie and then killing her off sees *The City of the Dead* often compared with the looming example of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960). Given the filming and release of the two movies it seems unlikely *Psycho* had direct influence – Moxey's film started shooting before Hitchcock's – making *The City of the Dead* more significant and ballsy in this move. *Psycho* nonetheless announced a great genre sea-change, auguring in today's general norm for the horror movie, built around lurking killers dealing out gruesome demises in modern, mundane locales, rather than the classical arsenal of supernatural monsters and stylised historical, foreign, or psychologised settings. *The City of the Dead* mediates the two ages with its simple but sufficient storyline. Another of the film's obvious quirks is being a British film set in the US, which had been done before and is chiefly notable in this case for Lee doing a surprisingly good accent. Devil worshipper movies had been relatively uncommon before the late 1950s in Horror cinema except in when safely relegated to exoticised forms like the many misconstruing takes on voodoo, in part because they tended to be stringently censored, testified by the edits *The City of the Dead* underwent and the controversy sparked by *The Devil Rides Out* (1967) a few years later. One of the few previous major examples was Edgar G. Ulmer's *The Black Cat* (1934).



*The City of the Dead* avoids playing out as a kind of drive-in take on *The Crucible* insofar as it makes no bones about the supernatural nature of the events, even as it offers a sliver of sympathy for the devil as the viciousness of the repression of the witches scarcely seems preferable to any evil they can deal out, and the result is perpetually dooming Whitewood to subsist as a canker subsisting into the officially purified modern world. Witchcraft as a subject was a potentially fruitful one for genre filmmakers as it tackled the basic schism between the audience's scepticism, backed up modern psychological and political understanding, pitted against a chthonic credulity. Despite the American setting, *The City of the Dead* also gave birth to a stratum of peculiarly British horror films involving heroes stumbling into strange communities where arcane cults and mores rule, a plot pattern that neatly encompasses a very British sense of the tension between communal mores and upsetting outsiders, modernity disturbing the balanced tensions underlying a fantasy vision of a settled, ordered, homey past. On came straight-laced variations like *Devils of Darkness* (1965) and *The Witches* (1966), ambitious and wilfully odd variations in *The Wicker Man* (1973) and *Kill List* (2011), and lampoons like *Bloodbath at the House of Death* (1983) and *Hot Fuzz* (2007).



Moxey had been born in Argentina, one port of call where his family had depots for their coal and steel business. Moxey underwent training at Sandhurst, the famous British military college, and fought in World War II, but left the armed forces after the war already world-weary at 20, and decided to instead realise a childhood ambition to get into show business. Moxey only made a handful of feature films in his long career, but they include several cultish gems of low-budget filmmaking, as he followed *The City of the Dead* up with the fascinatingly antiheroic World War II spy story *A Foxhole in Cairo* (1960), the gritty *Hands of Orlac* variation *Hands of a Stranger* (1964), and a string of Edgar Wallace-derived thrillers including *Circus of Fear* (1966), a thriller enlivened by Moxey's flashes of visual wit, including Klaus Kinski dying with a huge leering mask in his grip, a great opening sequence depicting an armoured car robbery on Tower Bridge, and a general glaze of drizzly, moody British charm. When the low-budget UK movie scene began to dry up, cheating Moxey of any further chance of breaking out into higher-profile movies, he returned to work entirely in television and soon moved to Hollywood, working on shows as varied and beloved as *The Saint*, *The Avengers*, *Mission: Impossible*, *Mannix*, *Hawaii 5-0*, *Magnum, P.I.*, *Miami Vice*, *Murder, She Wrote*, and the pilot episode of *Charlie's Angels*, as well a number of telemovies. His signal success in the latter field was the hugely popular telemovie *The Night Stalker* (1972), which birthed the cult TV series starring Darren McGavin.



Moxey's great eye, backed up by Desmond Dickinson's excellent black-and-white photography, and ability to conjure a powerful atmosphere with minimal elements, are clear right from the opening shot in the Whitewood town square, coals burning in a metal brazier looming in the foreground with sketchy shapes of a bent tree and town buildings just visible through the heavy pall of fog, out of which resolves a mob of period Puritans on the warpath. Moxey then carefully orchestrates the ritual condemnation that follows as Selwyn is first seen, dragged out from the prison with her imperiously sensual and boding gaze cast down upon the momentarily arrested villagers: the camera scans their stricken faces for a moment before settling on one woman who hisses, "Witch!" and earns a gob of spit from Selwyn in the eye, kicking off the baying abuse again. When Selwyn sets eyes on the waiting stake she stares in dread, and Moxey has two more harridans of the village loom in the frame, one pointing to it and crying, "Burn the witch!" Selwyn's terror, crying out Jethrow's name, and the puckered rage of the villagers, puts one immediately on the imminent victim's side, but Selwyn is nonetheless exactly what they think she is, and she makes her pact with Lucifer as the flames lick her flanks (much of her vow was cut out of the film's American release under the title *Horror Hotel*). Moxey cranks up the note of murderous hysteria as his camera tilts and swoops up to the variably frantic, blood-lusting, wailing faces of the crowd whilst Selwyn, sensing her plea has been heard, begins to laugh with malefic joy.



The rest of the film's first half revolves around Nan as the blonde, creamy-skinned co-ed falling under the spell of a mystique of devilry and atavistic forces more powerful and enticing in their dank vividness than the bright lights of the world she knows. The film's cramped budget, as is often the case, is cleverly employed to help build the drama's sequestered mood, from the relative normality of Driscoll's lecture through to Nan's encounters with the odd citizens of Whitewood, where the signs of lurking threat and oneiric eccentricity seem so overt one could rightly expect any visitor to run away screaming. The undercurrent of weird intensity Driscoll forges in his lecture is lightened by Bill's jokes ("I'll bring the matches.") which feel, in their way, distantly anticipatory of the self-aware tone of something like *Scream* (1996). The recurring use of Ken Jones' jazz music for diegetic music is an amusing touch but also one that Moxey uses with a degree of cleverness, managing to seem both drowsily seductive whilst also letting sounds of the ordinary, current world infiltrate Whitewood and its surrounds. Moxey's glimpses of a number of couples dancing in the cramped lobby of the Raven's Inn recalls the similarly eerie and stylised glimpses of a stygian dance in Carl Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932) just as the story recalls Dreyer's *Day of Wrath* (1943). Moxey makes the dance, to which Nan is invited by Selwyn in her guise as Mrs Newless, seem at once romantically inviting and quietly creepy and unreal, like a show put on Nan's sake, which it is: when Nan emerges from her room after getting dressed, the crowd is revealed to have suddenly broken up, the music they were dancing to abruptly turned off: Nan's solitude suddenly feels dangerous. The only potential ally Nan seems to have is the chambermaid Lottie (Ann Beach), who cannot speak but still tries to warn her, only to be foiled because Selwyn keeps a close and threatening watch on her.





Whitewood seems a place where the sun never comes up and the fog never lifts, a cute way to mask production shortcomings but also providing a deliciously iconic genre film setting. Whitewood is the essential Horror movie ghost town, a throwback to the purely stylised, set-bound variety of horror movie setting once seen in the Universal Pictures horror movies like *The Wolf Man* (1941), the kind where ground mist ran like rivers and twisted trees loomed like withered crones doing interpretive dance. Roger Corman seems to have emulated it for his *The Haunted Palace* (1963), and indeed whilst *The City of the Dead* isn't based on H.P. Lovecraft like the Corman film, it is perhaps the first movie to capture a Lovecraftian mood in its vision of a fetid, forgotten corner of New England where strange cabals meet and dark forces hold sway. John Carpenter probably likewise remembered it for his own Lovecraftian riff, *In The Mouth of Madness* (1994). Moxey's great images continue, most particularly in a recurring shot where first Nan and then Pat drive along the road to Whitewood in the foggy dark and see Jethrow picked out in their car headlights, standing at a crossroads, filmed from within the car: technically clever, this motif also helps Moxey firm up the urban legend texture he's chasing, presenting the kind of frisson that's come over anyone who's ever driven along a dark country road at night. The shot occurs a third and fourth time when Barlow and then Bill drive to Whitewood, but do not see Jethrow. Bill instead sees the looming supernatural vision of the laughing Selwyn on the stake, so disorienting that he swerves off the road and crashes into a tree.



The build-up to Nan's sacrifice is particularly good in vignettes like the dance and Nan's spacy, somnambulant voice as she recognises it's Candlemas Eve, one of the two favoured nights for witches' Sabbaths. The noted plot detail that Nan's stolen brooch allows the witches to "call" her at least papers over the question as to why someone as smart and well-versed in this lore as Nan doesn't flee the moment a clear pattern starts accumulating. Of course, there's another dimension to this, in Nan's desire to know, with all its quasi-erotic underpinnings. She falls under the intellectual spell of the charismatic Driscoll, inspiring her to travel to a place that represents the dark reservoir of history's septic sense of sexual knowledge and falls prey to waiting fiends, amongst whose number Driscoll eventually reveals himself, his face becoming visible under the cowl as he and Selwyn lean over Nan just before killing her. Later Driscoll is depicted performing a minor sacrifice with a caged bird in a sanctum in back of his academic office, a moment to which Lee applies all of his grim-browed conviction. Driscoll delivers a memorably simple epigram in riposte to Barlow's forceful insistence on rationalism: "The basis of fairy tales is reality. The basis of reality is fairy tales." One significant common and immediate precursor for *The City of the Dead* and *Night of the Eagle* is Jacques Tourneur's *Night of the Demon* (1957), with both films mimicking that film's heavy emphasis on the clash between realist and mystical worldviews, with a particular pertinence to the way Horror as a genre suddenly came roaring back at the time after the craze for science fiction earlier in the decade. In turn, Val Lewton's films with Tourneur and others in the 1940s hover in the background, and *The City of the Dead* channels something of a Lewton feel in the moments quiet and subtle strangeness in pockets of detached reality, the dialogue between moments of quiet, even hominess, and pressing threat.



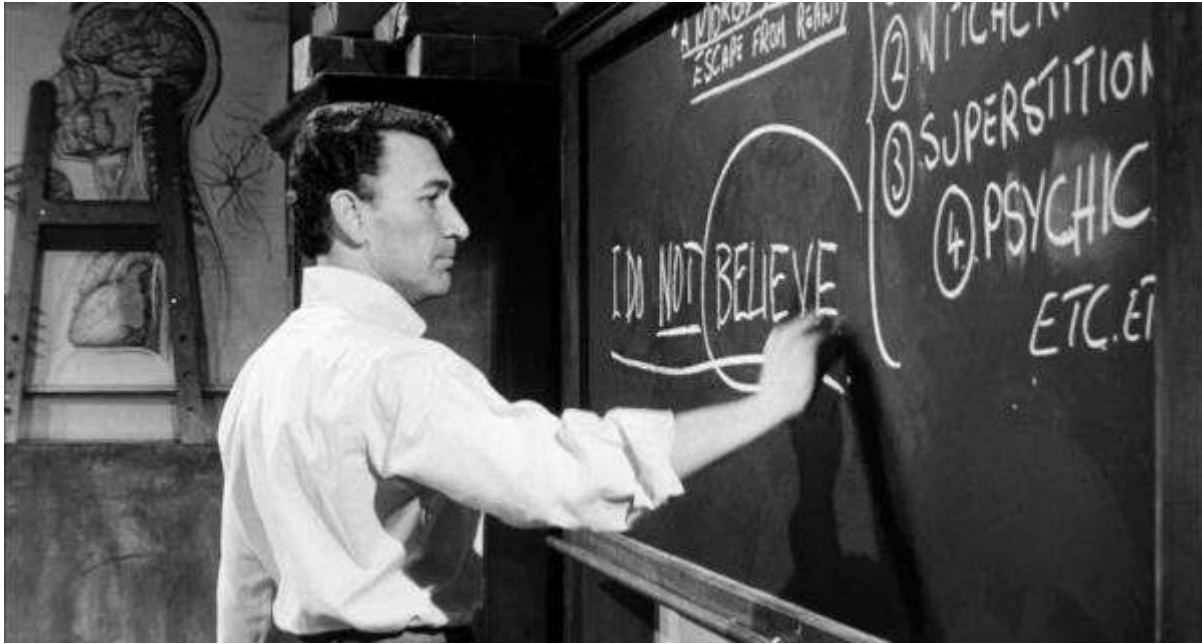
Moxey performs a jagged jump cut from Selwyn bringing the knife down on Nan to her and Barlow's cousin slicing her birthday cake at a party in her house, where Barlow and Bill wait with increasing unease for Nan. Once it becomes clear she's late, they set in motion an investigation, and some detectives visit The Raven's Inn. Selwyn-as-Newless claims Nan left without any notice without paying her bill. Pat reclaims the book she loaned Nan from Selwyn and later travels to Barlow and Driscoll's college to talk with them, and after Driscoll fails to throw her off her talk with Barlow and Bill convinces them to head to Whitewood and look around for themselves. On the return journey Pat picks up Jethrow, making it clear she's the anointed sacrifice for the Witches' Sabbath, a particularly apt victim for the witches as she's a descendent of the original, cursed villagers. After crashing thanks to the tormenting vision whilst following Barlow to Whitewood, Bill crawls out of his wrecked and burning car and stumbles towards the town, whilst Barlow himself checks into the Raven's Inn and then encounters Reverend Russell, who explains how the walking dead now control the town, but also recounts the formula for their destruction. Lottie is murdered by Jethrow and Selwyn when they catch her trying to leave a note for Barlow, whilst Bill manages despite his grave injuries to stumble into town just as Barlow finds Pat kidnapped and the Reverend dead.



The climax is suitably breathless and gripping as Moxey brings things home with ingenious cheapjack hype. Barlow searches for Pat, stumbling across Lottie's corpse hidden in the labyrinth under the hotel, before managing to snatch Pat away from the sacrificial altar. The pair flee up into the cemetery only to be met there by more of the coven: in a deliciously campy-creepy shot, the Satanists lift their clawing hands from under their swathing robes to grab hold of their prey. Forced to wait until "the hour of thirteen," that is an extra toll of the bell at one a.m., before they can kill Pat and claim another year's extension on their undead existence, the coven are obliged to stand around just long enough for Bill, obedient to Barlow's shouted instructions, to pluck out a crucifix from the cemetery ground and wield it as a weapon of faith whilst Barlow pronounces a ritual adjure. Even a notably good bit of knife-throwing from Selwyn, planting her sacrificial dagger in Bill's back, doesn't put him down for good, and the coven all erupt in flames screaming as the shadow of the cross falls on them, save Selwyn herself, who flees. Bill finally dies muttering Nan's name. Barlow and Pat chase Selwyn, only to find her in The Raven's Inn under the plaque describing her death, where she's become a burned and blackened corpse.



Despite its many intersecting lines of story and theme, *Night of the Eagle* takes a very different approach. *Night of the Eagle* is more obviously made in the mould of *Night of the Demon*, down to its title (and borrowing that film's cast member Reginald Beckwith), but it's actually an adaptation of Fritz Leiber's 1943 novel *Conjure Wife*. Leiber's book, one of the most famous and influential horror novels ever written, had already been adapted once as the *Weird Woman* (1944), a solid entry in the enjoyable series of B-movies starring Lon Chaney Jr and made under the imprimatur of the radio show *Inner Sanctum*. Baxt redrafted the script, which had originally been written by the lauded genre writers Richard Matheson and Charles Beaumont as a collaborative project: both men were connected at the time with the TV series *The Twilight Zone* and Corman's Edgar Allan Poe film series. Matheson and Beaumont's love of the novel acknowledged how it presented an ideal model for blending mundane realism and suggestive supernatural menace, and it's had the same impact on writers since. The movie project was first taken up by Corman's usual backers at American International Pictures, and farmed out to their regular production partners Anglo-Amalgamated. When the film was released in the US by AIP under the title *Burn, Witch, Burn!*, it came with an awful opening narration provided by the inimitable Paul Frees and new opening credits that removed Baxt's name.



The Scots-born director Sidney Hayers, who worked as a top-flight film editor in the 1950s, made his directing debut with *The White Trap* (1959) and quickly forayed in horror with the impressively Sadean *Circus of Horrors* (1959). Hayers' directing career ultimately proved disappointing, rarely living up to the remarkable control of *Night of the Eagle*, although he would later make the striking wilderness drama *The Trap* (1966), starring Oliver Reed and Rita Tushingham, which would transfer *Night of the Eagle*'s fascination with marriage as a kind of loving war in depicting a rudely matched couple surviving life on the frontier, and the lurid but effectively disturbing and atmospheric rapist-on-the-loose thriller *In The Devil's Garden*, aka *Assault* (1971), a film that would return to a school setting with a rather darker and more direct approach to the idea of fetid institutional repression and vicious abuse feeding each-other. Hayers had a potent feel for percolating sexual hysteria and agents of monstrous will, both of which inform *Night of the Eagle*. The film commences with protagonist Norman Taylor (Peter Wyngarde), a professor in a small, unnamed English college, lecturing his psychology students in matters of ritual belief and custom, in the face of which he maintains a ruthless scepticism, writing the phrase "I Do Not Believe" on the blackboard, a missive that will turn significant much later, but is offered here as a kind of reverse magic spell to exorcise all demons of irrationalism. Norman is much enjoyed by his students, most particularly his smitten prize pupil Margaret Abbott (Judith Stott), much to the aggravation of her boyfriend Fred Jennings (Bill Mitchell), a much less enthusiastic student.



Norman's male colleagues Lindsay Carr (Colin Gordon) and Harvey Sawtelle (Anthony Nicholls) are enormously admiring of their young but brilliant and energetic colleague, and it seems he's going to land the chair of their department. Harvey's wife Evelyn (Kathleen Byron) is teeth-grindingly angry about Norman's seemingly inevitable rise. Her sister Flora (Margaret Johnston) is Lindsay's wife and also a professor at the college as well as Margaret's guardian, and also walks with a limp. She seems more sanguine, and likes commenting on it all with teasing, ironic distance. The three couples and the college dean Gunnison (Beckwith) and his wife come to Taylor's house for a night playing bridge, where the factional tensions register despite the air of genteel entertainment, with Norman's wife Tansy (Janet Blair) playing the expert hostess but registering a certain jumpiness. Once their visitors leave and Norman goes to bed, Tansy makes excuses to begin a frantic search of the living room. Eventually she finds a tiny fetish figure pinned within a lampshade. She burns this and, relieved, heads off to bed. But Norman begins to find many similar items around the house, these all planted by Tansy herself, including a jar full of dead spiders. When he confronts Tansy about them she tries to dismiss them as keepsakes of a journey they once took to Jamaica to investigate voodoo practices, but Norman is unconvinced. Eventually the fraying and desperate Tansy admits they're totems she uses to ward off forces of black magic she believes are constantly assaulting them, combating them using methods she was taught by a bokor named Carubias and which she first turned to when Norman almost died in an accident. Norman forces Tansy to burn them all, despite her conviction this will leave them undefended.



The key beauty of Leiber's novel was the contrast between the insular, seemingly placid, rather dry world of the little academic grove that was its setting and the invocation of vast, powerful, inchoate forces, strongly anticipating some of Shirley Jackson's fiction, and the clever way this contrast was joined to a story that played witty games with the basic theme expressed by the old saying, "Behind every great man is a good woman." Leiber took that idea to an extreme in the tale of Tansy warding off the magical attacks by her fellow campus wives in an ongoing contest to fuel success or impose ruin. *Night of the Eagle* simplifies this aspect to a degree, as here Tansy only has one real foe, although the faculty politics are still drawn with amusing, stinging accuracy, particularly once Norman is exposed to malevolence involving jealousy and misdirected passion which could well manifest normally in any school setting, and the potential professional dangers that can befall a man like Norman Taylor feel all accurate, perhaps even more today than in 1961. Once Norman makes Tansy burn all her protections, including one she keeps in a locket with her photo that results, with particularly ominous import, in the photo being burnt too, nothing seems to change, and Tansy is briefly willing to entertain the possibility she really was being ruled by her anxiety. But soon events begin to rattle Norman's assurance: he gets a lewd phone call from Margaret, is almost run down by a lorry as he enters the college, and is threatened by Fred. When Margaret, in a volatile state, tells Flora that Norman raped her, Norman confronts her and gets her to retract her statement, and she flees after tearfully telling Norman, "I hate you!" Shortly after, Fred pulls a gun on him. Norman manages to get it away from him, but the swiftly mounting number of sudden calamities starts to make Norman think Tansy had a point after all.





*Night of the Eagle* offers similar characterisations to *The City of the Dead* – Margaret and Fred resemble Nan and Bill as your basic Jane and Joe College, if here pushed through the gates of self-combusting neurosis by forces beyond their ken. Norman is a more high-powered and abrasive version of Barlow, similarly dismissive of the supernatural but far more zealous about his self-image as an unshakably lucid mind. Hayers presents him as the acme of a certain ideal of a high modernist intellectual, fascinated by the meaning behind cultural arcana but also dismissive and contemptuous of any belief system contrary to his own, his own neo-puritan project one of ridding the world of its shadows. The crux of the drama is the relationship between Norman and Tansy, as an only slightly intensified study in heterosexual marriage as both a meeting and clash of personalities and ways of seeing and knowing. Norman's aggressive confrontation of Tansy's beliefs ape a familiar pattern in horror movies, of the hard-headed man correcting female inanities, reacting to Tansy's supernatural dabbling as if she were a closet gambler or alcoholic, only to teasingly invert the certainties as Norman becomes increasingly frantic and unmoored. Equally often in horror movies the anxious woman proves correct, and here that turn is given hyperbolic force. The phrase "It got on my nerves" recurs in the movie, and Hayers conveys that feeling of locked-in, up-close, frayed-nerve portent, from the early scene of Tansy searching for the hidden fetish she knows her enemy has brought into her home with increasingly febrile purpose. Cinematographer Reginald Wyer's zoom lensing keeps pushing closer and collapsing perspective to ratchet up the visual impression of things pressing in, whilst William Alwyn's score unsubtly but effectively matches with its own agitating force.



The title comes from the imposing eagle sculpture that sits ominously perched above the main entrance to the college, directly outside the window of Flora's office: for much of the film it seems the emblem of the many raptors eager to peck over Norman's career bones. The aura of threat becomes more immediate when Norman receives a tape recording of one of his lectures about supernal ritual practice as a psychological phenomenon, and tries to make Tansy listen to it. His professorial words dismissing all irrational forces are undercut by a strange, undulating sound dubbed in underneath it, a sound Tansy recognises as a sorcerous invocation. She switches the tape recorder off, much to Norman's anger, but the phone rings and the same sound comes through the receiver, and some monstrous form that releases a grotesque shriek thuds against the front door. Tansy manages to yank the phone cord from its connection just as Norman opens the door, and after being buffeted by a blast of the rainy night sees the caller has vanished. Here, as elsewhere in the film, Hayers generates remarkable hysterical energy that builds swiftly from baseline calm, aided by Wyngarde and Blair's terrific performances, his hawkish features and hatchet-like force of personality colliding with her bright-eyed and vibrant anxiety, and the forceful editing rhythm betraying Hayers' background.



Now entirely convinced that the enemy means to destroy Norman, Tansy gives him a laced drink and makes him recite words that will transfer any curse onto her, as a selfless gesture in her hope to die in his place: such gestures are the flipside to the tension between the couple as each is finally revealed to be willing to go to any length to save the other. When Norman awakens he finds Tansy gone, and figures she's heading to the seaside cottage they own. He manages to catch up with the bus she's taken but crashes off the road when forced to swerve out of the way of an oncoming truck. One the lorry drivers is a black West Indian immigrant (Frank Singuineau), and Norman awakens to focus on the totemic necklace around his neck, an odd little touch that obviously harkens back to Tansy's embrace of magic in Jamaica whilst also suggesting the manifold ocean of belief Norman floats upon in a manner that's correlated with the reverse colonisation of England, the nascent multicultural state. Norman shrugs off his injuries and continues in a hire car, but is too late to reach the cottage before nightfall.



Hayers keeps the tension mounting as the narrative begins to move with breathless pace, and delivers another great little set-piece here: Norman, realising he might find Tansy in the local churchyard thanks to a note he finds in one of her occult books, dashes along the moonlit beach, unknowingly passing Tansy who sits blank-eyed and motionless behind a boulder. When he reaches the churchyard cemetery, he claws his way through the old and overgrown tombstones and enters into a crypt. There Norman desperately performs a ritual to reclaim Tansy, whilst Hayers cuts to her robotically walking into the ocean as if to drown herself under the evil influence. Finally Norman gives up in a flurry of despair, only to turn and see Tansy standing in the crypt doorway, sodden, rigid, and staring-eyed, still under trance but having obeyed Norman's ritual call back out of the water. Hayers manages here to deploy classical genre imagery – the craggy coastline and the lonely cottage, the gnarled and ancient graveyard, the creepy sight of the mesmerised Tansy returned – but still not any sign of literalised menace. Reginald Wyer's grainy-gleaming, chiaroscuro photography and tight lensing enforce the tunnel-visioned reality of the characters as well as heightening the drama whilst also remaining real-feeling.



Indeed, *Night of the Eagle* manages something that *Night of the Demon*, thanks to that film's producer-enforced glimpses of the demon, never quite got to do, in that it occurs in a grey zone of credulity: if the mood of *The City of the Dead* feels Lewton-like, *Night of the Eagle* is closer to Lewton's ideal on a dramatic level in keeping things ambiguous. As dialogue throughout in the film hints, everything we see might be the result of entangled hypnotism, hysteria, and coincidence, even after the spectacular climax, although of course that kind of influence wielded with a malicious design could be scarcely less frightening than the occult. Norman takes Tansy to a doctor (Norman Bird) whilst she's still under a powerful influence, but she manages to utter a few words, asking him to take her home. There, she wakes up, and everything seems perfectly normal again. But once Norman goes to sleep, Tansy goes into a trance again, leaves bed, goes into the kitchen, selects a big knife, and sets out to stab Norman to death. Norman manages to fight her off and notices that as she's being compelled she walks with a limp, and he realises that Flora is the sender. After Tansy collapses and Norman puts her to bed, he goes to the college and seeks proof, finding a photo of him and Tansy attached to a fetish.



When Flora enters her office, Norman confronts her and puts on the tape recording of his lecture with the incantation, forcing her to shut it off. Flora then drives Norman to flee by building a deck of cards and affecting to set fire to the Taylors' house; at that moment their cat sets off a conflagration that begins burning down the house with Tansy in it. Attentive filmgoers might then and now have expected Byron, so specifically associated with her role as the crazed nun in *Black Narcissus* (1947), to prove the agent of satanic mischief, but her presence proves a red herring. Johnston's grinning malevolence nonetheless galvanises the climax, the sardonic quality her Flora had in the early scenes now touched with hints of lunacy and sadism as well as proud pleasure as she teases Norman about having his cage rattled by "just a silly woman," revelling in the puppeteer power she can wield over people and institutions in compensation for her debilitation and general sexism, although of course she has no qualms about making her own ward a plaything for her own ends.



Flora turns the tape recording on and broadcasts it over the school loudspeaker system, and Norman begins to see the eagle statue seeming to relocate itself constantly as he tries to leave the college grounds. The statue soon comes fully to life, a colossal bird of prey swooping from on high with eyes set on ripping him to pieces. Ripping open Norman's jacket and a chunk from the head of a statue, the beast soon crashes through the college front door when Norman tries to lock it out. Even here, as the film seems to finally indulge special effects and a literal manifestation of the sorcerer's art, Hayers is judicious and the effects are good with smart use of a real bird and models, apart from one unfortunate shot where the string tied to guide the bird is visible. Wyngarde's performance, which hints at the edge of hysterical energy in Norman in the first scene and gradates it throughout, reaches its tousled, sweat-caked apogee as Norman is reduced to screaming terror, backing against the blackboard in his classroom as the bird corners him there, his squirming incidentally erasing the word "not" from the slogan he wrote there at the beginning.



Norman is saved from the manifestation by Flora's husband bemusedly entering her office and complaining about the noise on the loudspeakers: Lindsay switches the audio back to the office, alarming Flora as she plainly fears the curse might rebound, whilst for Norman the eagle and all signs of its visitation suddenly vanish. This again opens up the possibility that the eagle was a hallucination provoked by some mesmeric quality of the tape recording. Norman dashes home and finds the house on fire, but Tansy is safe amongst the onlookers. Meanwhile as Flora and Lindsay leave the college the eagle statue suddenly toppled and crashes down upon her, killing her instantly, the reel of audio tape unspooling across the gravel from her corpse. A nicely ironic blowback comeuppance that still offers the tiniest fig leaf for clinging on to a rational explanation. In any event *Night of the Eagle* is a superlative little movie, one that could still use more attention, and it both compliments and contrasts *The City of the Dead* perfectly as a relic of a time when all you really needed to make a good horror movie was a fog machine and a creepy sound effect.

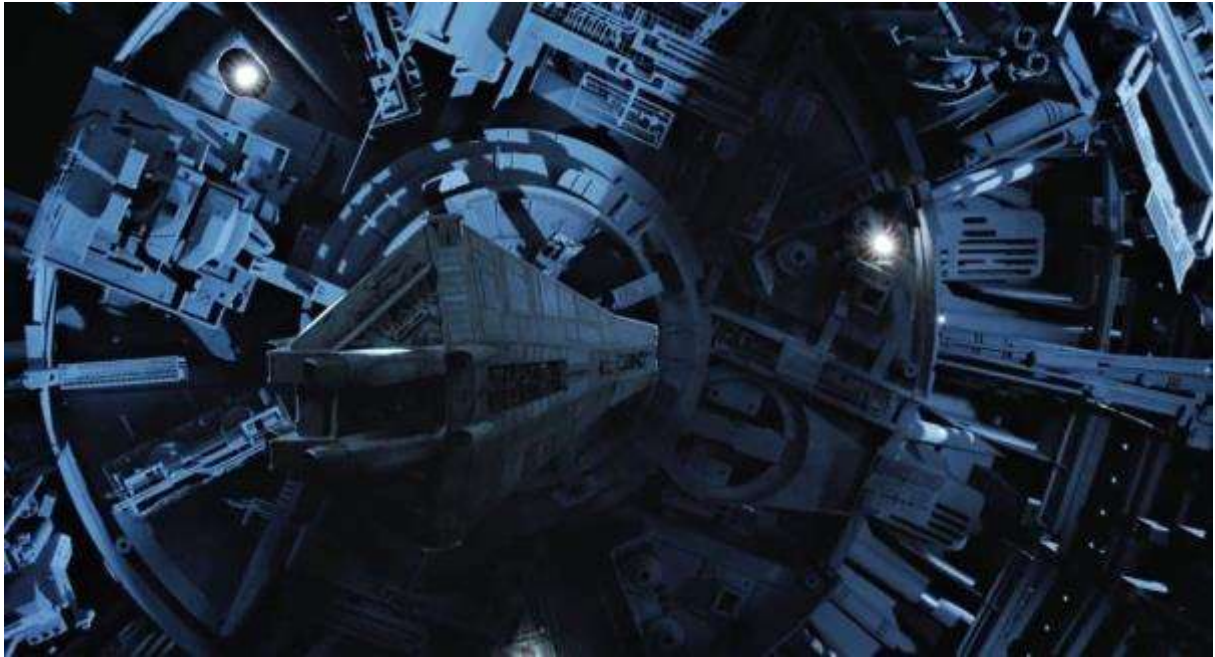
## Aliens (1986)



**Director / Screenwriter: James Cameron**

If Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) sounded in abstract like a movie unlikely to leave much of a mark on cinematic culture upon release, the sequel seemed if anything even more ill-starred. *Alien* had been a big hit, but attempts to make a sequel soon became bogged down in changing executive regimes at Twentieth Century Fox, lawsuits, and wrangling over returning star Sigourney Weaver's salary. Despite having emerged as a potential major star thanks to *Alien*, Weaver had only had one major success since, with her strong if not essential supporting turn in *Ghostbusters* (1984). A potential answer to the question as to who would make the film, at least, provided when an employee at Brandywine Films, the production company of the first film's producers and co-writers Walter Hill and David Giler, was on the lookout for interesting new scripts and found a pair by a young filmmaker named James Cameron. Cameron, a graduate of the film schools of Roger Corman and Italo-exploitation, had submitted a potential sequel for *First Blood* (1981) and his own original sci-fi work called *The Terminator*, and was busy trying to forget his first foray as director, *Piranha II: The Spawning* (1982). Hill and Giler, who had taken a chance with Scott and would continue later to hire interesting new talents for the series like David Fincher, Jean-Pierre Jeunet, and Joss Whedon, fed Cameron a basic idea of thrusting the first film's heroine Ripley into a situation with some soldiers. Cameron hit the ground running in developing the project, but was considered too green to take on directing duties until he made *The Terminator* on a low budget with maximum industry and potent results.





Cameron was officially hired to make the *Alien* sequel, given a large but, even by the standards of the time, hardly enormous budget of \$16 million, with his then-girlfriend Gale Ann Hurd, who had produced *The Terminator*, taken on in the same capacity. Cameron's osmotic knowledge of sci-fi, which caused problems for *The Terminator*, also drove his interest in portraying spacefaring soldiers in the mould of writers like Robert Heinlein and A.E. Van Vogt. The sequel was filmed at England's Pinewood Studios, and the 31-year-old Cameron upon arrival found himself facing a lot of scepticism from the British crew, as *The Terminator* hadn't yet opened in the UK. Cameron's own relentless approach to filmmaking, soon to become notoriously onerous, also ruffled feathers, but the film came in, as studios like so much, on time and budget. *Aliens* was finally released seven years after the first film, an eternity by pop culture standards, particularly in the 1980s. Nonetheless the film proved an instant smash with audiences, and one that would soon enough prove perpetually influential, to the degree that it doesn't feel like hyperbole to say that Hollywood's been trying to make it again and again for the past 35 years and never quite succeeding. All anyone who was young and impressionable thought when they first saw it, most likely on video, was that it was awesome.



Arguing over whether *Alien* or *Aliens* is the better film is one of those topics movie lovers enjoy fighting over, but what's certain is that Cameron managed the very rare trick of emulating a great model in a manner that both suited his own sensibility and logically expanded on the original. Indeed, the significant problem that beset subsequent entries in the series was in the inability of any single entry to pull the same trick. Cameron had the unenviable task of mediating Scott's stylistic approach, which had invested the first film with much of its unique power, and find something new to offer the audience through bringing his own sensibility to bear. The simple addition of an S to the title was all the promissory needed, as simple a declaration as any possible: where before there had been one alien, and the situation matched it, now there would be many, and Cameron follows through on the expectation to expand upon the world and the nightmares Scott depicted. The opening seems to take up where the first film left off, with Ripley drifting through deep space in the *Nostromo's* shuttle, the *Narcissus*, ageless in cryogenic sleep. The craft is intercepted by a much larger salvage vehicle, with a remote robotic unit cutting through the escape hatch and scanning the shuttle before salvagers enter and find Ripley and the *Nostromo's* cat Jones still alive. This prologue is exacting in returning the viewer to the mood and method of *Alien*, not just in the careful recreation of the shuttle set and the hushed, eerily romantic strains of James Horner's scoring mimicking Jerry Goldsmith's work, but in the rueful and world-weary comment by one of the rescuers, "There goes our salvage, guys," immediately recapitulating that this is a universe inhabited by working stiffs where the profit motive looms large and deep space is hardly an escape route from the mundane, where the possibility of rescuing someone is a secondary concern when rounding up a drifting spacecraft.



Cameron continues to follow Scott's model at first, artfully building a mood of quiet dread where for a vast chunk of the film little seems to happen, although of course every moment of charged intensity without payoff eventually gains its counterweight in thriller action. Such an approach to storytelling in a blockbuster feels all but impossible today, but it's part of *Aliens*' greatness, testifying to a near-vanished moment when crowd-pleasing on the biggest level could also still involve patient, careful storytelling and directorial conditioning. In the theatrical cut of the film, a full hour passes before any actual alien is seen on screen; well over an hour in the "Special Edition" director's cut assembled for laserdisc in 1990, which stands now as the essential version. Cameron does break from Scott and follows a lead more reminiscent of Brian De Palma in a fake-out dream sequence early on, in which what seems to be the authentic memory of being told by Burke (Paul Reiser), a representative of the company that owned the *Nostromo*, that she was rescued after 57 years in cryosleep, in the medical bay of a huge space station orbiting Earth: Ripley's probably real panic attack becomes a nightmare in which she imagines herself impregnated with one of the alien beings which starts to hatch inside her as it did in her fellow crewmember Kane, until she abruptly awakens, panicked and sweating, in the real medical bay. This dream both illustrates the deeply traumatic impact of Ripley's experiences and provokes the audience's presumed memory of the first film's most infamous scene.



As made particularly clear in the Special Edition, Cameron's script works initially to undercut any hope Ripley's homecoming will be as positive as the last frames of *Alien* suggested. She finds herself jobless, disgraced, doubted, and wracked by traumatic nightmares, without friends or family to recognise her upon return, a relic and an exile torn out of her moment. Even her daughter Amanda, who was a young girl when she left, has since grown old and died, a wizened face gazing out at her still-young mother from a pixelated image, time, fate, and identity all in flux. As Burke comes to give Ripley this news, Ripley seems to be sitting in a garden, delivered into nature to recuperate, only for her to pick up a remote control and switch off the large TV screen feeding the illusion. Cameron's wry visual joke here about technology and falsified environments feels oddly connected with his own extended act of providing such illusion in the fantasy world of *Avatar* (2009). Soon Ripley is unable to keep her temper when thrust before a review committee who plainly don't buy her story about the infiltrating alien and seem more concerned by the destruction of the *Nostromo* and its cargo, and to an extent one can see their point. Finally Ripley is found to have acted negligently, has her flight officer licence cancelled, and learns to boot from the committee chair Van Leuwen (Paul Maxwell) that the planet where the *Nostromo*'s crew found the alien spaceship and its deadly cargo, now known as LV-426, has now been colonised and is undergoing terraforming.



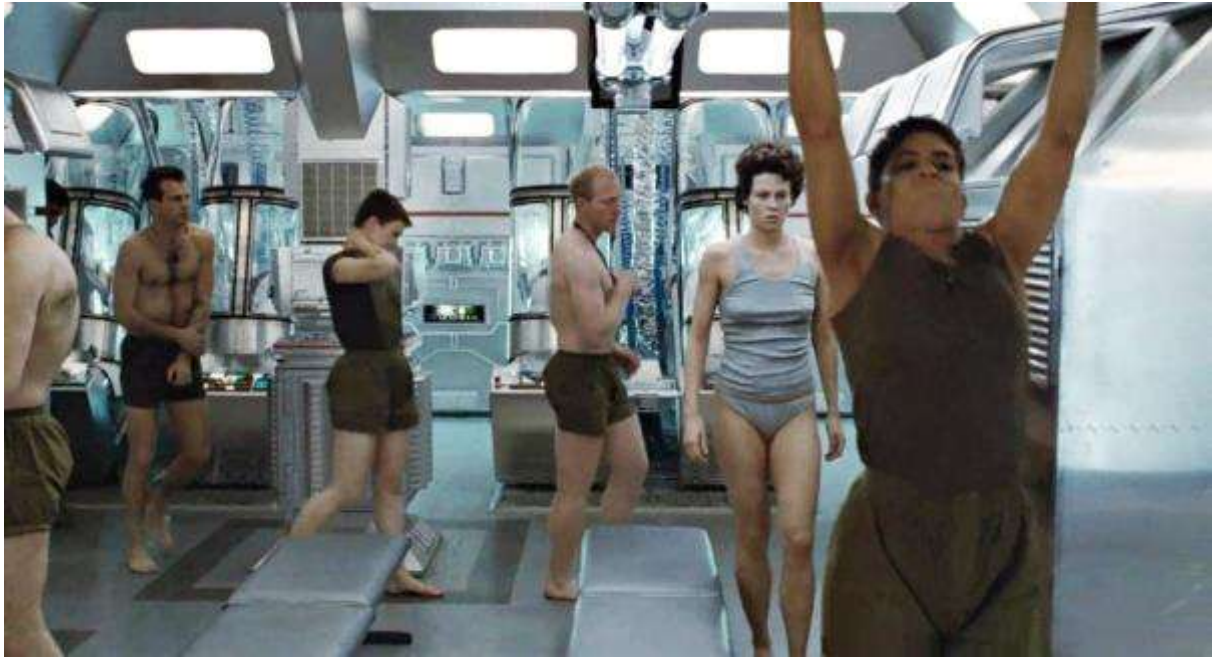
*Aliens* immediately recapitulates the cynicism of *Alien* towards the company, whose canonical name, Weyland-Yutani (suggesting in very 1980s fashion the future convergence of American and Japanese corporate interests into one all-powerful gestalt), was first revealed in the Special Edition, scapegoating Ripley and reducing her to a menial with a tenuous grip on existence. Burke introduces himself by assuring her that “I’m really an okay guy,” which is a pretty good sign he isn’t: although he does seem at first like a solid advocate for Ripley, he nonetheless uses a practiced line of clichés in the course of trying to manipulate her into helping him when it appears she was right all along. Cameron allows images of the cast of the previous film to appear on the computer feed scrolling behind Ripley during the meeting, a salutary touch. But another of *Aliens*’ qualities is that it’s well-told enough to be a completely stand-alone entity, as the film carefully lays out Ripley’s survivor guilt and contends with the consequences of a situation in a manner most similar types of movie gloss over whilst also offering enough sense of what happened to make her fear as well as the continuing plot entirely comprehensible. Cameron alternates visions of Ripley awakening in stark, body-twisting terror with moments of glazed stillness as Ripley smokes and stares off into nothingness. One nice, barely noticeable touch sees her mane of wavy hair as sported in the first film still present in early scenes but later shorn away to a more functional do, suitable as Ripley is by this time working a labourer in the space station loading docks.



The Special Edition also sports an early visit to LV-426, allowing a glimpse of the colonist outpost, dubbed Hadleys Hope – the outpost’s place sign has “Have a nice day” scrawled in graffiti over the stencilled lettering. Futuristic all-terrain vehicles trundle by the pre-fab structures, buffeted by wind and dust in this tiny island of human civilisation located amidst roiling volcanic rock forms, located someplace between a Western movie town and the outer precincts of hell. A conversation between two administrators (Mac McDonald and William Armstrong) establishes their jaded and frazzled state of mind in running this pocket of habitation whilst an important plot point is conveyed: some company honcho has sent a message asking for a grid reference far out in the planetary wilds to be checked out, so wildcatter mining couple, the Jordens (Jay Benedict and Holly De Jong), have gone off in search of it. Of course, the Jordens come across the all-too-familiar wrecked horseshoe spaceship. I’ve always found this portion of the director’s cut interesting but ungainly: effectively atmospheric, it gives a glimpse of Hadleys Hope as a functioning zone of labour and community, with convincing touches like the playing children who invade the control area of the otherwise tediously functional outpost, and a glimpse of the Jordens as an example of the kind of people who would choose such an existence – tight-knit, working class, adventurous. But it dispels the highly effective sense of mystery and discovery sustained in the theatrical cut, has noticeably weaker acting, and it goes just a little too far in coincidence in presenting Rebecca ‘Newt’ Jordan (Carrie Henn), later to prove an essential character, as being at the epicentre of the nascent crisis. Newt screams in horror as she beholds the sight of her father with a facehugger gripping his head with remorseless biological purpose whilst her mother urgently sends out a mayday.



An unstated amount of time passes before Burke comes to Ripley's domicile with a representative of the Colonial Marines, Lt. Gorman (William Hope), and tells her that contact with LV-426 has been cut off, and they want her to come with them as an advisor as a unit of Marines are sent to investigate. Ripley is at first, understandably, determined to not to go, resisting Burke's arsenal of pop psychology cliché ("Get out there and face this thing – get back on the horse!") and the offer of protection from the armed forces that Ripley already, plainly half-suspects might be vainglorious. Only another wrenching nightmare and a long, hard look in the mirror convinces Ripley there's only one way out of labyrinth for her, and that only after calling up Burke and seeking assurance that the plan is to exterminate the aliens. Cut to the Marines' spaceship, the *Sulaco*, cutting through deep space: the name, taken from a town in Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo*, extends that running gag and the connection with Conrad's grim contemplation of hearts of darkness and corporate-imperial enterprise. Cameron apes Scott's creation of mood and tension by recreating the quietly gliding camera movements Scott explored the *Nostromo* with, now scanning the *Sulaco*'s interior. James Horner's scoring, like Goldsmith's employing horns and woodwinds to illustrate the eerie absence of life, interpolates faint drum taps that match the sight of military hardware dormant. One quality that invests Cameron's early films with much of their populist muscle is the respect and feel he had, certainly earned in his time working as a truck driver in his early 20s, for working class characters, strongly defined by their little social units and camaraderie. It's a quality Cameron shared with John Carpenter, his immediate forebear as the hero of neo-B movies, although with Cameron it's arguable this quality arguably hardened into a kind of shtick by the time of *Titanic* (1997) and *Avatar*, and where Carpenter's sensibility led him to increasingly ironic considerations of genre storytelling, Cameron knew which side his bread was buttered on. Nonetheless this lends weight to Cameron's glancing portrait of life LV-426 and the attitudes of the grunts of the Colonial Marines, as well to Ripley herself. Weaver herself noted that *Aliens* is essentially one great metaphor for Ripley overcoming her trauma, albeit in a way that thankfully avoids overtness.



It's important for Cameron that Ripley, originally portrayed in *Alien* as an officer who makes a slightly snooty impression on her more plebeian crewmates and irks others with her cautious mentality even as circumstances prove her right, here falls basically to the bottom of society as well as mental health. Burke, whilst assuring her there's nothing wrong with it, tries to plant hooks in Ripley by commenting on her newly tenuous existence. What he doesn't know, nor Ripley herself, is that her fall also occasions her rise, with particular consequence in the climax, where her specific skill and talent learnt on the loading docks arms her for the ultimate battle with her personal demon. The detachment of Gorman's Marines, awakening along with Ripley and Burke from cryosleep, is quickly and deftly sketched individually and as a functioning team, particularly the dominant if not necessarily most genuinely strong personalities, including the motor-mouthed, enthusiastic Hudson (Bill Paxton) and the formidable Vasquez (Jenette Goldstein), as well as the quiet, calm Corporal Hicks (Michael Biehn), and the no-nonsense sergeant Apone (Al Matthews). The Marines are reassuring in their confident certainty of their own toughness and competence, and also their generic familiarity, combining classical war movie archetypes and modern sops: the unit includes women, a touch that illustrates Cameron's cunning retrofitting of old movie templates for a new audience as well as suiting his own sensibility – Apone, who jams a cigar between his teeth within moments of awakening, is right out of a Sam Fuller. But the most crucial point of emulation is Howard Hawks, as the core team fuses together in to a functioning unit once the authority figures are dead or counted out and prove more effective once reconstituted as a semi-democratic whole. Ripley could be said to play the part of the traditional Hawksian woman, except Cameron inverts the old emphasis: she doesn't have to adapt to the group, but the group fails because it doesn't adapt like her. Cameron disposes of any dissonance as Hudson teases Vasquez, as she immediately starts doing chin-ups, with the question, "Have you ever been mistaken for a man?" to her immortal riposte, "No. Have you?"





The soldiers patronise Ripley not as a woman but as a civilian, something she gauges immediately, and she takes a certain wry, challenging delight in showing off when she clammers into a robotic loading suit that resembles an anthropomorphic forklift and casually handles a heavy load, much to Apone and Hicks' approving amusement. Cameron drops in effective, intelligently accumulating character touches that give depth to the Marines, from Hicks falling asleep during the bumpy descent to the planet, to Vasquez and Drake (Mark Rolston) displaying their deep sense of camaraderie as masters of the big guns, drilling in choreographed movement and sharing their own sense of humour, and shades-wearing, ultra-cool shuttle craft pilot Corporal Ferro (Colette Hiller) spouting surfer lingo as she steers her craft down through the stormy clouds of LV-426. There's also the android ("I prefer the term artificial person myself") Bishop (Lance Henriksen), present as a standard member of the team. At one point Gorman gets Hicks and Hudson's names mixed up, a hint at the speed with which the unit was formed that can also be taken as a wry acknowledgement of the difficulty in telling a bunch of young men with buzz cuts apart and of Gorman's lack of deep investment in noticing the distinction. Hudson himself has an edge of bratty braggadocio that first vanishes when Drake forces him to give aid to Bishop in his party trick display of speed and precision with a knife, but resurges as he regales Ripley with the splendours of these "ultimate badasses" and their arsenal of cutting-edge technological weaponry. The soldiers and their tag-alongs eat before getting mobilised, and another facet of social tension manifests: the grunts notice Gorman doesn't eat with them, another early sign he's not going to prove much of a leader. Ripley, remembering Ash from the *Nostromo*, reacts with virulent unease when she realises what Bishop is, despite his Isaac Asimov-quoting reassurances.



Later, during a briefing for the unit, Gorman generically describes the creatures Ripley has encountered as a xenomorph – exterior-changer – in some official taxonomical flourish that has become since the general name for the malevolent species. After preparing for deployment, the unit is dropped into LV-426's atmosphere and upon landing find Hadley's Hope seemingly deserted, with signs like half-eaten meals, in a nice nod towards the mystique of the *Mary Celeste*, betraying the suddenness of what befell the colonists. The Marines soon turn up signs that prove Ripley's story, particularly patches of metalwork eaten through by the xenomorphs' spilt acidic blood, and occupy the command centre which was hastily fortified for a last stand. Whilst exploring the deserted domicile, movement detected on their sensors proves to Newt, now bedraggled and deeply traumatised, but also having managed to survive thanks to her intricate knowledge of the domicile's air duct system, gathered in her years playing in them. Ripley quickly takes on a motherly role for Newt. The team discover two live specimens of the "facehugger" strain that implants larvae in living hosts, kept in plastic tubes in the centre's Med Lab, with a surgeon's notes queasily reporting a patient died having one specimen removed. Finally the Marines, trying to find the missing colonists by looking for their subcutaneous tracking chips, locate them seemingly all congregated together in a space under the gigantic atmospheric plant, a fusion reactor-powered array busily making the planetary atmosphere breathable. But when the Marines venture into the plant, they quickly find signs they're entering a xenomorph nest, and the one living human they find amongst the many eviscerated victims they find fused to the walls quickly dies as one of the larval aliens explodes from her chest. Within moments the unit is attacked by swarming xenomorphs, quickly reducing their ranks and setting the remnant to flight, and it falls to Ripley's quick thinking to save them.



One aspect of *Aliens*, relatively minor on the dramatic scale but important to the deep impression made by its overall look and texture, was Cameron's strong feel, bordering on fetishism, for both a realistic technological milieu, and for military lingo and tough-hombre attitude. Some of the hardware, like futuristic guns mounted on steadicam harnesses and the robotic loading suit, still remain exotic, but other touches, from the Marines' helmet-mounted cameras to video phones, have become familiar, and all still seem part of a coherent vision of a future that's at once hi-tech but also rough-and-ready, everything designed for hard encounters on far-flung rocks. That the Marines would use a "drop ship" to shuttle them to and from the planet rather than land a cumbersome spaceship like the *Nostromo* on LV-426, provides both a logical-feeling aspect of the mechanics of the enterprise whilst also echoing both World War II landing craft and helicopters in the Vietnam war, and also, eventually, provides an important component of the plot. The drop ship itself disgorges an Armoured Personnel Carrier, which the Marines use as a mobile protective base of operations. The visual sheen of Adrian Biddle's cinematography, with omnipresent steely blues and greys, suggests that the atmosphere itself has soaked up the cobalt-hued lustre of gunmetal and industrial colossi, and the first sight Ripley and the Marines have of LV-426 is of the enormous atmospheric processor installation, powered by a fusion reactor, looming out of the grimy haze, and Hadley's Hope beyond, blurry and smeared in being seen through cameras.



Cameron's use of such mediating technology also gives *Aliens* flashes of estranged menace, as the signs of battle and carnage the Marines find once they penetrate the interior of Hadleys Hope, bearing out Ripley's accounts, are mediated through grainy, fuzzy camera feeds. The oft-emulated scene of Gorman steadily losing all connection and control as the Marines are attacked and the mission turns to lethal chaos intersperses immediate footage and glimpses conveyed through the way their cameras capture incoherent flashes of action and, in the cases of those grabbed or killed by the xenomorphs, blacks out: the technology, which seems to embrace and unite the humans, instead only testifies to their breakdown and impotence. This sequence, which sees the film finally combust after its long, nerveless build-up, cleverly reproduces a key aspect of *Alien* in the idea of the responses to the xenomorphs being limited by situation, as the nest is directly underneath the plant's cooling systems, which means that firing off powerful weapons could critically damage the reactor and result in a nuclear explosion. Given the unexpected signs of sentient intelligence the xenomorphs display, too, this might not be a coincidence. This means the team is left almost defenceless as the aliens pounce, save flame throwers and Hicks' shotgun ("I like to save this for close encounters."), although Drake and Vasquez, having contrived not to hand over all their ammo, start blasting away wildly as the attack comes.



Cameron and the design team gave the xenomorphs a slightly different look for the film than the sleek anthropoidal shark look of the original model, kicking off a motif in the series where the creatures adapt to their environment. Here they're distinctly more demonic with a more veinous-looking exterior, hobgoblins surging out of dark reaches they've decorated to suit themselves, an environ festooned with eviscerated corpses in a vision of a Dantean hellscape. They discover one living woman (Barbara Coles) who, as Ripley did in her dream earlier in the film, begs her would-be rescuers to kill her, but they're too late to stop the larval "chestbuster" alien from erupting from her chest. The Marines immediately incinerate it with a flamethrower, but this has the unfortunate effect of stirring the other xenomorphs from their nooks. Gorman, pale and sweating and delirious in his horror, quickly proves incapable of a response, so Ripley leaps into the seat of the APC and charges through the corridors of the processor plant, Horner's furiously martial scoring booming out in announcing the gear change from cosmic horror to rumble-time action. Ripley's frantic driving in her compelling sense of mission, APC careening against walls, and Gorman's attempt to intervene only sees him fought off by Burke and then knocked silly by falling containers. Ripley crashes through a partition and reaches the Marines, but not in time to save Drake, who takes a face full of acid blood when Vasquez blasts a xenomorph about to launch on him. As it tries to force open the APC doors, Hicks jams his shotgun in a xenomorph's mouth and cries "Eat this!" before blowing its head off – an all-time great cheer-out-loud flourish that deliberately makes mincemeat of one of the most disturbing aspects of the xenomorphs as seen up to this point, their double jaw.



One of Cameron's most important storytelling inflections that recurs throughout *Aliens* is evinced here in near-throwaway fashion, as Hicks's heroic action nonetheless results in spraying acid blood burning Hudson's arm. This motif of rolling crisis where gestures and actions constantly result in unintended consequences drives much of the story in a manner that feels realistically chaotic whilst also forcing it onwards in compulsive motion. Ripley manages to barrel the APC out through the plant door after running over a xenomorph that tries to break through the windscreen to get at her, at the cost of shattering the APC's transaxle. The Marines call in Ferro and the drop ship to come pick them up, but a xenomorph gets aboard the ship and kills the crew, resulting in the drop ship crashing and colliding with the atmospheric plant, setting in motion exactly the inevitable nuclear meltdown they feared. Later in the film Vasquez and Gorman's final action of blowing themselves up to avoid being eaten and take a few xenomorphs with them offers a moment of valiant kamikaze grace, but also causes another accident that forces Ripley to even more dangerous and strenuous actions.

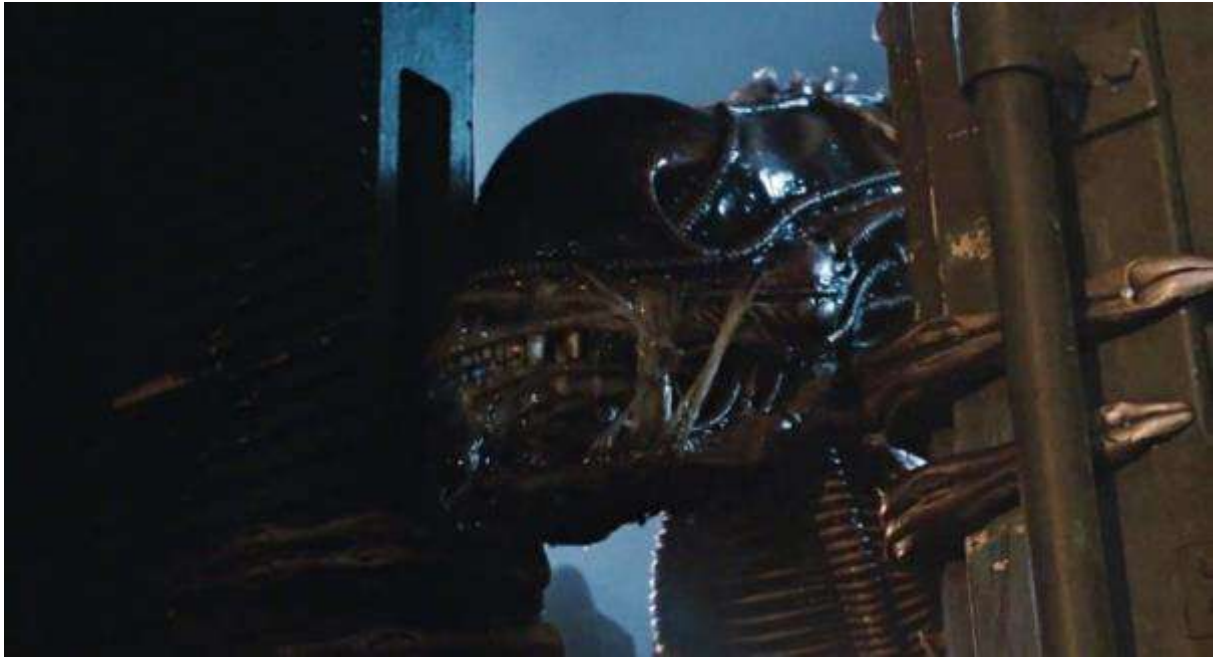


*Aliens* tends not to be thought of as a horror movie, unlike *Alien*, which more obviously straddles the narrow gap between that genre and sci-fi. And yet it has just as much horrific imagery and atmosphere as its precursor, and indeed goes a few steps further, like showing the results of people getting sprayed with the acidic alien blood, and the imagery of the hive festooned with dead, eviscerated colonists. As well as the obvious Horror cues *Alien* subsumes – the “haunted castle” space ships, the blasted alien planet, the lurking monster, the presence of Ripley as an early and defining “final girl,” the strongly Lovecraftian tilt of the imagery and ideas – it exemplifies how Horror is a style or genre defined by tension derived from the fallibility of the feebly human before forces beyond their control. By contrast, action as a genre is defined by the dispelling of such forces through exemplars of human resilience and toughness: filmmakers don’t have some big, tough muscleman turn up in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) or *Halloween* (1978) to kick the fiend’s ass, precisely because such stories require the heroes to be distinctly more vulnerable than the avatars of evil. *Aliens* can also count classic horror films like *The Birds* (1963) and George Romero’s *Dead* films as precursors in the theme of fighting violent inhuman besiegement.



But of course *Aliens* is also a war movie and an interstellar western, and the argument between the immobilising dread of horror and the proactive furore of these other genres is part of what makes *Aliens* endlessly engaging as a grand nexus of various storytelling traditions and inflections. As legendary as the film's heroic beats have become, they wouldn't be at all effective if Cameron wasn't also so committed at walking his characters up to the edge of the truly nightmarish. The disparity can be traced to the divergent urges expressed in the roots of the two genres. Both go back to stories told around tribal campfires in a far-flung past. In such oral traditions, horror is based in the kinds of stories told to keep children close to the circle of light, warning balefully of the gleaming eyes watching from the dark, whereas those other genres are based in the tales told about great warriors and leaders, the defenders of the tribe, the ones strong enough to go out into that dark. Something *Aliens* does better than just about any other example I can think of is find the interlocutor of the two in the image of a protecting parent.





Cameron's approach to the war movie, whilst containing character types going back to silent films like *The Big Parade* (1925), is nonetheless shaped by his own and his original audience's cultural moment. *Aliens* presents a strongly nudging subtext for a popular understanding of the Vietnam War: the Marines, confident in their edge of both machismo (even the women) and technological superiority, as they descend into an environment which their foes, who prove far more intelligent and dangerous than expected and motivated by more coherent, communal urges, are all too good at exploiting. Cameron emphasises the motif through both casting – Matthews, in a casting touch anticipatory of R. Lee Ermey in the following year's *Full Metal Jacket*, had been a real-life US Marine, and knew the required attitude inside out – and details like the future-but-not drop ships and the subsumed banter and attitude of Vietnam-era American soldiers. Cameron had success writing the post-Vietnam revenge and homecoming fantasy of *Rambo: First Blood Part II* and to a certain extent *Aliens* can be read as its distaff variation, with Ripley fulfilling the role of resurgent natural warrior. But *Aliens* feels closer to the more considered metaphorical meditation Cameron had woven into *The Terminator*, where Biehn's Kyle Reese was easily read as a damaged returned veteran. *Aliens* came out in the same year as Oliver Stone's *Platoon*, and the two films' similarities include a soldier's-eye sense of disdain for officer school training grad lieutenants.



*Aliens* feels its way around all this in portraying Ripley's reconstruction from PTSD-riddled human cargo to the essential and emblematic action heroine. Ripley's place in finally and persuasively creating an archetype scarcely seen so unfettered since folkloric figures like Boudica, Kahina, or Jeanne Hachette has been very well covered ever since, but it's worth noting on some of the things Cameron and Weaver manage to do through her that made her so vital. As noted, Cameron presents a largely gender-egalitarian world, mediating the traditional Hawksian testing of the outsider on the level of civilian versus soldier and grunt versus officer, cutting out any of the usual jockeying and bickering or tendencies towards what is now called "girlboss" politicking. Ripley's wisdom, as in the first film, is a mere edge of awareness and forthrightness, and what seems to be her chief liability, the crippling horror of her prior experience with the xenomorph, proves to be a great advantage too, able to recover more quickly from the dizzying blows of their attacks and already knowing what kinds of behaviours will save lives and which will get them all killed. A crucial moment comes when she reacts to the horrible death of the cocooned survivor, recreating her own image of herself from her dream as impregnated and doomed, as Ripley grips her own stomach and grimaces in terrible sympathy. As far as catharsis goes, this is about as rough as it gets, but it nonetheless immediately precedes her resurgence as a fighter.



To this Cameron added a faith that Ripley's specifically feminine qualities were potent virtues rather than discomfiting appendages to be denied or ignored in the course of enabling her. *Alien* suggested maternal instinct in Ripley in her choice to save Jones at the risk of her own life, and to a certain extent Cameron merely elaborates on this streak in reiterating the lengths Ripley will go to to save those she cares about and in subtly reproducing the original film's basic plot beats. Nonetheless *Aliens* is much more specific, and particularly in the Special Edition makes it clear that for Ripley such instinct is because being a mother is a significant and immediate part of her identity. This signals why she's able to form such a quick and intense bond with Newt, and also underlies her instinct to race to the rescue of the Marines. It's also apparent even in small but consequential gestures as when Ripley orders Newt to leave the APC's command space when the cameras show the Marines exploring the hive and seeing colonist bodies festooning the walls: as well as the awful spectacle in and of itself, in which Ripley amusingly resembles a dutiful parents warding a child off from something verboten on TV, Ripley also knows well Newt might see her parents and brother amongst them.



Newt herself is in part a nod to the kinds of urchins who attach themselves to soldiers in classic war movies, whilst presenting an ideal surrogate daughter for Ripley in the way too she is an uncommon, alternative kind of survivor: at one point Ripley admonishes the ranting Hudson with a reminder that Newt found ways to subsist for weeks without help or training, so surely the ultimate badasses can take a few lessons. Newt wields a mixture of the authentically childlike – picking up the Marines’ idiom and gestures (“Affirmative!”) with mimicking delight – and an edge of premature awareness and gravitas, in her certainty that the Marines’ firepower “won’t make any difference” against the aliens, and her nudging reminder to Ripley that her doll Casey isn’t cursed with scary dreams unlike herself and Ripley because “she’s just a piece of plastic.” It’s a measure of the depth of Weaver’s performance, and probably the reason why she gained a Best Actress Oscar nomination for the role, a rarity for such a genre movie, in that she’s coherently able to shift between more fearsome postures and gently coaxing maternal interactions with Henn’s Newt, in utterly convincing vignettes like her murmuring ruefully, after dabbing away some dirt on the girl with some cocoa when she’s first discovered, “Now I’ve done it, I’ve accidentally made a clean spot here – now I guess I’ll have to clean the whole thing.” Newt is of course also, like Jones, a plot device, providing a motive for Ripley to not only survive, but to take the kind of risk usually reserved to heroes of classic mythology.



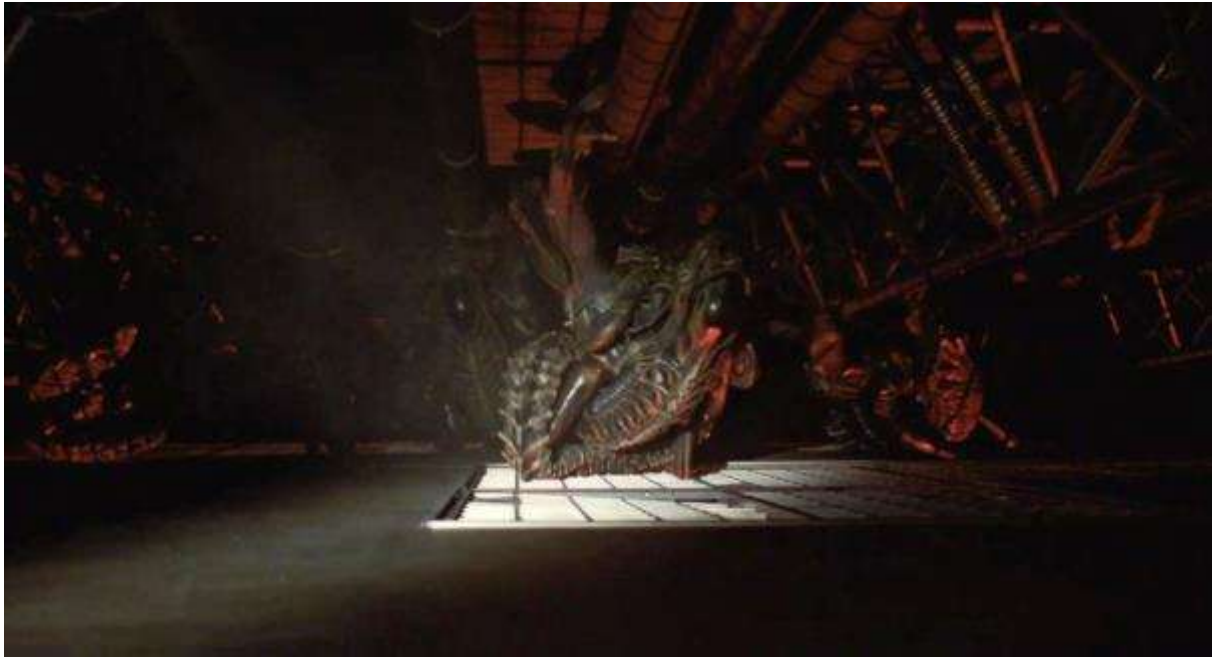
Meanwhile the rest of the humans interact with a deft combination of acting and writing to the point where they're more precisely drawn than many another film's lead character, from Paxton's brilliant slide from posturing wiseass to whiny hysteric before finally going out in a blaze of authentic glory, to Goldstein's strident Vasquez demanding of the injured Gorman, "Wake up, *pendejo*, and then I'm gonna kill you!" Henriksen, a familiar enough character actor in movies including *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975) and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), had been the star in Cameron's *Piranha II: The Spawning* and his initial proposed casting for the role of the Terminator. Cameron's fondness for him was justified as playing Bishop finally boosted him to cult acting hero status, in part because he expertly walks a line of studied blandness that sustains the question as to whether Bishop is another cyborg monster like Ash – he has a similar awed regard when studying their anatomy – or a good guy. The answer finally comes when he makes a quip, "I may be synthetic, but I'm not stupid," when he volunteers for a risky mission only he can likely pull off, and it's impossible to doubt him henceforth, even when he seems to abandon Ripley and Newt to their fate.



Biehn, hastily brought aboard the movie to play Hicks after James Remar was forced to drop out, finished up playing a similar role to the one he had in *The Terminator* as an ideal male hero who nonetheless finishes up too battered and scarred to be of much help to the heroine as she faces evil alone. Hicks however isn't a damaged case like Kyle Reese was, but rather a quiet, intense dark horse who clearly isn't eager to be the star: "Yeah...yeah," he murmurs ruefully after Ripley points out he's now in charge, a marvellous little moment for Biehn. But within moments, after being incidentally belittled by Burke, Hicks readily commits to command and to implementing Ripley's suggestion of aerial nuclear bombardment of the area - "Only way to be sure" - in a way that suddenly confirms he's the rare character both smart enough and sufficiently untroubled by ego to know the right idea when he hears it, and so is precisely the leader the crisis needs. The crash of the drop ship foils this plan, and obliges the team to fortify themselves in the command centre, sealing up every conceivable door, pipe, and conduit, planning to wait out the 17 day interval before another rescue mission is sent. But Bishop soon tells them they can't wait that long: the drop ship's crash damaged the atmospheric processor and it's now on a countdown to explosion. Bishop agrees to venture outside to patch into the outpost's transmitter and remote pilot a second drop ship down from the *Sulaco*. During the wait, Ripley and Newt find themselves trapped with two freed facehuggers specimens, and are only rescued by the Marines in the nick of time. Ripley knows full well this must have been orchestrated by Burke, who she already knows both ordered the search for the alien ship and wants to take the specimens back to Earth, and saw a good way of getting what he wants whilst silencing Ripley. And, incidentally, everyone else.



The reveal that Burke is a villain isn't at all surprising, as it was pretty compulsory for a 1980s genre film to have an asshole yuppie. It could be said his presence dials down the Kafkaesque portrait of corporate insidiousness in *Alien* to something more containable: rather than operating on the company's behalf Burke's self-defence suggests it's his own opportunism driving his actions. Still he's the avatar of the same forces at work, and Reiser makes the character effective in the way he carefully shades Burke's purposefully inoffensive façade with his unblinking believe-you-me stare and air of practiced facetiousness, a film of sweat greasing his upper lip as he labours to keep up his bullshit in the face of the Marines' murderous anger. His execution is only staved off by a sudden power outage, a failure that tells Ripley the xenomorphs are on the move with purpose, much to Hudson's disbelief ("They're animals, man!"), but quickly confirmed by the team's motion detectors. Cameron's use of the detectors, pulsing with ever-increasing pitch and squirming blurs on their readout screens confirming the horde's approach, to generate tension is peerless, whilst also returning to the ambiguity of technology as a filter for experience. The relentless march of the monsters towards the command centre remains invisible and illogical as they seem to be right upon the humans but without any sign of them, until the penny drops and Ripley turns her gaze upwards towards the panelled ceiling – the one, forgotten conduit for invasion. The pure essence of the monster movie and everything the mode encompasses comes in the next moment: Hicks is boosted up to lift a panel and turn a torch down the duct, glimpsing the hellish vision of a horde of xenomorphs crawling inexorably closer.

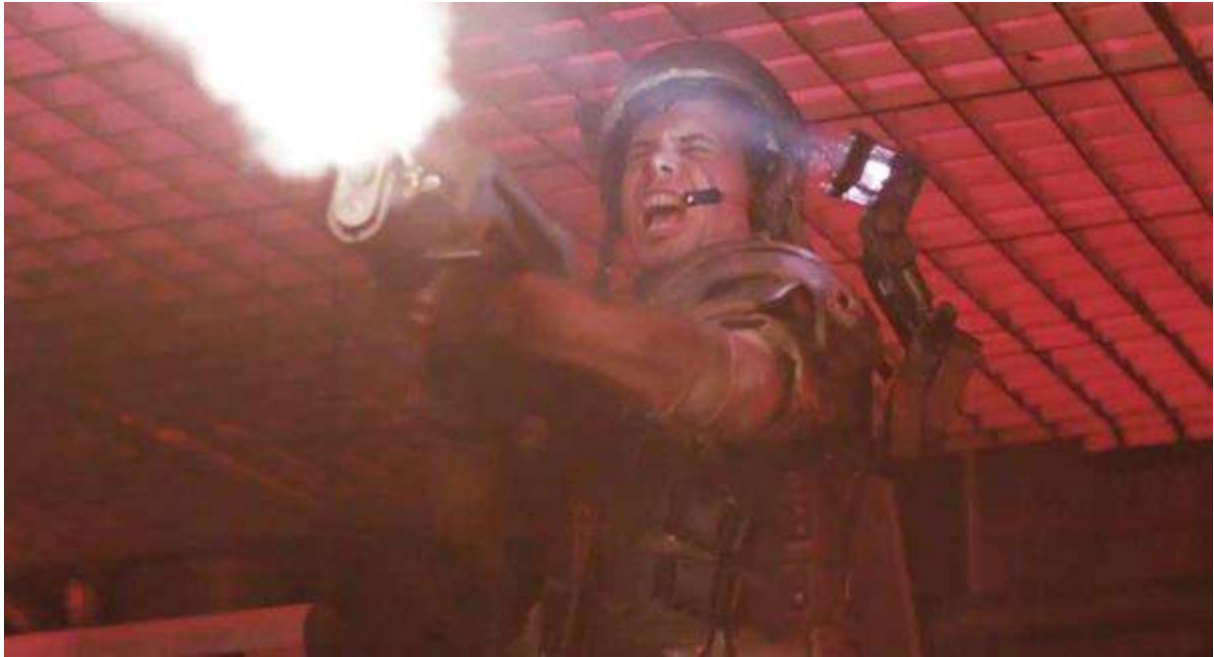


*Aliens* created a template that young and eager genre filmmakers, and some not-so-young ones, would imitate exhaustively in years to come. The hard, chitinous look imbued upon the tech and environs would be endlessly imitated along with the plot patterns and lines of defiant dialogue. Cameron's editing of the action scenes is quick almost to the point of being subliminal in places, generally to mask limitations of the special effects but also amplifying the sense of the blindsiding speed with which situations turn on a dime from anxious calm to life-and-death conflict. And yet it's also still entirely lucid and precise in filming and framing. Cameron's repeated, forceful use of point-of-view shots goes beyond the fascination with layered media, and provides much of the film surging, immediate energy – barely noticed in the rush of events as when he cuts between Burke's viewpoint as he shuts the door sealing off himself from Ripley and Newt and theirs as they see the door close, and repeated with more bravura towards the end as Cameron adopts Bishop's pilot's-eye-view as he barrels the drop ship through plumes of smoke and fire amidst the jutting steel forms in fleeing the atmospheric processor. The sequence of Ripley and Newt trapped in the Med Lab is particularly great in exploiting what the audience both knows and doesn't know as well as offering a moment of pure situational thrill-mongering. Cameron reiterates the constant motif in the film and its predecessor involving waking and sleeping and the blurred ground between dream and nightmare, as Ripley, who has fallen asleep with Newt who by habit hides under her bed from the very real monsters, awakens and spies the toppled tubes that contained the facehugger specimens, shifting from an idyllic portrait of her bonding attachment into imminent danger and threat, as well as invoking the basic parental role, as the person whose presence allows a child to sleep untroubled.





Ripley quickly finds they've been locked in, and Cameron cuts to a shot of Burke switching off the security camera in the Med Lab unnoticed by the Marines. Hicks has given Ripley one of the pulse rifles after showing her how to use it, but it's been lifted and left on a table outside. Ripley has to find a way of attracting attention, a problem she solves quickly enough by setting off the fire alarm. Hicks and the other Marines dash to the rescue, but how long it will take them to get there is unknown. Ripley has gained their attention, but has made the situation even more nightmarish as infernal red fire lamps glow, the harsh siren buzzes and robs any advantage of listening for the creatures, and water pours down: will the water slow down the facehuggers, or do they love it? For those who had seen *Alien*, the facehuggers are known to be swift and akin to an instant death sentence once attached, but just how fast they can move and whether they can be outwitted is still moot. Cameron builds to the sear-itself-into-your-cortex shot of the facehugger scuttling after Ripley with obscene multi-limbed motion before it springs on her, wrapping its tail about her neck, Ripley trying to find off its furiously wriggling form, whilst Newt manages to pin the other one's tail against the wall as it comes for her. Only then does Cameron cut to the sight of the Marines outside, having arrived in the meantime: their appearance is both logical but also a non-sequitur, a startling break from the suffocating moment of dread. Hicks tells the others to shoot out the plexiglass window before launching himself through it in a moment of fearless bravura, and the Marines earn a moment of heroic effectiveness as Hudson saves Newt whilst Hicks, Gorman, and Vasquez untangle the one on Ripley and toss it into a corner to be blasted to bits.



The final invasion by the xenomorphs likewise exploits the red emergency lighting to signal the change from placidity to hellish urgency, as monstrosities drop from the ceiling and erupt from the floor. Burke momentarily prevents the team's retreat by locking a door, seemingly hoping the team will be killed so he can meet up with Bishop and escape, only to find himself trapped with one of the monsters. It's a measure of the craftsmanship brought to bear in the film that this sequence manages to evoke the authentic chaos of such a battle as the jangling monsters spring and surge in the bloody red light, whilst also capturing iconic vignettes for its heroes – Hudson taunting the xenomorphs as he guns them down, Vasquez blasting them with her grenade launcher, with Horner's most epic strains blasting all the way. Hudson, Vasquez, and Gorman all die in the rear-guard defence. Cameron allows each to go down as the reborn absolute badass they always sought to be, fighting to the last round with all their ferocity and grit brought to bear, Hudson dragged into the abyss still screaming out curses at the monsters, Gorman blowing himself and Vasquez up when he realises they're trapped and can't escape.



But it's also worth noting that their gestures are also self-defeating, dying in part by their own heroic pretences as well as the monsters, as none of them quite has the sense to follow Newt at top speed: the little girl holds the key to their salvation in knowing the way through the air vents to the landing field. In this regard Cameron echoes something of the romantic fatalism of H.G. Clouzot's *The Wages of Fear* (1953), and indeed its source novel with its last line describing its ill-fated hero as one killed by his own ferocious determination to live. The way Vasquez wails, "Oh no!" after she's crippled by some of the xenomorph blood, is a perfect signature for her character, registering both fury at herself and terror in finally being crippled, before the simultaneously stirring and ironic sight of her and Gorman locked together in a moment of perfect fulfilment in the second before Gorman's grenade goes off, and they vanish in a fireball. Problem is, this götterdämmerung for warriors results in a shockwave that makes Newt fall into a vent and plunge to a lower level in the building, demanding Hicks and Ripley pursue her. By the time they reach her she's been snatched away to the hive by a xenomorph, and Hicks is badly burned by acid blood killing another. Ripley manages to help Hicks reach Bishop as the drop ship arrives, but insists she has to back into the hive to rescue Newt. Cue perhaps the all-time greatest variation on a standard action movie vignette, as Ripley arms herself to the teeth in preparing for the venture whilst Bishop flies her into the atmospheric processor, which is beginning to show signs of destabilising in the face of imminent meltdown.



Everything up until this point has been great, but *Aliens* kicks to a higher level, reaching the innermost core where those divergent ancient storytelling traditions fork, in this sequence. This is of course in large part to the converging elements of cinema – Weaver’s performing, the shooting and editing, Horner’s big brass-and-drum scoring – but also because of the way everything seen before in the film and its predecessor unites into one, pure spectacle. Much like the following year’s *Predator*, the climax dispenses with all social-animal preliminaries and gets down to a basic, primal rite, the hero who must venture into the bear’s cave and risk tooth and claw. But with the corollary that Ripley’s motive is not symbolic or general, but a specific, deeply personal expression of maternal urge that overrides every other instinct in the existential manual. The deep-flowing fairy tale motif returns as Ripley uses flares like the breadcrumb trail in *Hansel and Gretel*, whilst on a more mythic level she combines in herself Theseus and Ariadne heading into the Labyrinth on the hunt for the minotaur, Perseus and Andromeda, St George and the princess. The processor plant, glimpsed as Bishop flies into it, has become a gothic monstrosity, spitting lightning and fire, the most literalised edition of William Blake’s vision of dark satanic mills as the blight of industrialism conceivable. All classical storytelling kneaded into modern psychological theory, and it’s working on that level too, as Ripley has also found the overriding urge that makes all inner demons ineffective. At the same time, Cameron lets the audience see Ripley thinking as well as acting: the weaponry she assembles – taping a flamethrower to a pulse rifle, readying the flares – is, far from heedlessly vainglorious, instead utilising every particle of knowledge she’s gathered about her foes and their home, from their physical traits to their numbers, which by this point if hardly decimated must be greatly thinned, and with the majority of the remaining host left behind in the abandoned command centre. In short, even as Ripley finally becomes an action hero unbound, she’s still very much the character she’s been portrayed as, quick on her mental as well as physical feet. If Cameron had by and large eased back on the protean erotic imagery Scott wielded by way of H.R. Giger’s art in the earlier part of the film, he brings it back with a more sickly, suggestive edge in the sight of Newt swathed in hardened cocooning gel that looks like ejaculate, a xenomorph egg peeling open in rather penile fashion, giving this vignette a coded quality of a wrathful mother coming to save her child from a paedophile.



The symbolism inverts nonetheless as Ripley successfully locates Newt and tears her free only to stumble upon the monstrous queen, a great bony crone with a gross, pendulous egg-sack spitting out monstrous seed. Ripley has found her own interspecies doppelganger – the queen’s squarish jaw even seems to have been deliberately moulded on Weaver’s – as another fiercely protecting mother, but this one diseased, spawning misbegotten devils. The two communicate in gesture, as Ripley gives a spurt of fire from her flamethrower, just enough to make clear to the queen she’ll set fire to her eggs if she lets the xenomorphs lurking in the wings come out, and the queen bids them retreat. The tentative little truce ends when one of the eggs opens: Ripley gives a tilt of her head, grits her teeth, and starts blasting. It’s impossible not to share Ripley’s raw, punishing, near-mindless expression of exterminating rage, and yet as with the Marines earlier, her warlike self-purgation is self-defeating, as she wastes most of her arsenal destroying a hive that will be blown up anyway in a few minutes, making herself very close to a victim of new warrior bravura. Tellingly, Ripley aims all her rage and grenades at the queen’s vestigial egg-sack rather than her exoskeletal body, and after Ripley flees with Newt, the alien queen rips free of the sack and follows, bent on vengeance. Ripley finds Bishop seems to have flown off with the drop ship, seemingly confirming Ripley’s anxiety about Bishop, and in the moment of ultimate confrontation with both parental and childhood fear, Ripley tells Newt, “Close your eyes, baby,” as the alien queen emerges from the shadows of an elevator. Except, of course, Bishop suddenly flies the drop ship into view and scoops up the two humans, before fleeing at top speed, just managing to escape the colossal explosion that consumes Hadley’s Hope and everything around it and zooming back into the stars.



Cameron makes a dry nod towards a Spielbergian take on a cinematic fairy-tale motif, as he shifts from the cataclysmic vision of the explosion to the sight of the drop ship zooming up into the stars, Horner's music now offering gently melodic, resolving sounds at a juncture that for most movies would mark the end of the bad dream. But this being Cameron, of course, he has a trick up his sleeve as he did with the emerging cyborg in *The Terminator* and with the same basic concept of an inimical form of intelligence simply refusing to observe the niceties of what a human would justifiably call enough, as well as repeating and expanding upon the finale of *Alien*. Right at what seems to be the hearty final moment of conciliation between Ripley and Bishop, who's delighted by her praise, the hiss of burning acid and Bishop suddenly contorting in pain announces a last act as the alien queen crawls out of a landing gear bay, having skewered Bishop on its horny tail, before ripping him in half. Being as he is an artificial person Bishop doesn't expire from such treatment, but the vision of both Hicks and Bishop left too injured to help Ripley not only demands she find a way to battle the monster alone but also carries potent metaphorical aspects – Cameron's viewpoint of a fatally injured idea of masculinity, exposed in both the classical hero Hicks and the motherly, slightly fey male Bishop, whilst playing nice in that they're both nobly wounded rather than toxic and imperious like the Terminator, nonetheless demands a new kind femininity evolve to take its place, and with the suggestion that the last act of all wars is ultimately fought by women, those who have to deal with the subtler but more pernicious monsters it unleashes.



Bishop's sundering is also a bravura moment of visual ruthlessness, a shock twist that resembles Ripley's discovery of the alien on the *Narcissus* in the previous film and also a last, needling reminder that the material is still mean stuff. Whilst the alien queen hunts for Newt, who tries to hide under the docking bay floor gratings, Ripley emerges wearing the power loader suit, augmented to a level of power equal to the monster. Okay, altogether now, three...two...one: "Get away from her, you bitch!" An unnecessarily rhetorical flourish, probably, given we've already seen the idea illustrated thoroughly, but still one of the most delightful moments in the genre film canon, and the signature for Ripley: this isn't Ripley the damaged survivor or Ripley the hysterical berserker but the ultimate version, powered up with steel fists, completing the journey in now making clear it's the monster that should be scared. Later, in *Titanic* and *Avatar*, Cameron would more conspicuously re-devote himself to what could be called new-age editions of imagery and themes echoing out High Romantic art and literature of the 1700s and 1800s, where artist-heroes rewrite reality with passion, flee collapsing idols, and bestride pristine wildernesses, a twist that might have seemed odd given his penchant for technology as a device both liberating and frightening.



But it becomes clearer in watching Cameron's oeuvre that the dark side of technology lies in its potential, indifferently destructive effect on living systems, the appeal of it lies in restoring the kind of heroic agency associated with classical art forms. Thus Ripley repurposes a tool, one associated previously with her humiliation and reconstruction, into a new kind of knightly armour, able to step up to the nastiest demon lurking in Beelzebub's caverns and sock it in the face. Finally, in the titanic struggle that follows, she manages to dump the creature into an airlock and blast it out into the same void as its predecessor, although not before the queen, with its species' characteristic will to survive, keeps hanging on to Ripley to the bitter end. Finally Ripley seals up the ship as the bifurcated Bishop clings onto the flailing Newt, who finally, unthinkingly anoints Ripley as "Mommy!" as they're finally united. Cameron returns to the fairy-tale motif for a final image of mother and daughter delivered back to their dreams, perhaps no better than before, but at least now just dreams.



## **The Invisible Ray (1936)**



*The Invisible Ray* might be the most underappreciated gem of the classic Universal Pictures cycle of horror and science fiction films. That could be because it was difficult to see for a long time, for the director troubles that went on behind the scenes, and because its basic plot was recycled so many times in mad scientist movies over the following twenty years its specific qualities are easily overlooked. The second of three star vehicles uniting Boris Karloff and Béla Lugosi, between *The Black Cat* (1934) and *The Raven* (1936), *The Invisible Ray* trends more towards sci-fi whilst retaining a very gothic atmosphere, particularly in the striking early scenes as director Lambert Hillyer's camera descends on a castle in the Carpathian Mountains, the home of Karloff's antiheroic character Janos Rukh. Janos' wife Diana (Frances Drake) appeals to her husband, who is habitually locked up in his laboratory high in the castle, to prepare himself for a visit by several colleagues he's clashed with and resented in the past, invited to behold Janos' recent breakthrough.



The visiting scientists, including Sir Francis Stevens (Walter Kingsford) and his strident wife Lady Arabella (Beulah Bondi), and Rukh's major nemesis, Dr Felix Benet (Lugosi), as well as the gallant young explorer Ronald Drake (Frank Lawton), are treated to a demonstration of Janos' new capacity to capture and manipulate rays from space, having found that images of the past recorded in them and how to extract them. Rukh shows the visitors a moment from Earth's distant past when a meteorite composed on a mysterious element from the Andromeda galaxy fell somewhere over present-day Nigeria. Benet and the others immediately revoke their criticism of Janos and ask him to join them in a scientific expedition to the region where the meteorite fell. Once in the jungle, Janos locates the meteorite, which lies in a place shunned by the local tribesmen and is marked by fire and smoke spurting out a solid rock cliff. He contrives to keep its location hidden from the others in the expedition, except his wife. But Diana, feeling spurned and closed off from her husband, is falling in love with Ronald.



Janos constructs a device to contain and channel the alien element's extraordinary power which at first provides an extraordinarily destructive weapon, but contracts radiation poisoning that manifests when he starts glowing in the dark and makes his touch instantly lethal, killing a dog when he strokes it. Janos seeks Benet's help, and Benet successfully synthesises a counteractive he must take every day or risk disintegrating on a molecular level on top of being dangerous to others. Benet eventually decides Janos' discovery is too great for him to handle, and Janos himself too unstable, and so publicises it so others can build on his initial work. Janos, increasingly embittered by both losing sole control of the element and his wife who he's agreed to divorce so she can marry Ronald, and with his mind affected by the strange power infesting his body, soon begins a project of murderous revenge.



Hillyer directed hundreds of Westerns over his thirty year career, often working with William S. Hart and Tom Mix, as well as assorted crime films and melodramas, but today he's essentially remembered purely for *The Invisible Ray* and his second Universal chiller, *Dracula's Daughter* (1936), and helming the first screen adaptation of *Batman*, the 1943 serial. Hillyer was drafted in very early in production after the initial director, *Werewolf of London's* (1935) Stuart Walker, quit because of management tensions at Universal. Where *Dracula's Daughter* is flatly realised despite its modern fame for its mild lesbian overtones, *The Invisible Ray* is excellently handled and replete with strong visuals, aided by one of the classiest productions Universal applied to their cycle. In fact some of the quality might represent Walker's groundwork, as certain flourishes, particularly the flowing tracking shots and the generally lush atmosphere, resemble Walker's work on *Werewolf of London*, as well as carrying over the basic theme of an obsessive male savant pushed to become a monster whilst crucified on love for a wife who he is nonetheless unable to love as she needs and so gravitates towards a more normal rival.



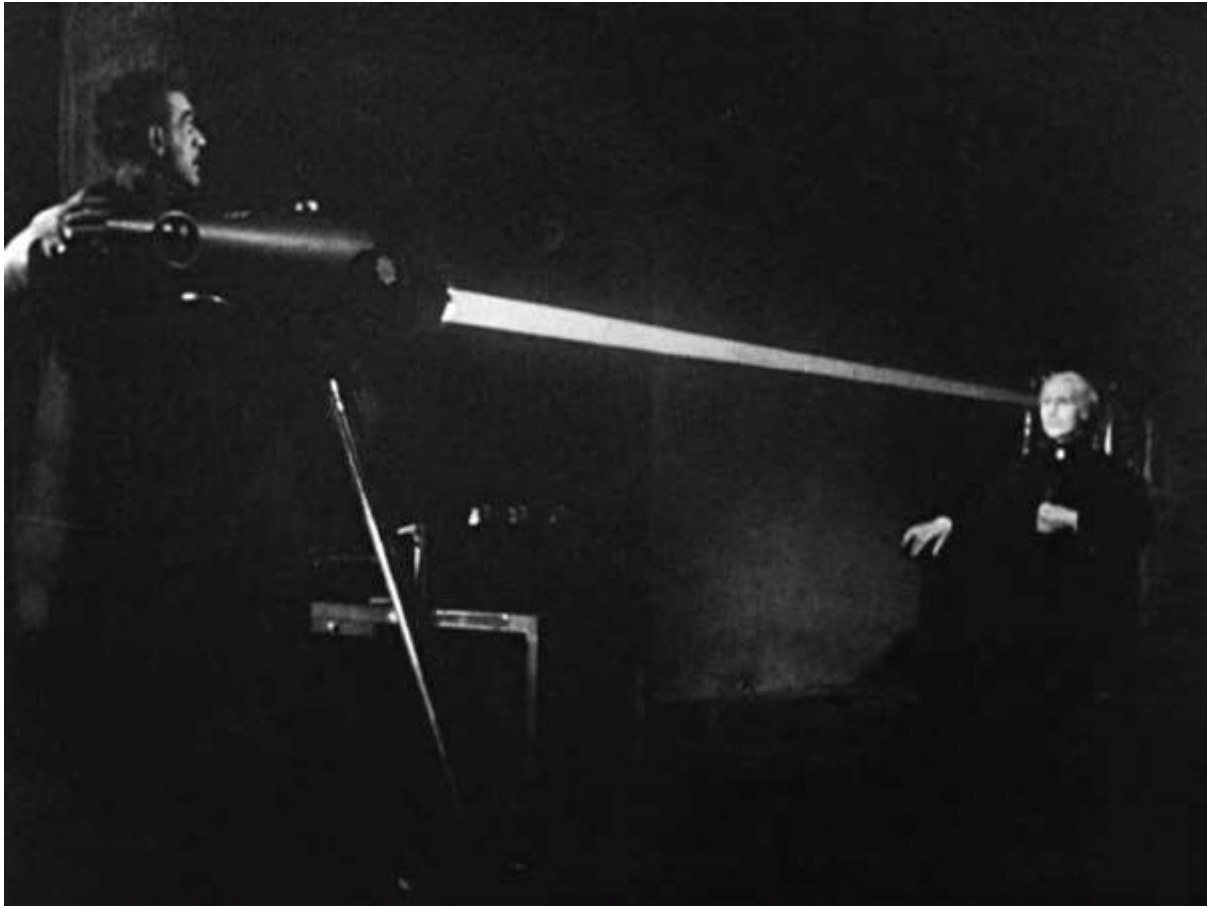
The early scenes conjure a deliciously rarefied and otherworldly mood as Diana and Janos' elderly mother (Violet Kemble Cooper) are essentially introduced as priestesses in a new religion of super-science. Mother Rukh lost her sight aiding Janos and his father in their early experiments with the alien rays, and she maintains a quiet, grim awareness of both the necessity of Janos' research but also its Medusa-like dangers, a tradition she schools Diana in. The motif is visually extended as Diana, looking every inch the Vestal exalter, strides across the battlements of the castle in a white, fluttering dress, ascending to meet the master alchemist in his sky-seizing abode. Janos' demonstration to the assembled scientists is amusingly planetarium-like and the scientific rationale pure gobbledygook, but there's something engaging in the notion of the universe operating like a giant recording device charged with mysterious energies requiring only the right device to unlock the past. He accesses the glowing heart of the universe ironically located close to Conrad's heart of darkness, using it to terrify and cower the local people, and it reminds me that years later Karloff would play Kurtz in a legendary TV take on Conrad. The narrative contains fragments of both the myth of Midas and a twist on Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Dr Rappacini's Daughter* as Janos becomes deadly to living things with all its cruel and intimate mirroring of his fear of human contact and incapacity to hold onto his wife.



One problem with *The Invisible Ray*, unfair as it might be to call it out, is that the basic theme if not the specific plot mechanics were recycled innumerable times in the next few decades. Anyone who's seen horror movies the period will be very familiar with the "mocked mad scientist kills his enemies one by one" storyline, whilst Karloff went on to star over the next few years in a string of movies where he played geniuses whose experiments go haywire, including *The Devil Commands* (1941). But *The Invisible Ray* makes up for the familiarity in the interesting contours in the story. Janos is granted the edge of sympathy so important to the Universal imprimatur. Janos' mother warns him balefully that he should not leave his castle and engage with the world because he's not made for it: "You're not used to people Janos, and you never will be." Events quickly prove how right she was as Janos' experience of being deeply wounded by scepticism and rejection compounds his tendency to detach from the world, driving his attempts to jealously guard his discovery. This only serves to put a wedge between him and his wife, who he loves but cannot use when she's not serving her priestess role, whilst also touching off the megalomaniacal streak the ray's poisoning only unfetters. The crucial moment comes when Diana pleads for Janos to let her into his tent as he's glowing with the radiation power in him, and he begs her not to enter, the last severing act in their marriage that's also Janos' great proof of love.



Janos' determination to prove his command of the ray even after Benet strips him of sole ownership sees him fine-tune his channelling device to the point where he's able to cure his mother's blindness, but soon finds Benet is doing the same thing, curing patients in his Paris surgery. Eventually Janos envisions a row of six statues of saints overlooking the church where Diana and Ronald are married as the actors in his downfall – including himself – and begins killing them, after faking his own death by killing a man he finds in the street and making it look like he was accidentally incinerated by the ray. Jack Fulton's characteristically good special effects are used sparingly to help give Hillyer's images a gently nightmarish tint – the glowing palm print his deadly touch leaves on bodies; the dreamy voyage through time and space punctuated by the glowing meteor plunging to Earth; a huge boulder Janos turns the ray on, melting it rather than exploding it. The early visions of Janos working his machinery in his castle's cavernous reaches whilst swathed in a radiation suit have a quality that seems to have inspired a million comic books. There's a wonderfully weird vignette where, in a new spin on an old urban myth, Benet photographs the eyes of one of Janos's targets after he's found dead and finds: as he suspected, the killer's visage is recorded as the last thing beheld by his victim: the imprint of Janos with his radioactive glow burned into the iris.



Whilst Diana and Ronald's romance is stilted in the customary manner of the romantic subplots in horror movies of this time, the film is remarkably free of intrusive comic relief: most of the levity is supplied by Bondi as the wry and forthright Lady Arabella in a way that fits the surrounds. *The Invisible Man* takes its characters and story seriously, with Janos only slowly succumbing to murderous rage and paranoia. "It began to affect my brain almost immediately," Janos tells Benet of the element's influence in a line phrased as only Karloff can phrase, "I could feel it coming, crawling into the cells." Seeing Karloff and Lugosi together always has the ring of a film buff treat worth savouring, and one of the most interesting aspects here is the casting of Lugosi as a benevolent and decent figure, the character with pure motives who eventually falls victim to those motives, his tendency to be slightly high-handed in his conscientiousness helping compound the looming disaster. Lugosi's restrained, intense performance, polar opposite to his hambone villainy in *The Raven*, nicely dovetails with Karloff's shuffling, suffering, fire-eyed pathos and menace.





The climactic confrontation of the two men is particularly good as Benet tries to arrange Janos' capture only to be caught off guard and cornered, Janos asking with his viciously mordant purr, "Shall we shake hands?", as Benet tries to draw his gun before Janos can deliver the touch of death: Janos wins. *The Invisible Ray* doesn't sustain the eerie and strikingly visualised quality of its early scenes, and the straightforward tilt of the plot might ultimately keep *The Invisible Ray* from the highest echelons of 1930s fantastic cinema, but it's still remarkably strong. The breath of the tragic so important to Universal's ideal for its horror movies flows through *The Invisible Ray*, culminating as Janos even in his most maniacal state can't bring himself to kill Diana, but remains so fixated he still intends to kill Ronald. Meanwhile his mother, brought by Benet to intervene, confronts her son and swats the counteragent dose from his hands before he can take it, a motif of parental love in ensuring a child's destruction *The Wolf Man* (1941) would revisit. Accepting the judgement, Janos turns about and leaps through a window as he starts to smoke, and becomes a fireball plunging to the street below before vanishing like the ghost of all his old dreams and ardours. There are some things man is not meant to know, etc, but offered here with just enough poeticism to retain its power. *4D Man* (1959) is a semi-remake.



## **Dune: Part One (2021)**



**Director: Denis Villeneuve**

**Screenwriters: Eric Roth, Jon Spaihts, Denis Villeneuve**

As a dedicated fan of Frank Herbert's *Dune* and its literary children, I anticipated a new film adaptation with a mixture of hope and apprehension. *Dune* has managed to sustain a potent cult over the half-century since its publication, its influence manifest in subsequent hits as diverse as *Star Wars*, *The Matrix*, and *Game of Thrones*, to the point where its building blocks now seem pervasively familiar, even if its most individual and esoteric qualities remain largely untapped and evergreen in their strangeness. Herbert's legendarium, with its encoded metaphors for mind-expanding drug use, fossil fuel dependency, post-colonial politics, nascent feminism, and religious seeking, seemed exactly attuned to gathering forces in the modern zeitgeist and so caught the imagination of three generations of dorm room dreamers, but also connected with a larger, more mainstream audience in a way hardcore science fiction rarely does, albeit also erecting a firm barrier between those who could penetrate Herbert's odd, dense writing style and those left totally cold by it. On a more immediate level, Herbert's preoccupation with the figure of a quasi-messianic hero who finds himself anointed the one person who can rebound from near-oblivion to lead an uprising helped connect the science fiction genre's roots in pulp heroism and exotic adventuring with a new preoccupation with the experience of maturation as the key modern narrative, birthing the "chosen one" motif in just about every emulating fantastical epic since.



And, of course, there were earlier versions. David Lynch's big, bizarre, contorted, but almost endlessly fascinating 1984 version became mostly remembered as a debacle echoing in the corridors of pop culture history but has since gathered a fervent cult following. Jim Harrison's 2000 TV miniseries proved modestly popular and proficient in its indulgence: whilst scarcely memorable, it seems to have laid seeds for the age of prestige television. For myself, I love both the Herbert novel and Lynch's film, even if they're passions that cannot ever quite overlap: they exist a little like matter and antimatter, reflecting the image of the other but unable to touch without annihilation. Lynch's film manages the unique task of being both maddeningly fastidious and wilfully odd as adaptation, sometimes obsessed with communicating the most finicky details from Herbert and elsewhere badly distorting and even avoiding important elements. Now comes the first part of Denis Villeneuve's proposed two-installment adaptation of *Dune*, a bombastic unit of expenditure and epic portent that seems to have been produced with a determination to avoid the heralded mistakes of Lynch's version, by taking a leaf from Andres Muschietti's financially successful adaptation of Stephen King's *It* (2017-19) and splitting the book into two movies.



It's easy to see a dismaying motive behind the new version: present-day Hollywood's reliance on familiar intellectual property with a hopefully baked-in audience has become so unshakeable that it

would rather try again to adapt a book commonly described as unfilmable after Lynch's version proved a massive financial failure, on the vague expectation the novel's fans will come, than take a chance on something new. But hope for a new adaptation that would prove sufficiently balanced and coherent, able to at once honour the material's most specific qualities and appeal to a big audience, has long preoccupied *Dune*'s fandom, particularly as I suspect every aficionado has long cherished their personal idea of how it should be done. Bifurcating the story promises that the novel's meticulous construction of its imagined future 8000-odd years hence could be carefully meted out along with the strong, fairly straightforward central storyline. This approach has its own, big risks of course, as any of the three people who remember *The Golden Compass* (2007) can testify. Regardless, in familiar fashion, *Dune* unfolds in a distant future in which humans have colonised tracts of the galaxy and have developed a neo-feudal system of control where an all-powerful Emperor and the feudal houses under him administrate the many planets.



We see the House of Atreides, led by the canny and noble but world-weary Duke Leto (Oscar Isaacs), assigned to take over the planet Arrakis by his Emperor, displacing the previous clan of administrators, their hated rivals the Harkonnens, and taking on the responsibility of mining the substance called spice that only occurs there. The spice is absolutely crucial to the shape and operation of the Empire, so whilst the spice mining is an incredibly lucrative business, failure to keep it flowing could bring down harsh penalties. Leto and his advisors also suspect they're being set up for a fall, a correct assumption, as the Harkonnens are being backed by the Emperor to wipe the Atreides out and rid him of rivals. Leto and his concubine Lady Jessica (Rebecca Ferguson) have one son, the teenaged Paul (Timothée Chalamet): Jessica is a member of the Bene Gesserit, a sect who operate at the nexus of priestesses, nuns, witches, and genetic scientists. The sect has long been dedicated to breeding a human with psychic gifts pronounced enough to see the future and actively control future human evolution, a notional being dubbed the Kwisatz Haderach in ancient prophecy, and Jessica represents the near-culmination of the project. But Paul's birth, the result of Jessica's desire to please Leto after she unexpectedly fell in love with him, disrupted the project, and now Paul is displaying nascent signs of being the Kwisatz Haderach. The Atreides are attacked by the Harkonnens, who break through their defences thanks to the treachery of their house physician Wellington Yueh (Chang Chen), but Yueh's complex motives also see him arrange to save Paul and Jessica from the massacre.



Villeneuve wisely casts familiar faces even in relatively minor parts, making *Dune* something of an old-fashioned star-studded epic, even if it resists the Lynch version's delight in showing off its all-star cast in a long curtain call-like final credits scene. Jason Momoa and Josh Brolin play the ultraloyal and omniscient Atridees warriors Duncan Idaho and Gurney Halleck, respectively, whilst Stephen McKinley Henderson plays the house strategist and "Mentat" Thufir Hawat. The three actors have the ability to swiftly and effectively make their characters interesting and palpable, even as they're also essentially wasted. Brolin gets one of the very few jots of humour in the film as he maintains his familiar tight and stoic grimace even whilst answering Leto's teasing command to smile with "I am smiling." Charlotte Rampling is somewhat inevitably cast as Reverend Mother Mohiam, the stern, mysterious, haughty exemplar of the Bene Gesserit creed who nominally works for the Emperor but pushes the Bene Gesserit agenda at all times. Liet Kynes, the Imperial ecologist assigned to study Arrakis turned covert renegade and a male in the book, has here been turned into a woman for some reason or another, with Sharon Duncan-Brewster taking the role. Javier Bardem turns up for two scenes to mumble impressively as Stilgar, a leader of the so-called Fremen, the original human colonists of Arrakis who long since adapted to life on the planet and consider themselves its true custodians, but have since suffered from persecution at the hands of the Imperial and Harkonnen enforcers.



Villeneuve and his co-screenwriters Jon Spaihts and Eric Roth peel away much of the story superstructure in digging down to the fundamental melodrama that forms the spine of the plot, which, he's decided, is the fate of the key Atreides themselves – Leto, Jessica, and Paul, with interpersonal exchanges between the three trying for a mix of familial affection and pained gravitas, and the tragedy that presages the rise of the young scion on the path to revenge and mystical transformation. There's an early scene in the novel, dutifully recreated in all versions, which provides a galvanising moment in the narrative, when Paul is visited by Mohiam, who insists on testing his mettle for at that point obscure reasons. She forces him to stick his hand into a box that induces terrible pain, challenging him to withstand the pain or be killed with a poisoned needle pressed to his throat, in a rite of passage designed to distinguish if he's a true human, infinitely capable of patience and resistance, or a mere "animal," slave to impulse and reaction. It's a scene that, I expect, most genuinely hooks the attention of about-to-be fans, as it not only presents a thrilling situation, but also encapsulates much of how Herbert's writing and storytelling works – the lengthy, ritualistic confrontation of strong personalities, the suspense based in the problem of a surviving a situation when hemmed in by potential checkmates of lethal capacity where cast-iron willpower must be met with the same, and the unsettling description of a teenage boy being forced to endure perfect agony without flinching as a preparation for life in a world without safe and comforting moral boundaries.



Villeneuve handles the scene as well as Lynch did, in the contrast between Chalamet's open-faced youthfulness and Mohiam's veil-clad and forbidding embodiment of all that's powerfully arcane and dismissive of weakness, particularly with the added touch of Jessica able to maintain sympathy with her son from outside the room and experiencing what he experiences, reciting the famous mantra against fear. Villeneuve and his screenwriting team seem to be trying to take a leaf from *The Godfather's* (1972) example in trying to communicate the relationships between the central family characters whilst they seem to mostly discuss business, as in another early scene where Paul and his father discuss the looming challenge before them whilst walking between grave markers of their ancestors on the grey and watery world of Caladan that has long been their home and fiefdom. The trouble is despite this approach I never really felt convinced by their family dynamics. Isaac and Ferguson are strong actors and are undoubtedly the right age, but it still feels a little odd seeing them cast as the grizzled patriarch and weirdly hot mother who has a perturbing dynamic with her on-screen son. It doesn't help that Isaac and Ferguson are both forced to quell their natural charisma to fit into Villeneuve's pinched, po-faced dramatic style. Villeneuve's essential approach is one of characters muttering earnestly at one-another in dimly-lit spaces.



What's surprising about Villeneuve's *Dune* is that despite being given a nominal wealth of space to tell the story, it doesn't really know what to do with it. Despite the simplifications, the script essentially settles for being an exposition machine, with very few flashes of effective and engaging interpersonal detail, like Paul being teased by Gurney whilst being welcomed for the first time into one of the House strategy meetings. It's the sort of movie that makes you long for the day when a director would spice up an epic with a few dancing girls or something. Villeneuve takes almost exactly as long as Lynch did in telling the story from beginning to the point where Leto finds Fremen housekeeper Shadout Mapes (Golda Rosheuvel) dying, signalling the start of the Harkonnen attack, and then spends the majority of the next hour and twenty minutes of running time on a listless succession of chase scenes Lynch was more effective in compressing. As a fan of the book I'm in a dichotomous position in this regard. Familiarity helps me keep up and indeed a step ahead of everything so I don't need to expend the mental energy it will undoubtedly cost a newcomer to the material. But it also makes me susceptible to possible boredom when I simply see things being checked off rather than being truly, creatively explored. Unfortunately, that's what I began to feel watching Villeneuve's *Dune*.



The Quebecois Villeneuve emerged as a feature filmmaker with 1998's *August 32nd On Earth*, a debut that immediately gained him notice as a talent screening at the Cannes Film Festival, and his French-



language follow-ups, *Maelstrom* (2000), *Polytechnique* (2009), and *Incendies* (2010), were all acclaimed and award-garnered, with the middle film stirring some disquiet in portraying an shooting spree at the University of Montreal in 1989. Villeneuve then went Hollywood with the would-be thoughtful, moody thriller *Prisoners* (2013), sparking a swift rise up the Hollywood totem pole as he followed with the paranoia study *Enemy* (2013), the drug war drama *Sicario* (2015), and sci-fi tales *Arrival* (2016) and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017). I haven't seen Villeneuve's French-language films: if I had I might have a different perspective on his later stabs at mating art movie postures with popular storytelling. As far as they go, I find Villeneuve a largely insufferable filmmaker. But he's one who certainly seems to be finding a particular niche in current mainstream cinema discourse similar to those held in the recent past by David Fincher and Christopher Nolan, in that his particular approach seems to impress some and dismay others through a carefully filtered aesthetic sensibility aiming to deliver chic spectacle.



Villeneuve's mainstream works to date have been defined by this smothering aesthetic matched to storylines that are generally far less deep and intensive than the stylistic cues insist they are. Those cues, including a relentlessly drab colour palette and droning, booming music scores, seem to me hallmarks of a particular brand of modern quasi-seriousness even when, upon close inspection, there's little substance to back them up in Villeneuve's films. I still cringe when I remember how the plot of *Arrival* was explained by a randomly info-dumping Chinese general to the time-unmoored heroine, or *Sicario* affected to be a grim investigation of the drug war only to become a ridiculous revenge drama, and *Prisoners* waded through highly unsubtle character signposting and emblazoned themes even whilst affecting a glaze of knit-browed profundity. Like *Blade Runner 2049*, *Dune* sees Villeneuve being relatively restrained, but there's still something relentlessly pummelling and joyless about his filmmaking to me. *Dune* has been sucked dry of all its exotic strangeness and dynamism, all its semi-surreal, florid liveliness, with a kind of dry, pseud efficiency in its place. "My planet Arrakis is so beautiful when the sun is low," Chani (Zendaya), Kynes' daughter and a Fremen warrior, is heard in voiceover at the very outset. This immediately evinces an attempt by the filmmakers to combine exposition and low-key genre poetry, a method that continues throughout. But the unconvincing clumsiness of the line, the lack of actual, proper expressive language and specificity apparent in it, also neatly demonstrate how this method fails.



Rather than the artists who provided beloved illustrations and cover art for the books, like Bruce Pennington and John Schoenherr, Villeneuve moves to take inspiration from more European styles in sci-fi illustration, with a particular emulation of the work of Jean 'Moebius' Girard in the oddball costuming and weirdly-shaped spaceships, designs which, as Luc Besson's *The Fifth Element* (1997) which had actual Moebius design work proved, just don't work very well off the page. But that's a relatively minor issue. It's in the specifics that Villeneuve really falls down. The actual uses of the spice and way the substance informs the entire social, political, and economic structure of Herbert's universe are more or less dismissed in a couple of pithy lines of dialogue, and so we've subtly but firmly shifted from any attempt to convey the depth of Herbert's text in favour of simply delivering its most basic story points. Sometimes this can be a wise move – Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy worked in large part because whilst it happily included much of J.R.R. Tolkien's esoterica, it knew how to impart it in a fashion that wove around rather than interrupted the central story. The trouble is *Dune* doesn't work in the same way. Tolkien deliberately structured his stories so you didn't have to worry about the quasi-angelic background of the many magical figures including Sauron, Gandalf, and Balrog, even if to understand all that does make things more explicable: nonetheless we intrinsically grasp their function. Similarly, in *Dune*, it's possible to approach it without thinking too much about the larger structure and historical meaning of organisations like the Bene Gesserit and the guild of mutated Navigators who need the spice to fuel their precognitive ability to steer colossal spaceships.



But – and this is a large but – to not understand those things means to miss what’s important and interesting about *Dune* as a mythos and as a work of speculative fiction. If you haven’t read the books you’ll have no idea from this movie about the Navigators; whilst the function and method of the Mentats are depicted through Thufir, just exactly what they are and why they exist is likewise impossible to properly deduce, nor why the flying machines and spacecraft are conspicuously missing guidance computers. Anyone who’s read the book knows about the Butlerian Jihad, which saw all robots and artificial intelligences destroyed and forbidden in the universe, and obliging human beings to stretch their abilities to limits unthought-of in our current time, most of it allowed by the spice. Herbert’s real fascination was with human intelligence and physical development as our vehicle, for which our machines are mere externalised devices. I didn’t sense any real intellectual curiosity in Villeneuve’s *Dune*, nor desire to put across Herbert’s world beyond what’s strictly necessary to the plot. In Villeneuve’s vision, the spice is reduced from a substance of vast, fantastical conceptual importance to the mere, tinny metaphor for fossil fuel it started as, combined with a kind of light hallucinogen. Villeneuve’s renderings of Paul’s visions are the most banal imaginable, consisting of lots of adolescent yearning glimpses of Chani, swanning about in flowing garb, and occasional glimpses of tussling warriors.



This tendency, to mine the prosaic from the visionary, is an awfully common failing of a lot of recent genre film and television in the contemporary obsession with grounding and pseudo-realism. With Villeneuve it’s particularly acute, having already taken Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982) and tapped it for straightforward plotting and self-consciously obvious thematic, reducing the original’s unique dreamlike palette and narrative density to just another plodding blend of action movie and TV commercial-like sentimentality in its odes to human qualities. Similarly, there’s a monotony to the acting and dramatic beats here. The introduction of the Harkonnens themselves, including the bulbous, infinitely malevolent Baron Harkonnen himself (Stellan Skarsgard), his henchman Raban (Dave Bautista), and Mentat Piter De Vries (David Dastmalchian), takes the mumbling-in-dark-rooms aesthetic to a logical conclusion: the entire world of the Harkonnens seems to have a lighting problem. The obvious, cliché casting of Skarsgard, swathed in a fat suit, is matched by the equal, exhausting obviousness of the nods to Marlon Brando’s performance in *Apocalypse Now* (1979), as Skarsgard strokes his greasy bald pate with monstrous meditation.



The portrayal of the Harkonnens in Lynch's film has long seemed to me the biggest problem with that work, in trying to graft Lynch's penchant for leering id-beasts and wild, bristling bullies onto Herbert's material with its hypnotic fascination with intellectual evil and total amorality. And yet I found myself longing for the vividness of Kenneth McMillan's Harkonnen and his outsized delight in obscene behaviour, compared to this drab substitution, and Lynch's most gleefully appalling touches, like giving a poisoning victim a surgically stitched-together cat and rat to milk for an antidote daily, or Raban crushing a small animal and drinking its bodily fluids like orange juice. The closest Villeneuve gets to such twisted flavour is a brief glimpse of some genetic chimera, part humanoid, part spider that his Harkonnens keep as a pet. Yueh was played with some force by Dean Stockwell in Lynch's film, and his pathos as a man who betrays himself and his friends for the sake of one, desperate tilt at a more personal revenge was allowed to register as he screamed at Harkonnen after being stabbed in the back for his aid, "You think I don't know what I've done? For my wife?" By comparison, Cheng's Yueh is bland and blasé even as he dies, his motive not suggested until just before he's killed, one of the many tributaries of potential melodramatic juice reduced to mere plot function in the face of the impassive-grandiose style. There is, that said, a good touch when Harkonnen has Leto prisoner thanks to Yueh's machinations: Villeneuve has the Duke stripped naked and laid prone before his enemy, a potent little encapsulation of his sudden vulnerability before a truly evil foe. But Lynch's crazy, disturbing imagination imbued his *Dune* with something by and large missing from this one. Which is one reason I've long felt that Lynch's *Dune* is not a perfect adaptation but is perfectly itself, wielding a specificity and, most importantly, a fearlessness of creative passion almost entirely missing from contemporary big-budget cinema.



Not that I want to get bogged down in simply comparing Lynch and Villeneuve's versions. Villeneuve goes for an aesthetic, full of monumental forms and a kind of medieval minimalism in décor and design, that's quite different to the tangled Gothicism, Austro-Hungarian martial dress, and madcap Rococo dominant in Lynch's film, and it's a look that struck me as more appropriate to the material. And yet Villeneuve's style of shooting too often has the hyper-sharp, gritty-glossy look of high-end video game cutscenes, particularly in the special effects sequences, although there's still some genuine awe stoked by visions like the Atreides fleet being disgorged by one of the colossal "heighliner" space transport vessels. His vision of Caladan makes it look like a drizzly patch of New Brunswick – understandable perhaps for Villeneuve – rather than a watery world where the primal power of the ocean matches and opposes the similar power of Arrakis. Villeneuve swaps out a blue filter for Caladan for a grey-brown one on Arrakis, and he makes the desert planet relentlessly dingy and colourless. Villeneuve's approach has drawn a lot of comparison to *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), but I can't see why. David Lean (who was apparently approached to direct the first version at one point, whilst Herbert himself took strong inspiration from T.E. Lawrence's story) knew how to convey the scale of the desert as well as its physical extremes through his approach to light, framing, and colour – the more brilliantly blue the skies the more relentless the sense of sun beating down, of exposure and dire physical straits. Villeneuve makes all of his shots colourless, his skies filled with omnipresent dust, and his desert looks, well, rather tepid.



One telling disparity in Villeneuve's take on *Blade Runner* was where Scott's street scenes were teeming with life carefully conveyed not just through hiring extras and costuming them but with the camera's sense of how to pick up that life, Villeneuve's felt stodgy and depopulated. There's a similar lack of any real energy and sense of lifestyle in his approach here. Here everyone seems afraid to raise their voices too high or gesticulate too much lest they disturb the carefully composed symmetry of the shots. There's genuine visual ingenuity sometimes, that said. Herbert's cleverest touches, like the ban on nuclear weapons and the personalised force-fields that have returned warfare back to a matter of who's best at hand-to-hand combat rather than one of projectile weapons, helped at once to give a clever legitimacy to the old-school space opera's Wagner-in-space sensibility, whilst also feeling coherent and well-thought-through in terms of its imagined future's construction, where the path to victory for both villains and heroes means threading a path through seemingly impregnable bulwarks of technology and behaviour. The visualisation of the fights between force-field-wearing warriors are good, but only when dealing with one-on-one fights. The big, tragic combat between the invading Harkonnens and Atreides host is oddly curtailed and lacking much dynamism in staging, the sort of moment that really makes you wish some ebullient meathead like Zack Snyder or Neil Marshall was directing rather than a hyperfussy aesthete. Herbert's ornithopters, the usual mode of flight on Arrakis, long seemed one of those ideas easy to imagine and write but just about impossible to effectively film, are realised nonetheless with true visual élan, with Villeneuve's take offering helicopters with side-mounted blade that beat like dragonfly-like wings. There are some truly beautiful images scattered throughout, testifying to the cinematographer Greig Fraser's masterful talents, including the striking prologue depicting Fremen resistance against the Harkonnen spice miners during a sandstorm.



And of course there's the sandworms, the massive beasts that infest the sands of Arrakis and provide an omnipresent threat, as well as a potential source of power, and are connected to the spice. Villeneuve handles the first scene involving a worm well, in part because it's a strong suspense situation: Leto and his team, being flown over the desert by Kynes, spot a worm advancing on a manned spice harvesting machine and race to save the crew before the unimaginably large creature swallows the harvester up. Modern special effects are more than equal to the task of realising the worms, and there's a nice tightening of the suspense as Paul is abruptly distracted during the rescue as he breathes in the unrefined spice and is plunged into a visionary state, demanding Gurney fetch him, the two almost getting caught in the liquefying sands caused by the worm's approach. After this, however, in the subsequent appearance by the worms as one swallows up a team of Imperial "Sardaukar" troops after they've executed Kynes in the desert, and another chases after Paul and Jessica, the worms rapidly become familiar and prove a bit dull-looking: whilst obviously better-realised in a technical sense, they never register as effectively nightmarish as Carlo Rambaldi's creations for Lynch did, particularly in the

latter pursuit. Villeneuve's versions have long hair-like teeth and perfectly round mouths and crinkly, puckered skin that make them look a bit, well, anal, particularly in a very misjudged shot when one pauses it attack and sits centre-frame. Not that this represents some lurch towards Freudian imagery. If Lynch arguably went overboard in trying to tease out the surrealist imagery and dream symbolism inherent in Herbert's material, Villeneuve's edition strains in the opposite direction to make everything clean and hard-edged, plunging Herbert back into the regulation techno-fascist style he broke with.



Momoa's presence, with his innate muscular swagger and obliquely twisting grin, gives the film a thankful jolt of matinee heroism that's also appropriate for the character, who, as his name suggests, is offered as a kind of holdover of an ancient kind of frontier grit – one reason Herbert kept reviving Duncan over and over in the books. Villeneuve gives him an appropriately spectacular end, something Lynch fumbled rather badly, as he fights a unit of the Sardaukar hunting Paul and Jessica after the Atreides' downfall, still managing to battle on even after being skewered with a blade. Momoa's presence is particularly vital as he offsets Chalamet. Chalamet is definitely a current It Boy on the cinema scene with his anime-drawing-of-a-young-man looks, and he's an actor with great potential – he did, for instance, an excellent job as the compulsory stand-in for the director of *A Rainy Day In New York* (2020). The film tosses in a ribbing joke about his lack of muscular manhood, but it doesn't quite cover up the fact that he feels wrong in the role, whereas Kyle MacLachlan, whatever else you can say about him, expertly negotiated the shift from eager teenager to fearsome messiah: here Chalamet kept reminding me a little too keenly of his character in *Lady Bird* (2018) as a gangly brat who read a Marxist text once, here with a few added taekwondo lessons. One problem is that Villeneuve's relentless approach to the style means the only moment where Paul feels at all boyish is when he first meets Duncan on screen, displaying a smile reserved for a kind of older brother or alternative father hero figure. Later in the film when he's called upon to display emerging grit and gravitas he falls totally flat.



A more obvious problem with *Dune: Part One* is there in the title. We don't get a complete story here, and the point where Villeneuve and company choose to leave off is at once fairly natural but also tormenting only in being anticlimactic. Villeneuve ends not on a cliffhanger but at a relatively lackadaisical story juncture, as Paul and Jessica are accepted into the Fremen fold after Paul finally meets Chani, and he is obliged to kill a Fremen, Jamis (Babs Olusanmokun), when the offended and xenophobic warrior challenges him to a duel, a fight that establishes Paul really does have a deadly streak as well as training. This provides a solid fight scene that nonetheless caps off the multimillion dollar blockbuster about some kind of war in the stars with a knife fight. "This is only the beginning," Chani says in a trailer-ready line, whilst looking and sounding just like a sophomore at a SoCal performing arts school. The time *Dune: Part One* spent on the shelf awaiting post-COVID release is telling as Zendaya still looks rather young and pouchy-cheeked, with no sign of the impressive maturity she brought to bear in this year's *Malcolm & Marie* – not that she's in the film long enough to make much impression either way. Hans Zimmer matches Villeneuve's style perfectly in his scoring, alternating drones and ululating songstresses and throbbing-propulsive, drum-thumping cues in a succession of current scoring clichés. Zimmer's scores are inseparable from the contemporary blockbuster scene, and more specifically from the way movies are sold now: Zimmer's work maintains a perfect synergy with the art of modern movie trailers, and in effect his work essentially does advertising for the movie within itself, refusing any kind of lyrical invitation in an imaginative universe but instead twisting the viewer's wrist to find it all grand and darkly thrilling.





Herbert nodded to the early history of science fiction with *Dune*, with quite a bit of *Flash Gordon* and Edgar Rice Burroughs's John Carter of Mars tales in its makeup as well as more sophisticated concerns and investigation of mythopoeic patterns. So to a certain extent it's fair enough that the movie emphasises this aspect, even if it doesn't do it all that well. But Herbert deconstructed that kind of old-fashioned adventure tale at the same time, commenting on what's often seen as the quasi-imperialist assumptions of stories where outsiders, usually white and western, become leaders of far-flung populaces, whilst his narrative both mimicked and commented upon the power of messianic mythology, uncovering links with twentieth century totalitarian movements. Herbert kept in mind things like the way Moses' emergence as prophet and nation leader led directly to a war of extermination after the wanderings in the desert waged upon occupants of the Promised Land, and saw the way such narratives are pitched as self-justifying for aggrieved nations. He also had an evident fascination for Arabic legend and culture, appropriate considering the story's basis in the current reality of the oil boom in the Middle East, but also tackled in a complicating fashion: Herbert's future is a great melting pot of all past human culture and identity, where religions, creeds, and races have long since all formed into a melange as rich as the spice. The Fremen are hardly supposed to be mere stand-ins for Arabic peoples, but a society that's retained and transmitted a classical culture as appropriate to their lifestyle. This is, after all, once again supposed to be science fiction. Villeneuve's choice nonetheless is to hammer home the relevance and the more stolid side of the fantasy by emphasising the Fremen culture as quasi-Arabic, which manages at once to be more of a sop to emphasising contemporary parable but also more retrograde and confused in the contained politics.



As for Paul's dread of the potential of unleashing a genocidal holy war, Villeneuve signals, at least, unlike Lynch who avoided and indeed entirely contradicted it, that he plans to deal with this consequence, but still only has Paul very quickly mutter some malarkey about holy war along with some flash-cut visions of a bloody hand. Lynch's theatrical cut was forced to compress the second half of the novel in extremely ungainly fashion, so in this regard Villeneuve has left himself plenty of room to deal with the oncoming deluge of fresh weirdness, including Paul's self-inflicted visionary trip to emerge as Kwisatz Haderach, the arrival of his sister Alia, the bloodthirsty adult in a child's body, and the great battle for control of Arrakis and the Empire, as well as the bleak side to Paul's ascension. And yet I'm also forced to ponder how Villeneuve will drain these of their perverted fervour. The ultimate impression *Dune: Part One* left me with was of something utilitarian, a work that seems to have finally managed, judging by the box office and general reception, the task of successfully selling Herbert's creation to a broad audience, and indeed it's worth celebrating insofar as it finally revives hope for

franchise blockbusters more ambitious and mature than superhero movies. But the price paid for this is pyrrhic, as too much of what made Herbert's work lasting and interesting has been sacrificed, and what's left in its place is occasionally striking but essentially inert. Moreover, it forces me to say something I never, ever expected to say: Lynch's version remains the superior.

## **Eternals (2021)**



The latest entry in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Chloe Zhao's *Eternals* has suffered both a weight of expectation and eagerly simmering scorn in the lead-up to its release. *Eternals* has been publicised on the back of Zhao's Oscar win for 2020's *Nomadland*, with the promise Zhao would set the seal on the MCU's imperial might by risking some new artistic seriousness, and for the allegedly revolutionary diversity of its cast, which is roughly as diverse as the cast of, say, *G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra* (2009). This however managed to make a broad swathe of potential viewers sceptical of such carefully marketed progressive credentials and corporate-approved auteurism, on top of a general critical fatigue with the industrial dominance and increasing storytelling laziness of the Disney-Marvel money machine and superhero movies in general. It doesn't help that *Eternals* comes out of the gate parading a new self-importance in the series, with an epic running time closing in on three hours. Zhao, a former documentary maker who made her initial foray as a feature filmmaker with the spare and poetic blend of fiction and veracity *The Rider* (2019), never suggested the type of filmmaker who would feel much affinity with the grandiose fantastical action of the MCU, but it's where the money and the populist prestige are now in Hollywood, and all rivers flow uphill there.



*Eternals* has to find space in the now crowded and well-defined MCU precincts, adapting a comic book created by legendary comic book creator Jack Kirby in the early 1970s when he was indulging his cosmic streak to the hilt. His *Eternals* property drew heavily in turn from mid-20th century sci-fi, the pop pseudoscience of Erich Von Daniken in mooted alien influence on human history, and a tincture of Gnostic theology. Kirby's melange came in the form of a team of ageless, powerful humanoids sent to Earth by a being called Arishem, one of a race of cosmic entities called Celestials whose propagation helps supply the universe with energy and fertility. The alien visitors, who belong to a breed created to serve the Celestials called Eternals, have been assigned to protect fledgling human civilisations from a ravaging species of intergalactic predator called Deviants. Although the Eternals are allowed to work a positive, behind-the-scenes impact on human development, they are nonetheless under strict instruction not to intervene in local struggles and history, with killing Deviants their first and last priority. Zhao uses a flashback structure to depict the Eternals as they become increasingly frustrated with this project, finally splitting up as a team after they kill off the last Deviants around the same time as Cortes' conquest of Mexico, and events in the present day as they're forced to reunite again as ominous events demand.



Like some of the other recent entries in the MCU, *Eternals* has to awkwardly explain why these mighty new protagonists were absent through the travails that culminated with the wrath of Thanos in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) and *Endgame* (2019). Their assignment to purely guard against Deviants doesn't quite convince in this regard. The Eternals team all have names that sound like famous figures of classical mythology and religion because they are the historical basis for those figures. There's Sersi (Gemma Chan), gifted in transforming matter. Ikaris (Richard Madden) can fly and shoot energy beams from his eyes. Druig (Barry Keoghan) can take possession of other beings. Thena (Angelina Jolie) is a dynamic warrior who can conjure a lance and shield of pure energy. Kingo (Kumail Nanjiani) can fire bolts of plasma and also has amazing powers of comic relief. Makkari (Lauren Ridloff) wields incredible speed. Sprite (Lia McHugh) is a conjurer of illusion and a storyteller, locked in age as preadolescent. Phastos (Brian Tyree Henry) loves invention and works of the mind, and labours to inspire human technological innovation. Gilgamesh (Don Lee Ma Dong-seok) is a tough and earthy fighter but whose greatest ability proves to be nurturing. Their commander, Ajak (Salma Hayek), is found dead early in the film, apparently killed by a mysterious new Deviant that seems to have the ability to absorb the Eternals' powers, allowing it to evolve rapidly.



Sersi is introduced holding down the guise as a museum worker in London and posing as Sprite's guardian. She has a mortal boyfriend, Dane Whitman (Kit Harington), although she still carries a torch for Ikaris, her long-time lover, who suddenly abandoned her and vanished centuries earlier. After the super-Deviant attacks her and Ikaris intervenes to fight it off, they seek out Ajak, only to find her dead. A glowing, globular device that allowed Ajak to keep in contact with Arishem and the marker of her authority over the team, slips out of Ajak's chest and enters Sersi's, rather than Ikaris, who most members of the Eternals seemed to assume was their natural next leader. Sersi and Ikaris begin gathering the team, a fraught process. Thena, who often suffered from fits of dissociative and indiscriminate violence after millennia of battle, is being cared for by Gilgamesh in the Australian outback. Druig has retreated to a jungle dwelling where he has fostered a small human community he's determined to keep unpolluted by the outside world. Phastos, who completely lost confidence in humanity and his own projects after the bombing of Hiroshima, has taken up with a husband, Ben (Haaz Sleiman), and found new faith in raising a son with him. Makkari chose seclusion, holing up in the Eternals' buried space ship. And in a touch the film milks for all the humour value it's worth, Kingo got into movie acting, becoming a star in the Bollywood industry, and liked it so much he's now posing as the fifth member of a male acting dynasty.



*Eternals* places heavy – too heavy for many, I expect – emphasis on depicting the Eternals themselves, both as individuals and a group. Zhao repeatedly avoids any try for narrative velocity in favour of exploring their angsts and outlooks: rather than enabling the plot, the project of seeking out and probing the perspectives of the various Eternals actually is the plot, the process of the Eternals weighing up the price their existence has extracted from them, and the question as to whether it was all worth it. The twists that set the last act in motion stem directly from what we've been told, and not told, about each Eternal. As with the X-Men, another Marvel stable of prodigies, they're defined by both the qualities they've absorbed from humanity and also their separateness. Zhao tries to invest the Eternals with a sense of weighty function and substance in the fraying of their fellowship and its troubled reforming, from Thena's attempts to regain her former unflappable cool and relish of havoc, to Sersi's struggle with learning the actual motive behind the team's assignment to Earth. That becomes clear when she succeeds in making proper contact with Arishem and learns the dread truth: they've actually been fostering human development to provide sufficient life force to bring forth the birth of another Celestial, whose emergence will destroy the planet. The Eternals themselves, she learns, are artificially-created beings, whose memories are wiped after each assignment to a Celestial's cradle planet, but the erasure doesn't always entirely work, and Thena's mental troubles are the result of this.



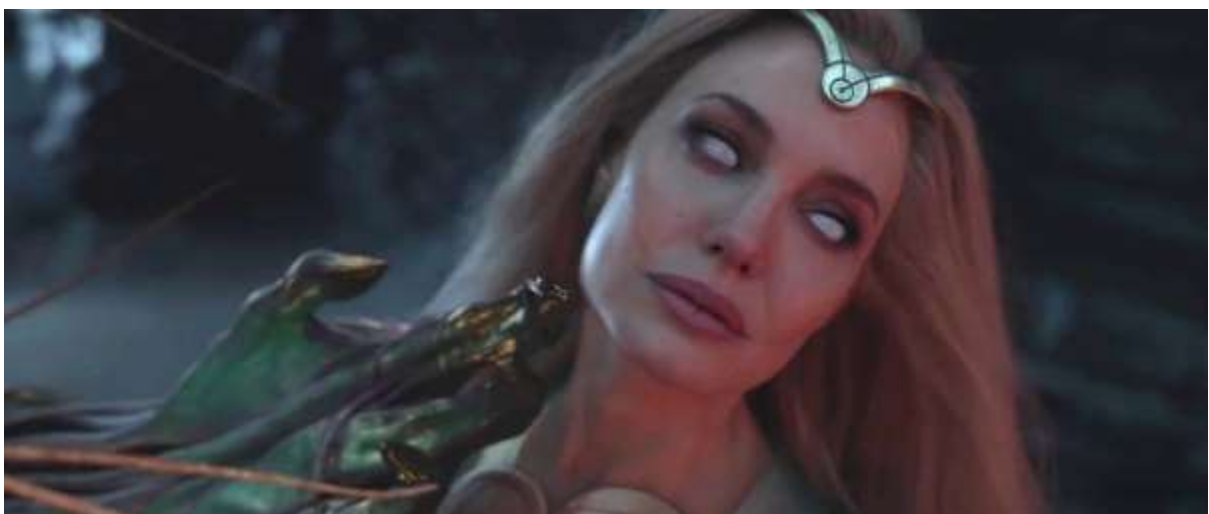
*Eternals* does suggest the presence of a real director, despite all the laborious franchise start-up work she has to do. Zhao works to convey scale and physical beauty, a feel for landscape and flashes of grandeur. Whilst the film eventually succumbs to the common problem these days of making some shots too dark for the sake of masking the CGI, many of Zhao's images have a burnished richness, and there's a fluid eye evinced in her moving master shots and staging. Her style constantly tries to bind the characters and their actions into mobile tableaux, particularly in the action scenes. At times, *Eternals* felt reminiscent to me of a bygone age of fantasy cinema, one that encompassed movies like *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963) through to *Clash of the Titans* (1981) and *Krull* (1984): even if it ultimately lacks those films' fine-grained flavour and flair for mythic detail, *Eternals* at least shares with them a conviction that the fantastical needs to be rooted in a real-looking world. Late in the film, when all the *sturm-und-drang* ends, Zhao pauses for a moment for the sound of surging surf and twittering birds to be heard, the stuff of life in its most banal state, something Zhao considers precious saved. There are moments of lyricism, in the way Zhao depicts Sersi and Ikaris' romance, and in the team's interactions with ancient Babylonians as Sprite entertains with her visions and inventing the narrative-spectacle tradition, touching on the Eternals' delight in being part of a great fledgling moment.



Despite such qualities, the problems with *Eternals* quickly start amassing. Even as the super-Deviant changes into a speaking, plotting avenger for its kind thanks to developing sentience in absorbing the lifeforce of Eternals, it and the other examples of its kind are still the most boring and rote kind of CGI-animated beast. A drama where the real monster is a lack of moral courage and personal motivation is fit for Greek tragedy, but it leaves the multimillion dollar action-adventure movie a distance up the creek. Arguably the biggest flaw of *Eternals* is also its most individual feature – the deliberate, almost languid pacing, so against the grain of the all-action all-the-time precepts of this genre. The middle act is punishingly slow and structurally repetitious, and yet despite the amount of time Zhao dedicates to the characters, some still never quite emerge fully. Phastos, for instance: his feelings of guilt and horror over enabling humanity's most destructive impulses is given its due moment and yet presents a strand of story and theme that goes nowhere, as it's immediately revealed he has simply reinvented himself as a family man.



Similarly, the film hints at Ikaris harbouring some dark secret throughout, and yet he's only vaguely characterised despite us seeing him romance Sersi, so that when that secret does emerge, it provides all the fuel for the last act, but also feels arbitrary. The choice of making Ikaris a tragic antagonist is more interesting than a lot of the villainy in this genre, and Madden is extremely effective in the role as he registers Ikaris' clash of powerful and entirely opposed impulses, and eventually choosing blind fanaticism because it delivers him from having to forge any kind of personal moral compass. It's a good theme and works better as an attempt to shade and develop the superhero fantasy than Marvel has generally managed thus far. There's an odd, jarring moment during one of the flashback scenes, where Ajak serves Ikaris sharp censure when he questions her commands with a faint hint of his excessive zeal for doing Arishem's work. But this still doesn't give sufficient grounding for his heel turn, or the way some of the Eternals later relish a chance to bring him down a peg. Part of the film's deeper dramatic failure is that it never effectively portrays a transformative epiphany, one that explains why, when for some of the Eternals it's reasonable that lives in one locale be sacrificed to disseminate vast new creation as per the Celestials' wisdom despite their feelings for the Earth's inhabitants, for others it's a grotesque mockery of their supposed holy task, and why the most angry and disaffected of their number, like Phastos and Druig, come around so readily.





It also doesn't help that *Eternals* lacks a truly persuasive central figure to provide the tale with a firm backbone. *Eternals* is instead forced to divide its focus amongst a grab-bag of heroes, many of them absent for long stretches of the movie: Makkari's reappearance, for instance, comes an hour and a half into the film, and when she does turn up we learn she's been holed up reading and watching movies. Adventure! Sersi is the nominal core protagonist, and Chan can be a strong and luminous presence, but she's stuck playing a character whose growth lacks any particular dramatic vigour or urgency, her performance jammed on a setting of wan soulfulness. It's not so surprising that Jolie, oddly shoved off to the margins for much of the movie despite being easily its biggest name, nonetheless gives a master class in blending star power and thespian cunning as Thena, expertly playing both the character's battered self-concept and sanity, and her swaggering confidence when launched into action. The motif of a damaged warrior regaining her natural might and preparing to take on the order of the universe is the authentic stuff of legend and good movies equally, especially when a star of Jolie's specific gravitas inhabits the role, but *Eternals* simply renders it diffuse.



Hayek meanwhile feels miscast for most her relatively brief contribution, except in that scene where she tells off Ikaris and shows her authority: she's far more effective unsheathing claws than playing intergalactic den mother. Sprite's impossible love for Ikaris, which drives her to some desperate and treacherous acts, introduces another potentially interesting theme – it's reminiscent of the vampire man-in-a-boy's-body in Kathryn Bigelow's *Near Dark* (1987), and an unexpectedly weird element in an entry in a series that's been defined thus far by its utter determination to drain all tint of weird from proceedings. Despite all its gestures towards sombre gravitas, *Eternals* refuses to divest itself of the customary quippy humour style that's come to define the MCU, and their dialogue is resolutely contemporary all the way through, even in the historical scenes. If there's a likeness for how such beings as the Eternals ought to have been pitched in their mystique and alien fascination, it could be the portrayal of the various colour-coded Deaths at the end of Roger's *The Masque of the Red Death* (1964), reuniting after bestriding the world for aeons; despite its resolve not to rush things, *Eternals* is still a slave to the MCU's relentless need to be relatable to 13-year-olds. The film does extract some solid humour out of the Eternals falling prey to common human maladies – Sersi is addicted to her smart phone, first glimpsed in modern drag taking a photo of a billboard advertising an ancient relic she made herself, whilst Kingo, delighting in his fame and hoping being outed as an Eternal will only bolster it, has his valet Karun (Harish Patel) film the team's adventures.



Karun himself is the sole representative of the average homo sapiens allowed in on the team's business, apart from Dane, who is introduced like an important character and then left out of the great bulk of the movie, only returned to at the very end with intimations that he has his own secrets. I liked how Zhao uses an interlude depicting Kingo shooting a Bollywood dance number not just for incongruous humour but as a time-out of colour and vivacity to leaven the melodrama, indeed fairly true to the approach of Bollywood itself. It's curious that Disney were willing to revisit the once-contentious theme of *The Golden Compass* (2007) involving rebelling against a destructive deity – perhaps the concepts are sufficiently disguised here, or the MCU is sufficiently bulletproof that no such controversy gains traction now. In any event the climax is just okay as action spectacle, but the peculiar emotional juice tapped in the sight of the Eternals fighting amongst themselves in the name of their different allegiances gave it more power to me than usual. It feels just a tad saddening that *Eternals* seems set to be the designated whipping boy in the MCU, because whilst severely flawed and not as strong as Cate Shortland's more intimate and tough *Black Widow* was earlier this year, it's better than many entries, including its immediate precursor, the stupefyingly bland and unimaginative *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*. *Eternals* may entirely cure Zhao of any desire to make further blockbusters, but in its better moments it nonetheless suggests she has something the breed needs.



## Titane (2021)



**Director / Screenwriter: Julia Ducournau**

Film festivals are in an odd position these days. Given the wealth of venues for viewing movies we have now, the idea of gathering everyone together in one place to watch the new crop threatens to feel passé. And yet critics and cognoscenti still look to the major film festivals to winnow down the ridiculous number of movies produced these days, to showcase and gate-keep for the supposed crème de la crème. The Cannes Film Festival has been the premiere event in the international cinema calendar since the late 1940s, providing a great crossroads for the many artistic streams around the world, but it's still had a bumpy ride in the past few years, with a large number of Palme d'Or winners failing to make much impact. Recently, however, Cannes has managed to reverse that to a degree, first with 2019's anointed Palme d'Or winner, Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite*, and this year's *Titane*, both choices well-attuned to capitalise on contemporary cultural talking points, much as the Venice Film Festival created a stir with its 2019 choice *Joker*. Such choices, however good as actual films they are, nudge awareness that current film discussion is animated as much by the way art is framed as much as by what it does in itself. The way movies are sold to us today is in terms of cultural discussion as important, or indeed more so, as the movies themselves, one reason why today YouTubers can make a good living fossicking through trailers interpreting the signals blockbuster movies are transmitting into the populace, and in art-house cinema touching on hot-button issues can make a movie seem vitally important even if its message is something like, "greed is bad," and when you're desperately trying to make up for a roster of seventy-odd previous Palme d'Or winners where only one was directed by a woman.



All that doesn't really have much to do with Julia Ducournau's *Titane* beyond noting that it's very easy these days to be pulled into reviewing the way a movie is framed by external factors rather than the movie itself. But today we might well be facing cinema that plays this game within itself. On YouTube it's common to see movie trailers that start off with a kind of miniature trailer within a trailer, a little grab-bag of moments of action and spectacles offered as a taster presumably offered to instantly capture the attention of attention-deficient young people. Again, this doesn't necessarily have much to do with *Titane*, except that the film's narrative approach reminded a little of this: *Titane* is frontloaded with elements of attention-getting intransigence before taking a swerve into something for the large part more conventional. Ducournau emerged in 2017 with the gruesome, stylish *Raw*, a portrait of a girl attending a veterinarian school, who contends with the abusive social strata in the student body and begins to develop voracious cannibalistic traits. Ducournau immediately declared herself in the running as one of the many possible heirs to David Cronenberg as the founder and champion of "body horror" on the current scene. Ducournau is also working in a familiar stream of outrageous, carnally and intellectually provocative French filmmaking long plied by the likes of Claire Denis, Catherine Breillat, Bruno Dumont, and Jean-Claude Brisseau: Ducournau borrows Vincent Lindon to play a similar character type as he did in Denis' *Bastards* (2013), the igneous but weathered exemplar of Gallic manhood.



Body horror retains an aura of cool because it readily situates itself at a fruitful nexus of cinema's most low-down and most exalted aesthetic vantages: any director who dabbles in it is automatically edgy because not everyone can stomach it, but it's easy to be considered elevated in the mode too, because body horror challenges contemporary culture's obsession with physical wellness and beauty and easy commercialised images of such by degrading, perverting, and outright assaulting such imagery with inversions of decay, damage, and grotesquery: it is therefore, intellectually and aesthetically, connected with the deliberate destabilisation and defiling of form found in post-World War I modernist art. Which leads me to consider another odd contemporary trait: nostalgic attachment to yesterday's iconoclasm, often matched by an absolute resistance to current iconoclasm. Anyway. Ducournau's first film, in a manner that's becoming increasingly pervasive in current, ambitious horror cinema, turned the cannibalistic theme into an unsubtle metaphor, in this case for emergent sexuality, which was something horror cinema had done arguably to more effect before, but the framing of quasi-abstract artiness made it more respectable, more discourse-worthy. One problem with body horror is that, to me at any rate, it's a style most effective when being sparing. Many of Cronenberg's imitators, constantly trying to up the ante of provocation and abnormality, see their films devolve into sprawls of blood and other bodily fluids without that much wit or depth to their musings, and indeed I too often get the feeling the showmanship is substituting for anything actually stimulating to say.



Ducournau is most interesting for most onlookers as a female filmmaker venturing into this zone, and both *Raw* and *Titane* are predicated around impudently twisting ideals of femaleness on screen. Actually *Titane* is ultimately rather old-fashioned, given the fiercely schismatic debates going on about gender and its meaning today, in what it says about the female body. Ducournau's journey to that end is a long and winding one. She begins with a jarring scene that presents an everyday sort of life-altering disaster: 7-year-old Alexia (Adele Guigui) sitting in the backseat of her father's (Bertrand Bonello) SUV, stokes his irritation with constant humming, fidgeting, and finally unbuckling her seat belt and flipping about; when the father turns momentarily to force her back into her seat, he loses control of the car and it crashes against kerbside barrier blocks. Cut to gruesome surgery scenes as surgeons implant a titanium cap in her skull, which leaves her with a large scar, and Ducournau's vision of the shaven-headed Alexia, engaged by a steel truss (nodding less to Cronenberg than to the vision of the hospitalised father in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, 1986, another constant point of emulation for would-be art-house provocateurs) presents her as something already ambiguous in gender and physical integrity, a fusion of human and machine, a misbegotten by-product of rage, damage, and family. As she's released from hospital, Alexia walks to the family car, caressing it and hugging it, pressing her scar against the window glass as if in intimate communion.



Ducournau takes this basic idea to a weird and literal extreme as the adult Alexia (Agathe Rousselle) is portrayed as erotically attracted to cars. Ducournau stages a long, dynamic tracking shot travelling through the environs of an auto show where exotic dancers gyrate atop vehicles to The Kills' "Doing It To Death," conjoining the fetishisation of flesh and of shiny steel for the titillation of the mostly male consumers, but Alexia has ironically taken this to the logical conclusion as her dances are to covertly get her rocks off with the machines, even as they've made her famous in this world. But Alexia's strange tastes have a dangerous side. Showering after her performance, she gets her hair entangled with the nipple ring of a friendly fellow dancer, Justine (Garance Marillier), in a moment of comic intimacy; as she heads out to her car later, she's tracked by a male fan who crosses the line between eagerness and offensiveness when he tries to force her to kiss him, whereupon she stabs him in the ear with a sharp metal file she hides in her hair like a hairpin. Ducournau seems to stoke sympathy for Alexis here, presenting her as a cold-blooded survivor who's justified to a degree in lashing out at a sexist and abusive world. But this is soon enough revealed as Ducournau trolling the audience: Alexis is an active serial killer, murdering anyone she gets close to.



We're obviously in quasi-surrealist territory here, even before our antiheroine fucks a car and gets pregnant by it. Or at least, surrealism in a contemporary usage. Original, authentic surrealism aimed to move beyond mere symbolism and strangeness to explore a realm of total instability, where all things can become their opposites; its aim was anarchic. *Titane* is not anarchic, not really: how it works as a movie depends on the degree to which one swallows the storyline's outlandish ideas as metaphorical. We can, say, interpret Alexis' injury and reconstruction as recovery from childhood abuse and her later persona as a resulting maladaptation, her ardour for cars a symbol of a need for perverse and self-mortifying kicks, as well as offering a clear enough nod to Cronenberg's *Crash* (1996). But it's more fun to take literally: Alexis, infused with foreign metal as a child, has been infected with the hunger for steel: only such fearsome penetration can satisfy her, and the language of the metal beings is the one she speaks. Ducournau depicts Alexis having an actual erotic encounter with a self-animated Cadillac that demands she emerge from her dressing room, car bouncing up and down with glaring headlights and beeping horn as Alexis within has a raging orgasm, wrists wrapped in the seatbelts and tits jogging merrily, sweat flowing down her tattooed form. A bold, funny, weird, sexy image. We, and she, will of course pay a price for this. Turns out if you have an automobile for a lover you can still get knocked up.



Anyway, Alexis's taste for violence asserts itself when she hooks up with Justine, biting her nipple with hungry force when they make out at a waterfront locale, just before Alexis vomits and realises she's fallen pregnant by the car. When she goes to Alexis's house and they resume their make-out session, Alexis slays Justine once again by her hair needle, missing at first and plunging it into her cheek, before a struggle that ends when Alexis manages to plant it in Justine's ear. But she's quickly confronted by the necessity of killing the two people Justine shared the house with, plus a random guy one had brought home for sex. Here Ducournau feels locked in the same creative zone as *Raw*, basically repeating its driving, punkish preoccupation with a young woman whose carnal needs manifest as a desire to kill, only sans cannibalism and with a different motivation. It could be that Alexis is supposed to be gripped with such a homicidal impulse because of her injuries, or because she's not entirely human anymore. But the real explanation is that Ducournau simply wants to galvanise the audience with images of bloodshed and mayhem ironically committed by a young and sexy woman: when she has Alexis tussle with a topless woman on the stairway, it seems Ducournau's trying to do an arty lampoon some concept of trashy thrills. Alexis, deliberate as she is in her murderous activities, experiences a blackly comedy exasperation as her task keeps getting more gruelling, including killing a sweet-natured black man named Jerome (Lamine Cissokho) and one of Alexis's housemates: a second manages to throw her off and escape. Realising she's going to be busted, Alexis returns to her home and sets fire to her clothes, seeming to set fire to her family home as well, and flees northwards.



It's easy to see why Ducournau kept all this stuff in her script, because it's provided all the talking points for many critics and viewers ever since, the sort of thing that gets reported in breathless "it's so crazy" terms, even though it only accounts for about a third of the film. The rest of *Titane* is an oddball take on a Shakespearean pastoral play, mixed with a variation on the Monster and the blind man scene from *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935). Alexia adopts a cunning plan to elude police: a couple of times early in the movie an old missing persons case is mentioned on TV broadcasts, with the father of a young boy named Adrien Legrand who vanished several years earlier still searching for the son he still resolutely believes is alive. Realising she looks just enough like a new computer-aged picture of the boy that's being circulated by investigators to possibly pass for him, Alexia retreats to a bus station bathroom and quickly gives herself a brutal makeover to look like a teenage boy, even breaking her nose on the sink to complete the illusion. And so she's ironically able to use the police hunting for her to instead deliver her to Adrien's father, Vincent (Lindon). Vincent proves so eager to find his son that it quickly becomes clear he's willing to accept anyone in the role, refusing to get a DNA test and immediately taking "Adrien" under his wing. Vincent is the captain of an all-male squad of firefighters, and he swiftly inducts his reclaimed son into their ranks.





This portion of the film felt the most adroitly observed and successfully ironic in the contrasting visions of people doing gruelling things to themselves in bathrooms: Alexia's self-effacing, self-mutilating adventure, strapping down her breasts and smashing her nose and shaving her head to a ragged crop, segues into vignettes of Vincent not just forcing his body through a gruelling nightly exercise regime, but injecting himself in his bruised and track mark-riddled flank with steroids, in his ongoing attempt to maintain his physical fortitude as the macho hero and king of the crew of professional heroes: as Alexia is trying to erase and overcome her biological identity, Vincent trying desperately to hang onto his. This works because, wild as the adult-woman-passing-as-a-teen-boy twist is and these scenes nudge zones of heightened grotesquery, it's still made just sufficiently believable by Ducournau and the actors. I'm sure someone's also already writing a thesis comparing the scenes of attractive women breaking their own noses in this and Cate Shortland's *Black Widow* from earlier this year, an act with the quality of a last taboo: with so many women, and men, in the world desperately trying to improve their looks, to reverse their aging, to assert their inner vision of what they are over the crude material of their genetics and environmental moulding, what perverse freedom in the act.



Once this point is made, however, *Titane* begins to tread water, settling into a wash-rinse-repeat structure of Alexia/Adrien constantly trying to avoid being caught in the altogether, first when she's bunked down for the night when her/his "father" comes to give her clean clothes, and then repeatedly thereafter. In between are vignettes of Vincent fiercely declaring his determination to protect Alexia/Adrien at all costs, and his pseudo-offspring interacting uneasily with the firefighter squad, including when she accompanies them on an emergency call and manages to save a life. The smirking younger men take the slight and shy-eyed Adrien to be "gay." For a moment I imagined a more farcical variation on the situation where all the nominally straight young braves start hitting on the newbie who has to keep his own secrets, but this is a supposedly serious movie. Finally Vincent's ex-wife (Myriem Akheddiou), the mother of the missing boy, barges in on Alexia and recognising her fraud demands a basic compact: she won't tell on Alexia if Alexia will continue her charade for Vincent's sake as one who truly knows how deep and painful his psychic wound is. Underlying all the superficial perversity here then is a straightforward emotional arc: Alexia, so badly damaged by her own pinch-faced father's incapacity to control himself, finds a superior father figure in Vincent, who engages Alexia/Adrien in an extended dance of role-playing where each is entirely willing to sustain their role according to their needs, leading to moments like Vincent insisting on shaving Alexia/Adrien's face, as well as ignoring the gigantic scar from her childhood operation on her head.



Their relationship seems to be constantly in danger from the ticking biological clock of Alexia's pregnancy, and she finds herself increasingly, frustratingly beset by her body's rebellion against her attempts to bury it. Eventually she's forced to survey her mangled form, covered in bruises and gouges and with the stigmata of her unnatural pregnancy breaking out regardless as she leaks out motor oil in place of milk and blood from nipples and vagina, and splitting skin on her bulging belly reveals the infesting gleam of metal. This narrative turn reminded me, in a seemingly distant swerve of attention, of something out of ancient ritual myth, or variations transmitted in some more profane vehicle like Jane Seymour's Solitaire in *Live and Let Die* (1973) – the seer who loses her mystic power when she's sexually awakened. Similarly, Ducournau seems to offer Alexia as depowered by the admission of anything like human feeling, with her killings representing some sort of sovereign power – a ridiculous metaphor but okay – that she loses, although it's her impregnation that nominally starts her down this road, an impregnation brought about by her rare nature. The trouble with this is that the early scenes of *Titane* seem to explicitly disavow sentimentality in terms of its characters, only to then try and milk Alexia/Adrien and Vincent's relationship for something resembling grounded pathos. Their connection is deepened when Alexia finds Vincent prone after one of his steroid injections goes wrong, and finds she can't take advantage of the chance to kill him.



More power to artists trying to walk a tonal tightrope and reach for strange new epiphanies, but I never felt particularly convinced or compelled by any of this, despite Lindon's vehemently committed and deeply felt performance: Lindon is one of the best actors in movies today, and he brings a depth of feeling and a palpable sense of his character's bleary mental and emotional exhaustion and desperate attempts to keep up appearances. The greater part of the problem is that Alexia/Adrien is by comparison an empty vessel: the casually murderous entity of the first section of the film becomes a poor vehicle for exploring unexpected and unusual bonds later in the film. It might have been more interesting if Alexia/Adrien was allowed a greater degree of self-expression, but the character is stricken with an impassive blankness beyond mere registers of transient feelings – pain, anger and so forth – particularly emphasised in the long mid-section of the film where Alexis/Adrien refuses to speak lest her voice give the game away and it's taken for a traumatic symptom. Such blankness is rather too common in contemporary "serious" movies, usually because filmmakers want characters who function as ready viewpoint figures, but Alexia remains stuck someplace else, between multifarious symbol and actual character. Alexia's scar is constantly, improbably on show, obvious both when she's a dancer – is that a good career move? – and later when she's posing as Adrien, gaining no comment from anyone. Again, of course, one can read it as symbolism of a kind, but it still feels overly garish and distracting.



In *Raw* Marillier also played a character called Justine, whilst the two major characters framing her emergent nature were named Alexia and Adrien, suggesting those names have some totemic meaning, particularly in their ultimate pseudo-fusion. Ducournau killing off this version of Justine, who's bold and queer, might represent some leaving behind of the past. Or maybe it's just a precious screenwriting touch. The version of Alexia presented early in the film is completely unsympathetic; the version we get later, the quasi-Adrien, we're asked to feel some odd sympathy for as she's beset by increasing impotence, stricken as her body rebels on her and her former cold-bloodedness deserts her – she can't kill Vincent and she fails in her attempt to abort her new body-infesting foetus with her hair needle. She can't even wield the same sexual imperiousness as before – when she's laughingly goaded by the fire fighters into dancing atop a fire truck during one of their unit's occasional parties, her sexy dance style falls flat by the weirded-out young men. This scene aims for cringe-inducing discomfort and obtains it, although Ducournau seems to think it's utterly verboten for a young man to dance like a sexy woman. Most guys would find it hilarious and the highpoint of the party. The repeated jabs at the raunch culture Alexia profits off feel rather dated in themselves, whilst Ducournau's collection of firefighters looks like a gang of male strippers anyway. The cultural targets in *Titane* feel a bit hackneyed is what I'm saying. Alexia's revisit of her ritual seduction dance is then followed by her attempt to get it on with the fire truck, but gains no result: Alexia has lost her ability to give or gain satiety that way.



Being inducted into the firefighter crew at least seems to offer Alexia/Adrien the chance to enter a world defined by madcap physical heroism and gutsy dedication that's the polar opposite of her/his sharklike and parasitic existence, an induction that also sees Alexia/Adrien slowly embrace the role of sustaining Vincent's illusions, something everyone around him seems to agree to do on one level or another. Vincent already has a surrogate son figure on his team, Rayane (Lais Salameh), who gets jealous of Alexia/Adrien. It's not a thread of the film that goes anywhere, and Rayane is killed later when he and Vincent fearlessly venture into a forest fire and Vincent gets him to take charge of a gas canister retrieved from a caravan which then explodes. This event serves to chiefly serve to drive Vincent even deeper into his self-imposed role, even beholding Alexia naked finally but still avowing his function as father and protector. Things build to a head as Alexia tries to seduce Vincent, a move that creeps him out too much, but also seems to finally provoke Alexia to give birth, with Vincent desperately trying to coach her as her body tries to do something at once natural and inimical.



Much of *Titane* made me wish Ducournau had stuck to the initial *epater-le-bourgeois* zaniness or had started with Vincent accepting this odd changeling and had rolled from there in a more careful journey through a game of arbitrarily agreed rules in deception and acceptance, because it feels like an uneasy

conjunction of a couple of different script drafts, and there are points in the film where it comes close to – *quelle horreur* – a typical indie feels entry where some life-ragged people find each-other and form an oddball unit. Or perhaps it's the dream life of the *Fast and Furious* films turned inside out, with their obsession with cars and family. The scene with Vincent's ex-wife, although exceptionally well-performed by Akheddiou, nonetheless disrupts the dragonfly-skating-on-water tenor of the rest of the film's mutually agreed reality, a veering into quotidian psychological realism that feels misjudged. Overall, as a film *Titane* lacks the derivative but compelling aesthetic of *Raw*, and in many ways feels like a classic awkward sophomore effort, even if the faults it shares with its precursor are fairly consistent: an indecisive tenor to the toggling between realism and anti-realism, the lack of sense for somewhere interesting or exciting to go after the basic conceits are employed and their elemental value expended until a great climactic image partly makes up the difference. This climax does manage to bring many of the film's meandering threads and depraved emotions to coherent and fitting terminus, culminating with the indelibly sick image of Vincent cradling Alexia's offspring with veins of rippling metal running up its spine and head, ironically reborn himself as a father to some fresh hybrid whilst the misbegotten mother lying dead and mangled.



Ducournau's attempt to restore some of the primal anxiety inherent in childbirth is fascinatingly visualised even if it remains at an arm's length from the nominal narrative containing it. Maybe if I felt something more maniacal and wilful in Alexia, something that made her body's rebellion and her ultimate fate feel more palpable, I might have been more persuaded by the drama overall. But I kept thinking back to the moment in James Cameron's *Aliens* (1986) where Vasquez (Jeanette Goldstein) wails "Oh no!" when she suffers a crippling injury that finally foils her brash physicality, and it hits in a few brief seconds exactly the note *Titane* tries constantly to hit. In terms of the film's nominal exploration of gender role-playing, *Titane* actually makes an unfashionable point – that, no matter how it's denied, disguised, revised, and inhabited, the body is still ultimately a slave to nature. Perhaps the proper zone of ambiguity there is just what nature is, what it imposes on us, the people trapped within such cages of flesh, could be a much larger question than anyone knows. Which is a damned interesting point to chase down, and the pity with *Titane* is that it doesn't really ask it until the very end.

## No Time To Die (2021)



**Director:** Cary Joji Fukunaga

**Screenwriters:** Cary Joji Fukunaga, Neil Purvis, Robert Wade, Phoebe Waller-Bridge

It feels like an eternity ago when Daniel Craig was cast as James Bond. The thought of a rugged, jagged, blonde-haired bruiser in the role caused consternation and debate amongst fans fond of the character's popular image as a slick, dark, handsome toff in a tuxedo. But Craig's debut in the role, *Casino Royale* (2006), proved an audience-delighting smash hit and a smart reinvention of the well-worn franchise: taking its cue from Ian Fleming's debut novel, *Casino Royale* stepped back from familiar, much-loved template filled with absurdist action, sci-fi gimmicks, and quasi-surreal villainy, and instead aimed for something tougher, earthier, more realistic, an edge that had been present in the earliest films in the series like *From Russia With Love* (1963) and *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* (1969), and briefly returned to in *For Your Eyes Only* (1981). *Casino Royale* owed much of its success to the direction of New Zealander Martin Campbell, who had previously reinvented Bond effectively for the 1990s in *Goldeneye* (1995). But it was Craig's strength in the role that enthralled the zeitgeist, his muscular sex appeal and skill in depicting Bond's evolution from a relatively unsophisticated government goon to something more like the familiar, suave, ice-cold agent. Craig's stint as Bond has been the longest of any actor to date at 15 years, although he's made less movies in that time than either Sean Connery or Roger Moore, thanks to oddities of fate like the credit squeeze that held up making *Skyfall* (2012) and the Covid-19 pandemic that delayed release of *No Time To Die*, Craig's avowed last turn in the part.



Craig's tenure has also been bedevilled by violent unevenness in the quality and reception of his actual movies, even if the actor himself has held on to general, if not universal, acclaim essaying the role. Marc Forster's *Quantum of Solace* (2008) was met by many as an excessively hyperactive, underwritten entry, and Sam Mendes' *Spectre* (2015) was also met as a letdown after Mendes and Craig scored a colossal success with *Skyfall*, a movie that managed to convince the rest of the world to play along with Britain's reborn nationalist delirium. For myself, despite being a Bond fan and nominally appreciating the moves the franchise made back towards Fleming's model, I've found it hard to really like the Craig era. *Quantum of Solace* was a bruising disappointment after the excellence of *Casino Royale*, and I also found *Skyfall* rather ungainly; ironically I liked *Spectre* a lot more than many, whilst conceding it had serious problems. Campbell's touch on *Casino Royale* expertly mediated the new sock-in-the-teeth grit with some of the old globetrotting lushness in a manner at once smart and unpretentious, but the production team's choice to bring in artier talents proved frustrating. Forster's tilt, much like his supposedly serious movies, proved flashy and facetious. Mendes' gift for creating adamantine imagery with a sense of scale and solidity and touched with gentle abstraction helped the series retain its aura of lush, ultra-classy style – you could all but smell the money being spent during his entries – but at the price of a somewhat languid pace and a sense of top-heavy self-importance in a franchise that once served up neo-matinee serial thrills.



There were subtler problems with the Craig-era films, too. The Bond series had long sustained itself vampirically through emulating pop culture trends – annexing Blaxploitation for *Live and Let Die* (1973) and the sci-fi craze of the late 1970s for *Moonraker* (1979), for instance, or even the parkour and Texas Hold ‘Em portions of *Casino Royale* – whilst retaining its own, mooring roster of demarcating tropes – the inimitable Monty Norman and John Barry theme, the opening gun-barrel logo scene and dreamy pop-art credit sequences filled with naked, silhouetted women, the familiar in-universe touches like Bond’s weapon of choice, the Walther PPK, and supporting characters like Q and Miss Moneypenny. The choice of divesting the series of many of these for *Casino Royale* came with a mooted promise to bring them back as Craig’s Bond evolved, whilst in the meantime the new films heavily emulated first the Jason Bourne films with their maniacally edited hand-to-hand combat and chase scenes and superficial cynicism towards statecraft, and Christopher Nolan’s Batman films, particularly *The Dark Knight* (2008), which *Skyfall* emulated to such a degree it sometimes felt like someone had erased the names from Nolan’s script and pencilled in new ones. The emulation of strong tendencies in contemporary serialised storytelling also drew the Craig Bonds to adopt a running storyline that managed to be at once negligible and convoluted, and an insistence on personalised conflicts and revenge themes based in backstory, leading to the point where even protozoa on Ganymede rolled their eyes when the series reintroduced Ernst Stavro Blofeld, the mastermind of SPECTRE, only to now characterise him as Bond’s resentful adoptive brother and chronic behind-the-curtain tormentor.



*Skyfall* and *Spectre* did at least serve to fulfil the promise of reintroducing the familiar Bond tropes with a fresh sense of their function. *Spectre*, in bringing back Blofeld (played inevitably but with curious miscasting by Christoph Waltz) and resetting the table so SPECTRE could once again provide ideal running villains detached from geopolitical tides, seemed to finally set the scene so the series could go wild again. Trouble is, the Craig-era films were simultaneously locked into another pattern, one obedient to current screenwriting clichés and the niceties of star vehicles. Craig’s advancing age was thematically tethered to Bond’s backdated status as a retro kind of hero and already being joked about in *Skyfall*, and now with *No Time To Die* Craig’s popularity in the part essentially obliges the franchise to eat its own tail. What was supposed to be a superhero’s origin story is suddenly, abruptly a fin-de-siècle meditation and dismantling. *No Time To Die* breaks with series traditions in many obvious and very arch ways, starting with being directed by an American for the first time, Cary Joji Fukunaga, who sometime back suggested a gift for filming very English material with his intelligent and textured work on *Jane Eyre* (2011) and brought cinematic attitude to the TV series *True Detective*. On the face of it, he seems like just the sort of talent to give the series a shot in the arm and help Craig wrap up in a blaze of glory. But something went very, very wrong here.





*No Time To Die* opens with a long flashback sequence to when Bond's current paramour, Madeleine Swann, a doctor and the daughter of the deadly former SPECTRE operative Mr White, was a child (played at that age by Coline Defaud), at home with her alcoholic mother (Mathilde Bourbin): a man wearing a kabuki mask, who we later learn is named Lyutsifer Safin (Rami Malek), traverses the snowy woods outside, enters the home, and kills the mother. Madeleine shoots Safin, but fails to kill him, and as she flees she falls through the ice covering a neighbouring lake. The intruder, rather than leaving her to die, saves her life. Cut to thirty-odd years later: Madeleine (Léa Seydoux) is travelling through Italy with Bond after he quit MI6 at the end of *Spectre*. As the pair resolve to make their peace with the ghosts haunting them as they stay in the town of Matera, Bond at Madeleine's encouragement goes to say farewell at the grave of Vesper Lynd, his great love from *Casino Royale*. But Bond is almost killed by a bomb secreted in her tomb, and is chased by a gang of SPECTRE agents working under Blofeld's command despite him being in strict isolation in an English prison. Hints given both by one of the assassins and Blofeld himself as he rings Madeleine on her cell phone, as well as her earlier encouragement, tell Bond she set him up for the assassination, and after he manages to wipe out the killers Bond stick her on a train and tells her she'll never see him again.



The opening flashback puts a value on Madeleine's past and perspective which does resurface later in the film, and yet I still don't feel it was justified especially in a movie so long, but Fukunaga does tap the image of the masked man suddenly appearing in the window of the house for a jolt of effective creepiness. The subsequent sequences in the lengthy pre-credits movement are excellent. Fukunaga and the production team do their best to provide some thundering good action with some thankfully real-looking stunts as Bond throws himself behind a small brick fixture on an ancient stonework bridge to avoid being run over by a speeding car and then leaps off the bridge using a power cable as a bungee cord, and a few moments later rides a captured motorcycle up a cyclopean wall and leaps onto a terrace. This is the sort of daring, vivid, no-bullshit stunt work that's been sorely missing from too much contemporary action cinema. But Fukunaga breaks the spell a few moments later when he has Bond, behind the wheel now of his beloved Aston-Martin, eject some miniature bombs that blow up a pursuing vehicle, done with obviously, horribly fake CGI. It's dismayed that even James Bond films no longer have the courage of their own megabudget, go-big-or-go-home convictions.



Nonetheless Craig-as-Bond is at his best in this sequence: the way his eyes go wide and glazed in their fixed and murderous ferocity where he was warm and romantic a few seconds earlier, betrays Craig's intelligent feel for how being an action hero requires a rarefied and demanding kind of acting, and builds to a moment when he seems paralysed by rage and heartbreak as he and the bewildered Madeleine are trapped in the Aston-Martin by gunmen who pound it with machine gun fire. Bond seems to be considering letting them both be shredded by the bullets once they finally puncture the armoured body as a just end for her deception and his foolishness, before his better self kicks back in as he beholds Madeleine's weeping, terrified face, and he wipes out the shooters with the car's secreted machine guns. A marvellous moment that knows how to express character through action, and seems to promise a Bond movie for the ages. The familiarly stylised credits sequence tips one of many nods to Peter Hunt's series high *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* in revisiting the imagery in Maurice Binder's credits sequence for that film involving a Britannia figure and hourglasses, seen here crumbling to pieces and sinking to the ocean floor, with Billie Eilish's duly dirge-like theme song on sound: the increasingly morbid and languid tenor of the last three Bond themes has exacerbated a certain cheerlessness starting to cling to the series.



The narrative proper takes up five years after the shootout in Matera, with a unit of heavily armed SPECTRE goons invading a covert germ warfare laboratory in a London skyscraper (!) to snatch a turncoat scientist, Obruchev (David Denchik), and a nanobot virus he was developing at the behest of M (Ralph Fiennes), capable of being programmed to kill anything from a specific person to an entire ethnic genome, and codenamed Heracles. Bond now in solitary, disaffected retirement in Jamaica, is visited by his pal and CIA agent Felix Leiter (Jeffrey Wright), along with a State Department official, Logan Ash (Billy Magnussen): they want to hire Bond to track down Obruchev as they've caught wind of the danger his invention represents. Bond initially turns them down, before he's confronted by a British agent, Nomi (Lashana Lynch), who is soon revealed to be Bond's replacement as 007: Nomi warns Bond not to get involved, which is a good way to make sure he does. Bond goes to Cuba where Leiter and Ash tell him Obruchev was last spotted, and in downtown Havana he finds the entire SPECTRE team gathered together to celebrate Blofeld's birthday. Bond makes contact with an American agent, Paloma (Ana de Armas), who professes to being a recent recruit with three weeks' training, but unleashes major skills when things go haywire.



Bond realises too late that he's been lured to this place by Blofeld who wants his death by Heracles to be the crowning moment of the celebration, but when the virus is released it instead kills all the SPECTRE bigwigs: Obruchev, whose true master is Safin, has doublecrossed them. Bond and Paloma fight their

way out and engage in a little friendly rivalry with Nomi in trying to catch Obruchev: Bond wins and flies him to a CIA spy ship disguised as a trawler where he meets with Leiter and Ash. But Ash proves to be another traitor in league Safin: he shoots Felix and leaves him and Bond to die as a mine blows a hole in the boat. Bond can't save Felix, but he manages to escape and when he returns to London has a charged confrontation with M, before allying with Moneypenny (Naomie Harris) and Q (Ben Wishaw) to fully understand Heracles and seek out Safin. Bond demands to see Blofeld, who usually only allows Madeleine, now living in London and serving hand-picked as his psychotherapist, to visit him. Preparing for the next session, Madeleine is visited by Safin, and who blackmails her into spiriting a vial of Heracles in to Blofeld. Madeleine flees before actually confronting Blofeld, but Bond, having touched her, transmits the virus to Blofeld when he gets mad and tries to throttle him, and Blofeld promptly expires. When Bond goes to visit Madeleine, they swiftly reconnect, but life throws a new wrinkle Bond's way – Madeleine has a daughter, Mathilde (Lisa-Dorah Sonnet), who he notices has his eyes: Madeleine swears she isn't his, but of course she's lying.



*No Time To Die* proves maniacally determined to cross the Ts and dot the Is when it comes to wrapping up Craig's tenure, which, I might as well say now seeing everyone in the universe knows already, ends with Bond dying. In the process, the film completely contradicts the supposed initial promise of Craig's entries as origin story. Instead, it exacerbates a trend that had been noticeable in *Skyfall* and *Spectre* in playing as a compressed greatest hits collection of tropes, but muted and pinched to fit in with the nominally more terse and down-to-earth Craig style, whilst also burning them as fuel for its own star vehicle engine. *No Time To Die* bewilderingly sets about wiping out Blofeld and SPECTRE just after they were restored to their proper place in the franchise, and also Wright's Leiter, on the build-up to the climax where Bond himself finally seems to bit the bullet. Or missile. It's as if the filmmakers feel that Craig is now so integral to Bond mystique that the character can't survive in the same form beyond him as far as his fans are concerned, and so as far as this wing of the franchise goes, all the outstanding business must be ticked off. Or is simply that contemporary Hollywood screenwriting needs big bangs all the way through, and the only way to prove how big *No Time To Die* must be taken as is to be, as TV commercials might put it with thumping music stings, The. One. That. Changes. Everything.



Craig's films have repeatedly tried to root themselves in concepts and lore taken in Fleming's books, many of which were casually tossed aside as the film series became its own happily ridiculous thing, in continuing on from *Casino Royale*, the film of which obeyed the novel in presenting Bond as the product of heartbreak and disillusionment. The death of Vesper Lynd left him hollowed and icy, but Fleming's most cunning and effective twist on this was that it finally made Bond the perfect spy. The Craig film accepted this as its own new beginning, but has, ironically, been dedicated to contradicting it since. Fukunaga and the screenwriters tip their hand many times to Fleming's closely linked later novels, *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* and *You Only Live Twice*, which saw Bond married and widowed at the hands of Blofeld in the space of a few pages, then travelling to Japan where he tracked down Blofeld and killed him before finishing up as an amnesiac living to a local diving girl and presumed dead by the world. Fleming had made a stab at killing off Bond before in *From Russia With Love*, only to bring him back for *Doctor No*, and when he tried to rid himself of the spy a second time deliberately left it more open-ended. So Fleming was hardly averse to the idea of his great hero proving very mortal, but he kept walking it back anyway.



The film version of *You Only Live Twice* threw out much of that novel's business, but the adaptation of *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* stuck closely to the template, ending famously with a note of tragic romanticism with Bond murmuring "We have all the time in the world" over his wife Tracy's dead body,

the phrase also providing the title to the Louis Armstrong warbled theme song for the film. *No Time To Die* gives warning this will be a reference point early on by having Bond repeat the “All the time in the world” line to Madeleine as they drive about in bliss, which for anyone who knows the series lore immediately sets antennae twitching, and wraps up with the Armstrong song, which is both agreeable – it’s one of the great themes and Armstrong’s singing is unbeatable – and a bit arch. It also incorporates the marvellous concept in *You Only Live Twice* of the villain propagating a garden filled with poisonous plants, although this classic touch of Fleming’s borderline surreal morbid imagery is here rendered in flavourless visual terms. At least, for the first time since Pierce Brosnan’s run, the plot stakes here offer the once-standard motif of a megalomaniac out to terrorise the world, working from a secret headquarters on a remote island – Safin’s father was in charge of a former Soviet chemical and missile plant on an island in disputed waters, where Safin grew up and now has set up a plant to manufacture Heracles there. Safin’s remorseless project of revenge was set in motion when Mr White killed his family by poisoning them all with smallpox, which Safin survived albeit badly scarred. Now, once he finishes his mission of wiping out SPECTRE, he turns his attention to remaking the world, mostly into corpses. He also seems to feel some sort of proprietary interest in Madeleine, feeling that he in effect owns her after saving her life, which makes it a bit confusing as to why he’s decided to wait thirty years or so to take possession of her.



Most of this heavy stuff is held off to the second half of the film at least. The first half tries on the other hand to restore some jauntiness too many felt had deserted the series. The added screenwriting hand of Phoebe Waller-Bridge, whose TV series *Killing Eve* offered its own, semi-satirical spin on a Bond-esque universe of assassins and spies, and which *No Time To Die* clearly seeks to emulate to a degree, is very apparent in this half, if not to much advantage. A lot of the humour falls flat, or at least it did for me, feeling entirely at odds with the tenor of the rest of the film. This in particular clings to Obruchev, who despite being a major villain in the film is also its comic relief, appears, like in his first scene where he’s being teased by his fellow scientists and he threatens to kill them in return. It also inflects the scenes involving Paloma, although it works much better there, in part because De Armas knows exactly how to sell a blend of superficial naiveté and secret dynamism. The scene where Fukunaga cuts between Bond and Paloma engaged in their own style of fighting, Bond in brutal fisticuffs with a SPECTRE goon, Paloma using explosive gymnastic dexterity and ingenious physical wit, is a highpoint not just for movie but the series in general, particularly in the wry punctuation of Bond falling from a balcony and springing back up again and patting himself down again to recover his *savoir faire*, before pouring himself and Paloma a drink and the two downing theirs with brusque aplomb.



The ebullience of this scene nonetheless points up the shortcomings of the rest of the film rather painfully, particularly when it comes to Nomi, who's posited in the film alternately as Bond's replacement, rival, foil, and comrade-in-arms. Lynch has the right statuesque swagger for the part, but Nomi emerges as seriously underwritten and scarcely conceived beyond the basic proposition of "tough black chick," and by comparison to the eager, surprising Paloma, she feels like a walking cliché and no fun to boot. I also got the feeling she's a victim of the rather garbled midsection of the film which might have been the result of hasty reshoots. Bond's contretemps with M also feels like a victim of this, leaping from the two having quite the falling out, in very English polite English fashion, when they meet face-to-face for the first time in years, only to be relatively chummy again a couple of scenes later, and there's definitely some connective tissue missing there. This is also strongly suggested through small but consequential plot details like the fact Blofeld in prison is able to communicate through a bionic eye implanted in him somehow, which is a nice, very Bondian idea, except that its discovery and removal all take place off screen. The core team of M, Q, and Moneypenny, well-served in the past two entries, here get very little to do. Q in particular, despite being playfully characterised here as gay, is still reduced to a character who taps rapidly at keyboards and explains the plot. Oh, and Rory Kinnear's Tanner is still around, doing whatever it is he does. Other problems are more existential for this material. *Spectre* interestingly mooted the continued need for the human touch in spy work in an age of cyber and drone warfare, which actually gave that entry a hint of contemporary political relevance, something the Bond series has generally run away from since its earliest days when it swapped out Soviets for SPECTRE as the necessary villains. But it also saddled itself with the silliest countdown in movie history as Bond and company had to race against a ticking clock...to when a computer system would go online!



*No Time To Die* similarly chooses a MacGuffin in the nanobot virus that's both difficult to make work in a movie and also somewhat worn out as a plot device in sci-fi action flicks. Which wouldn't be as much as an issue but it feeds into the clumsiness of the film's narrative, which the urgent attempts to earn gravitas through killing off familiar characters feel mostly designed to paper over. *No Time To Die* take the cake-and-eat-it-too tendencies of the Craig era to the limit, setting up all the old-school Bond tropes at last but still also play off the beat, in a way that foils narrative intensity, as when Safin simply lets Mathilde go, whilst the jokey playing of Obruchev means he's never convincing as a villain but not actually funny either. Nomi feels like the biggest victim of this indecisiveness. She's plainly introduced as a sort of goad to the much-mooted idea of generation change in supplanting Bond with a black woman, one who treats him with an edge of cutting condescension ("I'll put a bullet in your knee," she promises when warning him against interference, "The one that still works."), even if she finds he's still able to give as good as he gets. Of course, they eventually become mutually reliant partners, and Nomi hands back the 00 title to Bond. There's no particularly good reason given for why they've become less antagonistic by this point or why Nomi should give up a rank she presumably earned: of course James Bond should die, if he must, as 007, but the script fudges, and somewhere along the line Nomi was left as a fifth wheel rather than a potent new figure. Nomi is eventually given one would-be iconic vignette late in the film when she vengefully pushes Obruchev into a vat of his own nanovirus after he threatens to turn his invention on the "west African diaspora." Mass-murdering bad guy? Fair enough. Racist too? Die, mofo!





It's been compulsory for film critics to take a poke at the nominally outmoded aspects of Bond as a character and franchise for decades now, apparently oblivious to the fact that the series itself has been tapping it as a source of humour since the quips in *Live And Let Die* about "following a cue ball" and through segues like Judi Dench's M tautologically calling him a "sexist, misogynist dinosaur" in *Goldeneye*, as well the issue of a superspy belonging to a country that had devolved into a mid-range power by the time he was created. There's been a lot of debate lately about replacing Craig with an actor of colour or even a woman. The problem with such proposals, modishly pleasing as they are, is they reveal a fatal misunderstanding of what Bond is. The basic appeal of the character is rooted in ironic contrast, his surface appearance of the classic English gentleman hiding an existential shark whose interests, talents, and occupation all converge in bringing mayhem, delivering orgasm, and tempting chance, in about that order. Mendes got that, at least, particularly at the start of *Spectre* when he had Craig-as-Bond wearing a Day of the Dead mask and waving a red rose, his basic functions as bringer of death and life reduced to essential symbolism with a hint of morbid humour. There's still nobody quite like him around: compare him to the gelded stable of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, full of grown men who can barely speak to a woman. Only Tony Stark, who tellingly birthed that franchise, was conceived in a Bondian manner – his first entry even sported a direct lampoon in playing Bondish guitar music over Tony having a quickie. Of course, Stark's maturation saw him obliged to leave that behind, and Craig's tenure sees him somewhat ironically obliged to follow that arc, now even forced to mimic Stark in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), which also saw him become a father and die at the end. There isn't even a hint of the fun *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008) found could be tapped in the idea of a loner hero finding he's a dad.



The cinematic Bond's arrival on the pop culture scene in 1962 heralded a tectonic shift in many regards, but one above all. Certainly Bond was a male power fantasy at a zenith, but he owes his success to also being a female one: Bond's sexual prowess was a resource more valuable than all Auric Goldfinger's bullion, capable of rewriting the world's rules, as in *Goldfinger* (1964) itself, where the only actual, positive thing Bond does to alter the outcome of the plot is be a good enough lay to win Pussy Galore back to the side of right and virtue. Bond became thus the first authentic modern icon of female sexual need, save perhaps Dracula, a character with many fundamental similarities to Bond. The way a lot of critics talk about this aspect of Bond now, you'd think nobody in the world has casual hook-ups. Anyway, the Craig era's general response to this has been to make Bond less an erotic swashbuckler and defined more as a kind of emotionally crippled pseudo-stud. Which would be fine, close indeed to Fleming's character, but the Craig cycle has refused to stick to it; again, we are trapped within the formats of modern screenwriting manuals. Craig's arrival in the role rang bells across the world with his

shirtless beach scene, but now he's middle-aged despite still being in ferociously good shape. *Skyfall's* best moment also gave the best new twist on Bond's sexuality, when the villain teased him with queer flirtation, "First time for everything," to Bond's unblinking, ever-so-cool retort, "What makes you think this is my first time?" The perfect line: on the one hand a nimble revision of the undercurrents (and sometimes overcurrents) of homophobia in some earlier movies and in Fleming, on the other one that just seemed to fit: of course Bond would have tried every dish before settling on a favourite. Anyway, *No Time To Die* has no such adroitness. Instead it settles for a few jabs at the idea of aging lotharios, with Bond striking out with both Nomi and Paloma, before taking it to the logical extreme of having suddenly face up to being a family man.



Craig and Seydoux were good together in *Spectre*, but here they totally fizzle in terms of chemistry, not that the script gives them much chance to work it up again. Madeleine's reappearance in the story is so sudden and happenstance it's almost like a reel got skipped, before the film underlines Bond's new emotional dimension in the most hackneyed manner conceivable. In the prior film Madeleine was cool and ambiguous: now she's the vaguely tragic baby mama, and that does her as few favours as it does Bond, until she becomes the object of Safin's weirdly obscure attentions. It pains me to say that Craig himself eventually became part of the problem he was supposed to cure. There's a pretty familiar pattern to Bond actors getting tired with the demands of the role and the consuming nature of the career-arresting fame that comes with it, and Craig's increasing unease in the part has been apparent for a while now, even as he's become so fixed to it in the public imagination. Craig's good-humoured recent performances for Steven Soderbergh and Rian Johnson have indicated the kinds of parts he'd rather be playing. Craig still delivers in some vignettes, as already noted: he's too good an actor and too smart a star to walk through a part. But somewhere along the line his characterisation was drained of the roguish force he evinced at the start of his tenure, and Craig's pinch-mouthed and squinty impersonation of grim grit, once refreshing, is now somewhat rote, and as the character's basic qualities have been eroded – his sex appeal, his omnicompetence, his jet-setting savoir faire, his dark relish for adrenalized thrills – his Bond stopped feeling groundbreaking and just became, well, a bit of a drag. The irony of *No Time To Die* is that it suggests the filmmakers were aware of this and wanted to put some zest back into things, only to then be obliged to double down on the pseudo-seriousness.



Of course, one can simply say that *No Time To Die* obeys the logic of Craig's Bond as something distinct and discrete in the history of the character, and that's fair enough, I suppose, but it also made me really pine for the good old days. Malek is surprisingly effective as Safin, playing his supervillain as soft-spoken almost to the point of feyness whilst retaining a cold conviction that he feels is perfectly reasonable even when revealing utter mania. The film does its best to build him up as a truly threatening, apocalyptic figure, from his creepy, slasher movie-like entrance through his process of wiping out such storied figures as Leiter and Blofeld. And yet Safin never comes close to being a Bond villain for the ages: he feels more like the ultimate by-product of the Craig era's tendency to take an each-way bet when it comes to the series legacy, trying at once to present a vaguely realistic figure but also inhabit the superstructure of the old, epic-scale series villainy. He's not physically threatening enough to lend real, feral intensity to their final confrontation – compare the limp tussle here to, say, Bond and Blofeld's bobsled battle in *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* – and he lacks the kind of arrogant stature and venom that's long defined Bond's most indelible enemies. Instead he's offered rather too nudgingly in the screenwriting manual fashion as a mirror of the hero, to the point of giving him a very slightly revised version of the archetypal "we're not so different you and I speech," and having them battle over possession of Madeleine and Mathilde. In that last regard, the film can't even really commit to the basic melodramatic spur of a bad guy endangering a hero's mate and child: instead we get a helluva lot of wandering around corridors shooting anonymous henchmen.



I counted down to the virtually inevitable moment when Fukunaga would, as he did on *True Detective*, interpolate a one-take action scene, another contemporary cliché that Mendes already ticked off at the start of *Spectre*: Fukunaga's version is a long strenuous tussle on a flight of stairs that's not half as engaging as recent variations on the same idea in movies like *Atomic Blonde* (2017) and *Extraction* (2020). Whilst I still think Fukunaga's a talent, his work here for the most part feels rather fidgety and anonymous, and poorly geared to the rhythm of the performances. The action scenes aren't particularly clever or well-staged either, except, again, for the opening, and bits and bobs like a nod to the gun barrel logo sequence in a different context, and the smart use of wildly varying vantages in the Havana fight. The scene of Obruchev being kidnapped begins with sleek, semi-abstract images that suggest a real style-fest is in the offing. There's a solid chase that caps the second act in which Safin, Ash, and an array of goons chase after Bond and his new family into a fog-drenched Norwegian forest, which reminded me nonetheless just a little too strongly of the battle on Takodana in *Star Wars – Episode VII: The Force Awakens* (2015) in serving the same purpose of providing a lot of bash and crash as a distraction whilst the villain snatches away someone precious to the hero. Ash is another character who suggests possibilities that barely get to register: Magnussen plays him as a bland WASP who's also a star-struck Bond fanboy (do secret agents have fans?), but also a cunning and ruthless turncoat, a mixture that could be witty but here just feel random. He ought to have been kept around to loan some extra villainous presence to the climax, but he bows out in a nod to *For Your Eyes Only* when Bond literally drops a car on him as revenge for Leiter.



The film does finally hit the right notes again quite late in proceedings when Bond confronts Safin after invading his island base and finding its overlord seated behind a modernist-minimalist desk with Mathilde on knee. Suddenly, for a couple of crucial minutes, *No Time To Die* feels like an ideal James Bond film, with the classic situation of two extremely dangerous men with very different worldviews playing at calm conversation whilst discussing stakes both personal and global, given a new gloss by the hard conviction of the actors. The punchline of the film must be that Safin deliberately infects Bond with a dose of Heracles, this one programmed to make sure he can't ever touch Madeleine and Mathilde again without killing them. This is entirely contrived to place Bond into a cul-de-sac he doesn't want to escape as missiles rain down to wipe out the base, even as it scarcely makes a lick of sense on a basic plot level. Why the hell would Safin waste time on such a thing? Why not actually just kill Bond with it, especially considering Bond shoots him dead a few seconds later? Then he could still make sure his evil plan can be carried out. All right, so Safin's a man with a well-developed sense of irony as well as a mass-murderer, sure. All this still plainly happens entirely so the film can have its ending. All this apparently disturbs Bond so much he can't face living without Madeleine and Mathilde, who he was doing a perfectly fine job of living without a few days earlier, and so he climbs to the top of the base and

lets the missiles rain down on him. This is designed to preclude any doubt of the character's fate, with Bond disappearing in the blinding light of erupting bombs. "James Bond Will Return," the very end credits nonetheless assure. There is direct heed paid to the end of the novel *You Only Live Twice* in the choice of poetic eulogy M chooses to read to his team in memorial of Bond.



Perhaps the filmmakers intend a segue into some variation on Fleming's last, posthumously-published revival of the character, *The Man With The Golden Gun*, where Bond turned up after several years in amnesiac exile after being thought dead. But if they want to go that route, they ought to have been a tad less explicit. Such questions are, I expect, being held off for the time being. The real point of this ending is to allow Craig to draw a firm line under his tenancy and allow another reboot. After all, if Spider-Man can keep going through the same origin story again and again, why not James Bond? It's the sort of thing that might please those who considered Craig the apotheosis of the franchise, but will leave others wincing and wondering why they even bothered. What's most galling is that when one considers the many references to previous entries and to *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*, realisation dawns that as well as filching from Marvel and *The Force Awakens*, *No Time To Die* is also powerfully beholden to another J.J. Abrams movie, *Star Trek: Into Darkness* (2013). That film, whilst okay in itself, has deservedly become a byword for incoherent franchise remixing and self-sabotage, particularly in the finale where it decided to rearrange the immortal end of *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982) so that Kirk dies instead of Spock, whilst casually removing all the qualities that made that model so memorable. *No Time To Die* does basically the same thing in having Bond rather than his great amour die, and also forgets what made that long-ago tragic ending so strong, the stinging irony of a man so talented at keeping himself alive cursed to remain that way after crushing loss. By comparison this Bond's end feels like a sigh of relief. Bond's greatest enemy isn't Blofeld, or Safin, or love, or time, or fate, but the shrunken horizons of modern franchise creativity. The price paid for making Bond more earthbound, it seems, is to eventually drive him into the mud.

## **Benedetta (2021)**



Even as an undoubtedly aging provocateur, it's hard to imagine Paul Verhoeven mellowing, and his latest film seems from a distance like vintage showmanship from that most exalted of cinematic pervert-artists. Based on the true story of 17th century nun and mystic Benedetta Carlini, *Benedetta* can be said to occupy a seat in the no-man's-land that usually cleaves serious historical, social, and character portraiture and investigation from erotic fan fiction and a freewheeling trash movie trip recalling the "nunsplotation" strand of 1960s and '70s European grindhouse cinema. Verhoeven opens with the young Benedetta (Elena Plonka) being escorted to the convent in Pescia where she will spend most of the rest of her life, as a precocious and utterly ardent girl convinced she wields divinely invested influence thanks to the Virgin Mary. The power of her faith seems substantiated as she appears to command a bird to drop its poop on the helmet of a bandit who, with a gang of fellows, rides up and accosts her family: the other bandits are so amused they ride off. Benedetta is the daughter of a wealthy merchant (David Clavel), who pays the necessarily large sum required to gain her a place in the convent to the Abbess (Charlotte Rampling). As Benedetta grows to adulthood (played by Virginie Efira), she begins to experience intense visions of Jesus and seems to receive stigmata, developments that win her widespread fame, and also make her the object of machinations from the local church hierarchy, who install her in the Abbess' place in the hope she can attract pilgrims and their cash.



Benedetta's fame comes at a cost, as she experiences wrenching convulsions, hallucinations, and profuse bleeding from her supposed stigmata, which the old Abbess' loyal underling Christina (Louise Chevillotte) tries to denounce as self-inflicted, after discovering broken glass where she had a fit. There's also temptation in Benedetta's life: Bartolomea (Daphné Patakia), a young shepherdess who seeks refuge in the convent in fleeing her sexually abusive father and brothers, and whose plight so moves Benedetta's mother (Midea Carlini) that she obliges her gobsmacked husband to pay for Bartolomea to enter the convent too. Benedetta initially has no way to process her attraction to Bartolomea, and her spiral into mystic mania seems partly fuelled by furious sublimation. Bartolomea, with her already large sexual experience and unabashed appetites, stirs Benedetta's sadistic impulses as she forces the newcomer to pluck some toppled cotton reels out of a boiling pot, in a moment both know nonetheless is charged with displaced sexual gamesmanship. When Benedetta is granted the expanse of space and privacy of the Abbess' chambers when she's appointed to the role, she and Bartolomea begin an affair in earnest, unaware that the old Abbess is spying on them through a peephole.



Even before he went to Hollywood, Verhoeven was not exactly what you would call a subtle director, but the power of his best work stems very much from this very lack of moderation, rooted in the

sweltering intensity with which he portrays experiential extremes. *Benedetta* revisits his fascination with characters suffering fractured identity and reality thanks to duelling impulses of carnal frenzy and spiritual torsion, as well the uncertain degree those two realms can ever be separated, as well as his fascination with transgressive heroes, and more particularly heroines, who find themselves beset on all sides on odysseys of torment, because of the nominally perverse points of their psyche that drive them on leave them bound to become misunderstood social pariahs. In this regard *Benedetta* is close in nature to Verhoeven's recent antiheroines of *Black Book* (2007) and *Elle* (2016), but also recalls early protagonists like the ape-of-god artist in *Turkish Delight* (1974) and the tormented gay writer of *The Fourth Man* (1984), particularly the latter, as *Benedetta* is wrenched between yearnings for transcendental experience and earthly pleasures. The Renaissance-era setting nods back to *Flesh + Blood* (1985) and its evocation of those extremes in terms of a time and place, although *Benedetta* has a much cleaner, almost theatrical aesthetic.



The problem with *Benedetta* is that it proves more an accumulation of auteurist impulses than a truly, persuasive animation of them, one that never quite brings its full force to bear on any of its jostling conceptual viewpoints. The film's confusion is also, admittedly, proof of its innately Verhoeven quality. This is a space where *Benedetta* can be at once an egotistical and sensually greedy bitch and a divinely invested folk heroine, because that's what Verhoeven understands people are, bundles of madly warring impulse at the mercy of forces cosmic and immediate. But *Benedetta* suffers in part from never quite taking a definitive stance on its central character, in terms of her psyche and her veracity. People around her have suspicions stirred about her ecstatic episodes, and by the end even Bartolomea is given cause to think she is, in one sense, a phony. But Verhoeven labours to keep a degree of ambiguity: *Benedetta* remains adamant in her faith and self-image as anointed bride of Christ, to the point where eventually she chooses self-immuring over freedom. *Benedetta* has recurring visions of a gallantly sexy Jesus slaying corrupting serpents and demonic corsairs on her behalf, fantasies that counterpoint her growing awareness of the imminence of forbidden passion in her life, but also gain urgency and ecstatic persuasiveness from that thrill of such contending forces. The holy is not dynamic or exciting without the profane, and vice versa. These interludes see Verhoeven shifting into Ken Russell-esque territory in dancing along the knife-edge between mischievous kitsch and hallucinatory grandeur. But the flat-looking digital effects hamper the impact: where the film should be invoking terrible delirium we instead get stuff that belongs in a music video.





Benedetta and Bartolomea's romance is charted in fluctuations of will and bodily transfixing that rhyme sarcastically with a medievalist ideal of religious experience. Benedetta afflicts Bartolomea with stigmata as she herself suffers, be it from her own hand or Jesus, in demanding she atone for the sin of being desirable, and Bartolomea suffers it as a sign she can take all consequential pain, her obedience also a defiance in the martyring of love. As expected with Verhoeven, he's not in the slightest bit abashed in portraying the sexuality in direct and lushly physical terms. When Benedetta and Bartolomea do finally do the nasty, they do so fearlessly, riding the wave of what their bodies tell them is right. Such moments both extend Verhoeven's essential motif of being human involving obedience to warring gods within and without, as well as reminding the viewer that this is, after all, the director of *Showgirls* (1995) at work. And, like that film, the frankness is at once bold and curiously unerotic, whilst the narrative plays as a sneaky reprise, casting Benedetta as the upstart newcomer who displaces the queen bee and pleases the masters upstairs in proving a superior profit-magnet in the show business of dazzling the faithful. Like *RoboCop* (1987), it's a dense little myth about a redeemer figure carefully packaged by the powers that be for their own ends, only to panic when it becomes self-willed and dangerous. Bartolomea, invested with a sense of both practicality and satirical humour that's also Verhoeven's, eventually carves a dildo out of the stature of the Virgin Mary Benedetta inherited from her mother, creating a new iconography of religious eroticism that refuses to be merely sacrilegious, but instead tries to fuse the eternally wrestling identities. This also proves a major plot point, as such a device ultimately provides damning evidence.



Meanwhile the rituals of mortification are visited upon Christina when she tries to denounce Benedetta as a fraud but cannot prove it, and so is obliged to flagellate herself before her fellows, blending agony and masochistic bliss as she rips her own back to shreds, seemingly determined to relish suffering in punishment for failing the truth as she sees it. Christina finally throws herself from the roof of the convent on the same night a comet appears in the sky boding ill for the populace. The shattered former Abbess, now mere Sister Felicita, heads off to bring down the wrath of the church hierarchy on Benedetta, but eventually discovers she has more sympathy for Benedetta than the authorities. Verhoeven's visual allusions are more earnest than they feel at first – the eye in the peephole comes to Robert Bresson's *The Trial of Joan of Arc* (1963) just as the ending takes up the thread of Carl Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1927), but swaps out the burning virgin in favour of the holy sinner. Christina meanwhile is laid out in an aping of Holbein's portrait of the dead Christ taken down off the cross, a lateral hunk of dead meat invested nonetheless with quiescent spiritual import. Benedetta's shows of divine incantation also see her suddenly speaking in a deep, quasi-masculine voice that is supposed to be Jesus in command of her body, as if her experience of religious ecstasy is a release from the prison of mere gender – she also has a vision of Jesus on the cross in which he commands her to remove his loincloth and she beholds female genitalia – a touch which like much of the rest of the film can be seen to occupy both the tackily obvious and the wryly anarchic.



What's most interesting and bracing about *Benedetta* is Verhoeven's refusal to go down the same path a lot of recent prestige filmmakers have taken and present a simplistic sounding board for modern day mores, avoiding portraying Benedetta, Bartolomea, and the other nuns purely as victims and marooned proto-moderns. There's a clear-eyed gusto to proceedings I found rather superior to a run of thematically similar but prissier art-house efforts of late like *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2018) and *Ammonite* (2019), films that serve up tragic period queer narratives and are lapped up by straight audiences who crave them because those are the only kind of tragic romance they can believe in anymore. The women here are multifaceted, players in their games of power politics and loyalty, and as complicit in the hypocrisy of the church as anyone, although Verhoeven still eventually, forcefully indicts the misogynist brutality of it. Benedetta experiences moments of giddy narcissism and monstrous enjoyment of power. She idly masturbates after Christina's death, claiming shame doesn't exist under God's protection, which Benedetta feels she can claim as a shield, whilst Bartolomea disgustedly accuses her of only loving herself, and when she orgasms she breaks down sobbing, as if such private rituals are required to remove the blocks stymieing authentic feeling.



Benedetta seems mesmerised by both the pleasure and futility of corporeal existence, her sensual liberation swiftly becoming a form of fatalism that meets its inevitable rendezvous when Felicita's interventions attract the attention of Giglioli (Lambert Wilson), a Papal Noncio. The Noncio comes to Pescia in the midst of an outbreak of plague consuming the countryside to dig out the truth by customary methods, including vaginally torturing a trussed and stripped Bartolomea to make her reveal the location of the tell-tale phallus. The Noncio is first glimpsed reading Felicita's testimony whilst breakfasting with his pregnant mistress. Verhoeven notes the hypocrisy with a blatant obviousness that also wants to move past it – Verhoeven doesn't judge the Noncio for having basically the same failing according to their creed that Benedetta has, but for how he represents power with its self-presumed right to set such arbitrary rules and cast judgement. The last third of the film is given a jolt of energy by Wilson's formidable performance, one that reminded me a little of Ronny Cox in *RoboCop* in playing for Verhoeven a man who embodies corrupt power but is also invested with potent levels of charisma and intelligence that highlights how he gained, keeps, and wields that power. Efra matches him when Benedetta is pitted against the Noncio, as they enact the nominal roles as servile woman and imperious church patriarch, Benedetta scrubbing the priest's feet, a ritual that becomes nonetheless a moment of theatre wherein two cunning, strong-willed people contend in a dance of interrogation and defence, words careening off each-other as surely as duellists' swords.



*Benedetta* is so rich with thematic coin that the cornucopia seems to erode Verhoeven's creative poise, all that said, even as the surplus keeps the onscreen action consistently absorbing, intermittently titillating, and, occasionally, truly arresting. In the past Verhoeven has been a master at sustaining multiple tones, even multiple thematic readings and genre frames, within single movies, but *Benedetta* fails to cohere in the fashion of his best labours. The script, co-written by Verhoeven and David Birke, moves erratically between the various zones it wants to explore, sometimes offering a serious and intent study of religious zeal, other times a softcore adventure, and eventually a kind of parable for the overthrow of the medieval mindset, a parable complicated by the fact that despite all, *Benedetta* remains devoted to that mindset. The film finally fails to penetrate as deeply into *Benedetta*'s head as successfully as *Bartolomea* manages her groin, because of the central hesitation I mentioned earlier, seems to be trying to have it both ways. The blend of erotic and religious imagery never quite erupts in all necessary surreal glory as it did in *The Fourth Man*, and the segue into contending with social repression and institutional evil in the gaudy, blood-and-fire finale involving the unmasking of a literalised disease within the patriarchy and a chosen auto-da-fe, teeters on the brink of parodic. Nonetheless great touches still come on, as when the dying Noncio comments, in exasperation at *Benedetta*'s assurance he'll go to heaven, "You lie to the end."



## **Last Night In Soho (2021)**



**Director: Edgar Wright**

**Screenwriters: Krysty Wilson-Cairns, Edgar Wright**

Edgar Wright built his fame as a filmmaker with a very particular brand. Wright offered sarcastically comedic takes on well-worn film genres that, rather than playing as outright lampoons, took the up the thrilling, extraordinary, dynamic experiential journeys found in the likes of a George Romero-esque zombie horror movie or a Michael Bay-style cop action movie, and inserted very ordinary characters contending with the most commonplace and stodgy life problems into the midst of such craziness, taking the truism that the heightened metaphors found in genre films represent more fundamental and familiar human quandaries and gaining strange fizz from the disparity, the awareness that in some ways it's easier to face up to big disasters and epic calamities than the small, everyday terrors of life, and wielding filmmaking technique skilled and kinetic enough to bind the two seemingly opposite dramatic styles into lucid, giddily amusing wholes. Wright's breakthrough feature *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) and its follow-ups in the so-called "Cornetto Trilogy" *Hot Fuzz* (2007) and *The World's End* (2014), were also fuelled by that disparity, but also the tension between the very British settings with their air of cosy familiarity, and the adrenalized, stylised, fantastic precepts of Hollywood blockbusters.



Wright's first Hollywood film, *Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World* (2011), whilst working in a similar fashion, inevitably lacked that tension of sociology as well as genre, although it tried to retain it to a degree in adopting a Canadian setting. Wright's 2017 hit *Baby Driver*, whilst a divisive experience that proved oddly aggravating to some viewers in mashing together bratty comedy, neo-musical, and action thriller, signalled Wright starting to shift ground. *Last Night In Soho*, his latest film and judging by early signs his least well-received to date critically and commercially, continues that shift in offering what is essentially a straitlaced mystery-horror film. That is, straitlaced to a degree. *Last Night In Soho* is every inch a Wright film in its stylistic and thematic refrains. The fetishism for pop music and use of it as a seismograph of life experience for the characters and a texture-imbuing device for the filmmaking. The constant theme of a hero trying to come of age even as life proves rather more daunting and dangerous than expected. But where in Wright's previous films the pop culture fun was presented as a kind of spicy sauce layered atop the smart-aleck allegories, *Last Night In Soho* goes a step further and makes the allure of nostalgia and the habits of creative young folk in wrapping themselves in a self-mythologising cloak of preferred culture into a topic to be dissected rather than played off. Wright is certainly out here to do something more ambitious than offer a feature-length version of *Don't*, the terrific little unit of pastiche he made as a fake movie trailer for *Grindhouse* (2007).



Wright's heroine Eloise (Thomazin McKenzie) is a pure avatar who for myriad young, talented dreamers, albeit with her own, particular abilities and inspirations. She's first glimpsed dancing about her grandmother's house in a tape-and-newspaper dress to Peter and Gordon's "World Without Love" and fantasising about being a famous fashion designer. Eloise's penchants for a world of retro glamour are given a plain story basis, as she was raised by her grandmother (Rita Tushingham) on a diet of 1960s LPs, after her mother's death by suicide. Eloise is blessed with an extra layer of oddness in that she has a form of psychic awareness, allowing her to stay in touch with her mother's watchful shade. Eloise's embracing world of old music and big dreams faces the challenge of going to the London College of Fashion from her home in Cornwall. Eloise's stranger talent is the vehicle for the plot as it leaves her especially vulnerable in both her sense of detachment from other people her age and her ability to absorb the dense layer of experience, good and bad, soaked into every inch of London. But it also provides Wright and co-screenwriter Krysty Wilson-Cairns with a clever metaphor for a certain kind of heightened, transformative awareness that would surely feel familiar to many an artistically inclined youngster. Eloise's private universe allows communing with history, both personal and social, conjuring a glorious lost golden age when the culture's fruits were in full bloom compared to the petty, happenstance, unpredictable present, all the better for drawing on as fuel for one's own attempts to create alternate universes where more perfect things can exist.



Eloise's specific spur to such yearnings is her childhood loss of her mother. When she first lands in London she's both been schooled to be cautious in the Big Bad World to a degree that she overreacts at some manifestations of it – a flippantly libidinous taxi driver, ads for sex workers festooning phone booths – and quickly finds herself run ragged when she falls into the hard-partying company of her new roommate Jocasta (Synnøve Karlsen) and her circle of friends, finishing up zoning out whilst listening to her favourite sounds and falling asleep wrapped in a blanket at her first student dorm party. This part of the movie is the most familiarly Wright-esque as Jocasta and her circle are swiftly and wryly sketched as insufferable poseurs and providing a few good laughs in the process, with Jocasta explaining why she's dropping her last name thanks to the example of Kylie – Jenner, not Minogue – and tries to make social capital out of belonging to the "dead mum's club," and desperately trying to make up ground when Eloise incidentally outmanoeuvre her in the pitiable stakes. Jocasta and her pals provide suitably snooty foils for Eloise, whilst also representing the debased modern world with its most shallow and transitory obsessions and heedless disinterest in anything that doesn't feed into the machine of current commercial appeal.



Wright might be making a nod to *Pretty In Pink* (1986) as Eloise turns up to college wearing clothes she designed and made herself only to find Jocasta and company festooned in designer gear. Jocasta does at least perform the essential service of introducing Eloise to the pleasures of booze and a rowdy night out in Soho, where Wright cheerfully plays John Barry's theme for *Beat Girl* (1959) on the soundtrack. But the only person Eloise finds any real connection with at school is John (Michael Ajao), a young man who admits that he also has had trouble fitting in in North London. Being as he is from South London. Quickly tiring of dorm life, Eloise chooses to seek out a place of her own and seems to find the perfect place in a small flat in Soho rented off the elderly Ms Collins (Diana Rigg), who seems like a reassuring substitute for her grandmother, and the flat seems to harbour hidden pleasures available specifically to a person like Eloise. When she falls asleep on her first night there, drifting off whilst listening to Cilla Black's "You're My World," Eloise enters into a dream so vivid it seems more like an inherited memory, in which she witnesses young and lovely Sandie (Anya-Taylor Joy) saunter into the Café de Paris, the hub of Soho nightlife, circa 1965, and goes about trying to catch the eye of the right person to help her dream of becoming a singing star.



This sequence is perhaps the most unabashedly grandiose and idealised Wright has ever dared be in his staging and evocation of a past that's imperial in its resurgent confidence and glamour, an embrace of



something in a fashion that Wright, long the hipster's hipster in his blend of fervour and irony, has clearly both admired but held himself wary of. He stages a travelling shot from Eloise's point of view emerging from a side street into the midst of busy Soho, a huge poster for *Thunderball* (1965) pinpointing the historical moment as Black's singing rises from soft and enticing to grand and swooning in force, before entering the Café de Paris. There Eloise finds herself the reflected, fragmented image of Sandie descending stairs as the perfected dolly bird, and Eloise is able to share the experience as Sandie dodges the sleazy, grasping Cubby (Paul Brightwell) and makes a beeline for Jack (Matt Smith), who seems every inch Sandie's period male counterpart with his slicked-back pompadour, sharp suit, and insouciant charm, still daintily gripping drink and cigarette even as he joins Sandie on the dance floor. Sandie sets about wowing Jack, who seems to be the man to talk to break into Soho show business, by dancing to Graham Bond's "Oh Baby": Sandie gets to act out her fantasy of arresting the very eye of the zeitgeist whilst Jack plays her ideal swashbuckling lover, socking Cubby as he becomes insulting and dashing off with Sandie to make out in a telephone booth.



Eloise's vicarious experience through Sandie's persona gifts her a vision that fits her concept of the past and also an idealised edition of her own hopes and anticipations: Sandie has all the brash confidence Eloise (and Wright) associated with a spectacular era and which Eloise finds conspicuously lacking in herself. Here Wright touches on an essential matter that's fascinated him since *Shaun of the Dead* – how people construct themselves not only through their own lived experience but the art they love and how those two realms interact, art itself being an inheritance whether it's a week old or a century and presents a way of seeing that contains truth but not reality. Although both characters are linked by their maintained bubbles of detachment from the world, Wright makes Eloise the opposite to the hero of *Baby Driver*: for him all the music he loved, soaked in through his perpetually present ear-buds, was rendered equal and contemporary through the omnivorous way he encounters, where Eloise, detached from the mainstream by her life circumstances, uses music to create a world to retreat into. Eloise's psychic talents, in this regard, are unabashedly presented as an amplification of her creative talents, and the tale of Sandie and Jack, at first at least, operates like her fantasy projection of herself, a vehicle to evoke the textures she tries to recreate in her design work, birthing designs taking inspiration from Sandie's apparel. Of course, Wright is creating both stories, and the hall-of-mirrors story structuring is recreated within, as Eloise finds herself increasingly uncomfortable and unable to maintain the vicarious perspective, trying to escape the mirrors, but finds the price of that is the other world can access hers, too. Finally, after taking Jack back to her flat in an attempt as much to try and escape that other world as to gain experience of her own, Eloise is driven into screaming hysterics as she envisions Jack threatening Sandie and seeming to kill her in a gruesome welter of blood.



That Wright plainly loves the mid-1960s pop culture and the fabled stature of Swinging London is etched into every frame of the film even when considering its dank and malevolent side – indeed Wright knows full well part of the allure of nightlife groves is that debauched and seedy aspect, the feeling of a place carefully cordoned off from polite society where animal pleasures can be indulged, so long as it's place where one can safely be a tourist rather than a permanent resident. A little like horror cinema itself. If *Last Night In Soho* had been made at the time the period scenes are set they would in turn be transposed to about 1910. And, indeed, there were a number of horror movies in the mid-1960s and early '70s that cast their minds back, if not quite that far, then to the Jazz Age as a sounding board for contemporary drama, with a similar motif of an age of quaint glamour on the edge of popular memory, recalled by bedraggled and ancient survivors, a la Robert Aldrich's gothic valentines *Whatever Happened To Baby Jane?* (1963) and *Hush, Hush Sweet Charlotte* (1964), Terence Fisher's *The Devil Rides Out* (1967), and Robert Fuest's *The Abominable Dr. Phibes* (1971). Wright makes the obvious gambit of casting Tushingham, Rigg, and Terence Stamp in prominent roles as actors who aren't just the right age for their characters but carry a distinctive cachet from the era that gives an extra sense of import in their roles: Tushingham still has the limpid crystalline gaze she had in *Doctor Zhivago* (1965), now used to give a little twinkle of familiar compassion to Eloise's aging but reliable guardian.



Stamp is cast as an elderly man Eloise keeps encountering around Soho including in the Toucan, a pub where she gets a job pulling pints. Eloise soon begins to suspect he may be the older Jack, a suspicion that gains solidity when he seems to recognise her inspiration once she changes her hairstyle to match Sandie's. Stamp is still a formidable screen presence, and he brings something ineffable to his part, expertly deploying his native Cockney accent in alternations of gruff, chisel-on-stone scepticism and passages of wry, almost lilting wistfulness: "How dare you," he retorts when Eloise notes he was once a ladies' man as he bangs out air piano on the bar: "Still am." Eloise's conviction that he is Jack leads to a confrontation in which she tries to get him to confess to Sandie's murder and record it on her phone, only for the increasingly irate man to become so distracted in his irritation he's hit by a car, and Eloise learns not only isn't he Jack, he's actually Lindsay, a former policeman – the same one who decades before encouraged Sandie to get out, and has survived into old age as the keeper of the memory of all Soho's nasty secrets. Wright leaves it frustratingly vague as to whether Lindsay dies, and indeed it's a subtly dark touch where Wright makes his heroine essentially responsible for the death of the closest thing the period scenes offer to a hero figure.



*Last Night In Soho* is, evidently, a homage-cum-revision of 1960s and '70s giallo thrillers, most famously and specifically associated with Italian cinema and directors including Mario Bava, Dario Argento, and Lucio Fulci. But giallo can be argued to in part have British roots. The style took heavy licence from Alfred Hitchcock – Wright mischievously closes the stylisation loop by referring back to *Vertigo* (1958) in having Eloise's room flooded by red and blue neon light, in good Bava style, from the neighbouring sign of an Italian restaurant much like the hotel room in the Hitchcock film – and directors like Seth Holt and George Pollock were engaged in giallo-like stories and visual motifs at the same time Bava was synthesising the giallo style and creating his signature colour film filled with clashing, drenching hues which Wright quotes copiously. The very Italian quality of the giallo as it developed was of course more one of aesthetic, the delirious gusto in entering entirely into a tricky, deceptive way of seeing that in the hands of directors like Argento and Fulci all but lost contact with standard ideals of coherent narrative. Wright honours the giallo style with expected levels of referentialism, nicking from Argento's *The Bird With The Crystal Plumage* (1970) the motif of a murderous assault witnessed but misinterpreted in terms of who is attacking whom, and the obsession with dream visions and psychic connections from the Fulci films like *A Lizard In A Woman's Skin* (1971) and *The Psychic* (1977), devices that allowed Fulci to play cinematic games with perception and enter completely into a dreamlike space. And, in classic giallo fashion, the climax involves a gender switch of the expected killer, a gender switch connected with the style's concern with disrupted social mores. Like *Suspiria* (1977), Wright's film tracks a young student as she enters into a dark fairy-tale realm where the dangers and strangeness about her dramatise her urgent attempts to mature.



Wright also nods to a more local tradition in Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* (1965), and some of its odder children like Peter Collinson's *Straight On Till Morning* (1972), variants that drew on a more psychological and realistic style of horror preoccupied with sympathetic killers whose sanity has broken down until they are isolate islands of neurosis. Wright also reminded me a little of "The Mirror" episode from Kevin Connor's *From Beyond The Grave* (1973), which similarly depicted a hapless person experiencing mind-twisting visions in a recently-rented apartment, although Wright stops well short of going down the route in that story of having Eloise possessed and start killing herself, as amusing as the thought of the winsome McKenzie going on a killing spree is. Alongside the horror movie trappings, though, *Last Night In Soho* is also like *Baby Driver* before it a covert musical, and again takes its title from a song, in this case by cult '60s band Dave Dee, Dozy, Beaky, Mick & Titch, whilst its heroine is named after the song by Barry Ryan, featured in a key scene. The way Wright weaves music into the film's texture and its storytelling rhythms is represents perhaps his best filmmaking to date. Wright's use of music has always been inspired – the scene in *Shaun of the Dead* where the heroes bash zombies in semi-choreographic time to Queen's "Don't Stop Me Now" being a beloved example. But here he goes deeper in the way he exploits emotional associations with music, most obviously in Eloise's first dream where Black's singing encapsulates all her fantasies about the past and the authority of its art, segueing into Sandie and Jack's dance together as a tableaux of retro cool.



In Eloise's second dream of her, Sandie performs an *a capella* rendition of Petula Clark's "Downtown," a song specifically about the romantic allure of the big city's most fervent quarters, to Jack and the owner of a club called the Rialto (Terence Frisch), in an audition Jack arranged. The performance is a success, and the boss gives Sandie a job, leading to Sandie and Jack becoming lovers. So far Sandie's story is still perfectly on song for Eloise's idea of emerging into adulthood. Next dream, however, Eloise finds herself watching Sandie from amongst the all-male audience in the Rialto, and beholds Sandie as merely one of several back-up dancers in a burlesque act headed by "Marionetta" (Jeanie Wishes), who performs a tawdry naughty dance whilst lip-synching Sandie Shaw's "Puppet on a String." This sequence, whilst depicting bawdy high spirits, nonetheless represents one of the most effective tonal shifts I've ever seen in a film, as Eloise confronts the squalid flipside of her throwback dreaming. Soon enough she realises Sandie, as well as being degraded in the show, is doomed to become Jack's thrall and pet prostitute, rented out to a parade of bland middle-aged businessmen who go through the motions of charming her to a predestined outcome involving her sprawled in depressive self-loathing on her bed back in the flat with a wad of cash laid out beside her.



Wright uses the lyrics of the Shaw song, with its jolly but oddly sinister evocation of romantic dependence, to set the scene for Sandie's downfall, and segueing into a deliriously garish vision in

which Eloise swaps places with Sandie and flees through the interior of the Rialto, glimpsing visions of grim fates for girls like her glimpsed in dressing rooms engaged in sex acts or drug use, whilst being chased by Jack who's now become an ogreish incarnation of the sleaze. The fantasy suddenly becomes a bleak, Fellini-esque nightmare zone where the fetid flipside of the period is unveiled with all its abusive prerogatives. Wright follows this sequence with an equally effective episode where Wright communicates Sandie's mental fracturing and apparent total defeat through her dancing frenetically to the Walker Brothers' cover of "Land of a Thousand Dances," dissolving in deliriously psychedelic imagery, intercut with her listless and repetitious encounters with prospective johns. Amongst these, only an encounter with a man she takes to be a cop (Sam Claflin) stands out, as he suggests she's too good for what's she's doing and should get out while she can.



*Last Night In Soho* is, then, a story about the problems of nostalgia, rather than an unleavened paean to it. Eloise is an apt vehicle for such explorations: thanks to her empathic gifts, Eloise is able to explore the past both as spectator but also actor in it, cinema viewer and theatrical performer, a detachment that becomes increasingly frustrating – at one point Eloise tries to shatter the barrier, represented by the mirror she exists in as Sandie's reflection, and grab hold of her in a gesture of desperate protectiveness, a moment that perfectly illustrates the powerful feeling a lot of us have in contemplating the lives of people from the past we admire but know came to a bad end, wishing we could have intervened. But detachment is also deliverance, as Eloise is safe to awaken from the vicarious demimonde. At first, at least, before her dream life begins to invade her waking one, and she's stalked by grotesque shadow-men with blurred faces who resemble Sandie's client-rapists, as well as Sandie and Jack themselves. The dichotomies built in here involving the difference between safe distance and immersion, sentimental longing and grim reality, cinematic image and immediate reality, invest *Last Night In Soho* with a depth that eludes many such genre-sampling tributes, stumbling into territory for Wright close to Brian De Palma, another arch image-player with a penchant for quoting giallo cinema, although Wright, thus far, lacks De Palma's deeper perversity, his fascination for the dark battles in the soul he represents through his characters who are often brutally stripped of their naiveté.



Wright by contrast prizes the gawky innocence of his characters whilst also meditating on the inevitability of disillusionment and the sometimes unbearable impact of it. He has Eloise strike up a tentative romance with John as the two uncool kids in the College of Fashion, but when the two finally try to take some time out for a little authentic youthful fun of their own as they attend a student union Halloween party and start bouncing about joyfully to Siouxsie and the Banshees' "Happy House," and where Eloise and John's sudden exuberance might partly be the result of Jocasta giving them spiked drinks. This island of true, personal, potentially transformative experience for Eloise nonetheless becomes a jagged trap as she starts seeing the ghostly men hovering around the dance floor, their grey semi-transparent forms flickering like the strobe lighting. An extremely effective image that also, oddly, calls back to the imagery of *Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World* in Wright presenting the arena of music as a literal warzone, a place where people battle for control of their personalities, and perform great acts of self-discovery. Here Wright counters the jollity of that film with a jolt of ghostly visitation that can also be read as a portrait of melancholia piercing through fun, the melancholia that Eloise is trying to outrun, inherited from her mother. This theme of preternatural sensitivity to environment which operates as a kind of recording device for the common consciousness connects to a later comment by Ms Collins when Eloise asks her if someone once died in her room, "This is London – someone's died in every room in every building in this whole city." All cities are cities of the dead as well as the living.



The Toucan's owner, Carol (Pauline McLynn), offers her converse version of this when she expresses a faith that her pub's walls are haunted by ghosts of good times, as a stage where everyone – “Every gangster, every copper, every red-faced lush” – has some time of another stopped in for a drink and a laugh, forming part of the great mesh of community and continuity that imbues the city with its identity, in which every person is both a fleeting presence and a vital player, stars of their own movie overlapping with everyone else's, and life happens in those overlapping margins. Eloise's decision to seduce John leads into a keen example of Wright's talent for layering his motifs, presenting her as at once a normal but troubled young person contemplating a familiar rite of passage in part to try and root herself in the here and now rather than her dark obsessions, and a very unusual one, making a desperate but oddly practical attempt to find a way to distract herself from a haunting that's not metaphorical: from Eloise's viewpoint an array of kissing couples in the street outside the nightclub blur and become their predecessors from another era, including the abused and maligned, part of a chain of events. When Eloise freaks out at the vision of Sandie's apparent death as she and John try to have sex, John becomes the fool of absurd fortune, his humiliation and anxiety illustrated as he shatters a mirror and dashes out past Ms Collins with glass cutting up his feet, whilst Eloise is lost in a delirious and horrifying scene of flashing steel and spraying blood, taking to the most hyperbolic reaches imaginable the basic proposition of an initial sexual encounter proving tragically clumsy and hurtful.



Eloise, trying to find some historical record of Sandie's death in part to prove she's not simply suffering from a hyperactive imagination, goes trawling through old newspaper microfiche reels in the college library, not noticing that some of the faces from the old missing persons cases are awfully familiar. The Halloween dance party and its nightmarish interrupting is a brilliant scene that Wright, perhaps trying to really live up to his ambition to make above all a horror movie rather than a deconstructive impression of one, repeats arguably once or twice too often, as Eloise keeps experiencing similarly bloodcurdling and disorientating encounters with the wraiths. She cracks during one such assault during her library sojourn and tries to stab one of the ghosts, only to for her blow to be stopped just in time by John, and Eloise realises she was actually about to stab the understandably perturbed and wrathful Jocasta. It's not at all hard to guess where the plot of *Last Night In Solo* leads, for anyone who's ever watched a giallo or even an episode of a TV show like *Medium*, and when the casting itself serves to a degree as a giveaway. Suffice to say that there's a very good reason Eloise finds her double-edged dream-life in the place she does, which turns out to be as crammed full of dead bodies as Reginald Christie's notorious address. Classic giallo films liked playing games with perception, of course, much of it built around preoccupations with alluring images of beauty and complications of gender. *The Bird With The Crystal Plumage* climaxed with the revelation a psycho killer was actually the seemingly



victimised young woman, whilst *Deep Red* rifled a whole Freudian litany in its often literal deconstruction of bodies and the beings that inhabit them.



*Last Night In Soho* takes up those preoccupations in a manner that can be seen, depending on one's predisposition, as timely or trendy, but it's also wound deeply into its form and function. Whilst the narrative follows a classical giallo arc to its end, why we get there is given a new spin rooted in the exposure of sexism and exploitation in the entertainment industry, where monsters beget monsters. Wright's cunning approach to casting also made me think of how different actors in different eras are used to encapsulate similar personas, linking the ambidextrous talent of Taylor-Joy as well as her unusual looks to Rigg, and Clafin's brief but eye-catching embodiment of the young and urbane Lindsay, ingeniously able to reproduce the notes in Stamp's performance as a figure who is in many ways the closest thing to a hero in the narrative but fatefully stymied by a streak of smug detachment that curdles eventually into angry, guilty boding. This is also reflected in the casting of McKenzie and Taylor-Joy, who don't really look that much alike but are able to almost will themselves to resemble each-other. Rigg, for her part, in her last role, goes out luckily with a part that depends entirely on her specific talents as an actor: Rigg's particularity, going back to her days in *The Avengers* TV series, lay in her ability to suggest something steely and dangerous under a carefully maintained surface, be it the chic insouciance of Emma Peel or a wrinkly old granny type here.



When it's finally, inevitably revealed that sweet old Ms Collin is actually Sandie, or Alexandra as was her full, true name, Rigg handles the shift in manner to great effect, letting the sly, maniacal edge Sandie's used to survive for half a century show as she proposes to kill Eloise and John. The edge of fierce and unsentimental knowing in Rigg's performance as well as a certain indulgent awareness about life and the mistakes people make in it up until that point changes in perception from crusty-but-likeable to disturbing, like her comment that she would have killed John if she'd caught him in the bedroom scene. Sandie confesses that she killed Jack rather than the other way around before embarking on a campaign of vicious revenge by slaying all her old Johns as well, and she drugs Eloise and stabs John in a last-ditch, determined attempt to keep her secret. Wright goes for broke in the finale in a way that risks excess – indeed many have found it so – in seeking reaches of quasi-operatic grandeur to match the emotional heat of the songs Wright deploys in the film, returning to “You're My World” as Wright switches between the reality of old Sandie stalking Eloise up the stairwell and the swooningly stylised version of her fantasy where she's young again and bringing the murderous pain in a most glam way. Here, Wright tries to twin the opposite poles of his cinematic lexicon in a new manner, the adoration of grandiose spectacle and show business colliding with sordid reality.



The climax still has its twists, as the ghostly men seem to erupt out of the floor and walls, and demand Eloise gain revenge and kill Sandie, only to wring a note of tragicomic sickness out of the sight of the shades all cringing like chastised boys as Sandie looms over them and they remember the savage wounds she inflicted. Only the ghostly Jack with his leering, provoking sneer holds the line in maintaining what is actually his perpetual puppet-play where even in murder and afterlife Sandie and the others can't escape until cleansing fire claims them all. Wright tries to have his cake of genre fulfilment and eat his slice of revisionism, and there is some concomitant awkwardness. But ultimately I appreciated his attempt to be more complex, the dead men just as misogynistic and implacable as they were alive but not merely rendered as undead demons needing putting down again, Sandie neither fully crazed nor entirely sympathetic in answering abuse with abuse, grinding on in a joyless cycle that creates little hells on earth, a hell which, as Lindsay warned earlier, was in part Sandie's own choice. Eloise refuses to let Sandie cut her own throat, but still has to leave her to her auto-da-fe, catching a last sight of the youthful Sandie seated on her old bed, about to be consumed by boiling flames, striking in her pathos but also at least finally gaining the kind of spectacular ending any good performer deserves. Wright includes a coda that sees Eloise emerging as a designing star with her flowing retro creations now bobbing on the bodies of male models, watched by her grandmother and the healed-up John, whilst Sandie's image is now the one that keeps watch from the mirror, signalling Eloise has embraced the ambiguities, gender and otherwise, of the present and is keeping the cautionary example, and sense of mission, gained in her ordeal.

## Belfast (2021)



My lingering but long-tested faith in Kenneth Branagh has waxed and waned, but my feeling that he still had major films in him feels justified as his latest, the autobiographical reminiscence *Belfast*, has suddenly made the one-time enfant terrible of British cinema buzz-worthy again. *Belfast* is a terrific little movie, if a loose-limbed one. Branagh's specific achievement is the balancing act he manages, walking a very fine line between gently nostalgic portrait of childhood where all sorts of strangeness can be readily assimilated so long as it means no real personal change, and a more melancholy and disquieting portrait of what it's like to see a community tested and finally destroyed, piece by piece, whilst swerving in tone from melodrama to plaintive comedy. Branagh's subject here is his own youth, the circumstances that forced his family to leave their home in the titular city and relocate to England. The film opens with a substitute curtain-raising - Branagh cranes his camera upwards from a contemporary, colour image of a fresco on a wall to peer down a street dressed for the period setting of 1969, suddenly in monochrome - before a Spielbergian, scene-setting sequence. Branagh's camera roves around his childhood street, picking out the idealised vignettes of a community in full swing, where the kids play football in the street, all the mothers keep an easy eye on them whilst chatting outside their front doors, and everybody knows each-other, a swift encapsulation of a child's feel for their little world.



Brangah's youthful avatar, Buddy (Jude Hill), beholds the arrival of sectarianism, disruption, and the first blanché of maturity in the form of a looming wall of masked thugs who suddenly arrive in the street, toss Molotov cocktails that explode in sheets of flame, and begin vandalising the houses belonging to Catholics: a gang of Protestant thugs is determined to force them out as battle lines are drawn in the resurgent Troubles. The assault and others like it results in troops being deployed on the streets, and once they leave the street the residents build a barricade to defend it, but the Catholics swiftly begin to leave anyway, and the remaining residents soon find themselves under pressure to align with the new strongmen asserting authority over the community. Not that young Buddy understands any of this, being as he is far too concerned with going to the movies and trying to romance a clever clogs classmate, Catherine (Olive Tennant). His Pa (Jamie Dornan), is the kind of bloke everybody instinctively likes, a gentle raconteur and good singer, but whose easygoing ways with paying taxes have put him severe debt, obliging him to work across the water in England, only able to return home every few weeks. His tough and strident Ma (Caitríona Balfe) meanwhile keeps Buddy and his older brother Will (Lewis McAskie) in hand, and Pa's father Pop (Ciarán Hinds) lends a hand in giving the young lad advice, usually whilst seated in the cramped back yard, whilst his wife Granny (Judi Dench) comments acerbically from her vantage inside the house, all of about five feet away. Buddy's campaign to get closer to Catherine, usually the best student in his class, demands he try to move up ranks in their classroom's grade-based seating system, and Pop teaches Buddy some nifty tricks to make his math marks better.



Branagh's proved a real survivor as a filmmaker even as at the expense of losing much of his early standing, and *Belfast*, as a very private statement from a director who's strained to invest flashes of his personality even in movies as potentially anonymous as *Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit* (2014), gives some clues as to why: he contextualises his later life and career, even his abiding love of Shakespeare, as a search for a cultural home, with a capacity to adapt, to become fluent, that's both a strength and points to a dogging absence. *Belfast* is on one level a tale of a fall from Eden, losing a place where the embrace of the familiar is much more than simply comfortable: it's an entire working system of family and friends, whose basic communal and personal self-definition, the very substance of their selves, comes from the interwoven nature of their lives. Buddy lives already when the film begins with the concurrent problem of absence, as Pa keeps his family well but pays the price in being forced to live away from his family, making that embracing safety net all the more important and immediate. As the pall of violence descends on the family and their community, that basic contiguity is threatened and shattered, but even the terror of anarchy in the streets is only one factor to consider for Ma when Pa raises the possibility of leaving Belfast, compared to the sheer vitality of the world they've always known. The basic problem that Buddy and his family eventually must face is that to prosper and be safe they have to give up precious things, and risk becoming aliens in a new place.



Meanwhile Branagh merrily charts the way-stations of youth and prisms for seeing the world, both in immediate and popular culture – block party sing-alongs and *Star Trek* on the television, rite-of-passage criminal dares and viewings of Technicolor blockbusters in the movie theatre. One pivotal scene where his parents first broach to Buddy the possibility of moving sees him wearing a valiant-looking *Thunderbirds* costume, his imagination and sense of yearning identity filled with the promise of super-futurism even as Buddy panics and furiously rejects change. Buddy’s attempts to romance Catriona have ironic reverberations – his ascension to the top of the class by using his Pop’s trick for fudging math answers accidentally displaces her, but he finally gains connection when they agree to work on an assignment about the moon landing. Not that Granny believes there was a moon landing, as her favourite church newsletter disputes it. Buddy’s family are Protestant, and Buddy and other kids have fraught arguments about just what terrible practices the Catholics get up to, whilst neighbourhood girl Moira (Lara McDonnell) schools him the finer points of avoiding getting randomly beaten up over the question. Moira talks Buddy into joining the gang she belongs to, and to prove his mettle has to join her in a shoplifting raid on a corner store, only to snatch a bar of Turkish Delight, much to Moira’s disgust. Nonetheless the deed proves sufficient and Buddy is brought into the gang, only to find it’s an action force working for the new local sectarian kingpin Billy Clanton (Colin Morgan), sent to smash up and loot a shop for a “statement.”



Branagh borrows the hyper-clear black-and-white look of Alfonso Cuarón's *Roma* (2019) but thankfully avoids its arch, pseudo-objectivist camera gymnastics, instead offering a blend of his own fluidly illustrative energy which for once has a venue worthy of it, abutting deadpan minimalism. Branagh also channels a lot of John Boorman's *Hope and Glory* (1987), another spry portrait of a young lad growing up amidst conflict and paternal absence. Like both of those movies it traces a direct lineage back to Fellini, if avoiding Fellini's queasy fascination with the tangled roots of sexuality. Branagh's own cine-theatrical imagination comes more plainly into play in how he stages all this, both establishing and exploiting the tight-unit quality of the world the characters inhabit and the formative prisms of his imagination. The opening scene, which sees Buddy playing mock battle with a picket sword and a garbage tin lid for a shield, plays at once as a simple and effective portrait of childhood fancy and a nod to Branagh's emergence in cinema with *Henry V* (1989) and his ambivalent investigation of Shakespearean heroism. The childhood play morphs into genuine, adult battle as the riot breaks out, blending chaos and pointed humour as Ma comes to Buddy's rescue amidst the hail of stones, appropriating his shield to use for real, a great image that encapsulates Branagh's celebration of his mother as the embodiment of a protective ideal.





Similarly, Pa is portrayed as a man with troubles and a tendency to glibness but who's also touched with the light of childhood idealisation: it's precisely Pa's best qualities as a beloved and respected, open-minded man of the world, and a good if sometimes slipshod provider, that make him a target for Clanton as representing an alternative to the new regime of hate and violence. At one point Buddy overhears as Pa deflects Clanton's attempts to force him into compliance, writing him off as a jumped-up gangster. Buddy nonetheless becomes aware of his parents' faults, with the family paying the price for Pa's slackness when it comes to paying his taxes, then exacerbated by Ma's proud demand for clearance from the powers-that-be only to bring down new extortions on their heads, and overhearing the couple in their hushed but heated arguments. The children's meditation on the way their social identity is defined by religion segues into a hilarious depiction of their average Sunday in church, where the sweating, bulging-eyed priest (Turlough Convery) delivers with pulverising force a sermon filled with fire-and-brimstone admonitions before swerving sharply to the issue of getting the donation box filled. Render unto Caesar: Branagh captures the looming and intimidating appearance of the soldiers deployed to protect them, one soldier sternly interrogating Ma as she tries to get out of the street to meet her husband (in a brilliantly framed shot as helicopters loom in the sky above), but he also notes their humanity, helping Pa move an armchair even whilst swathed in body armour and clutching their guns.



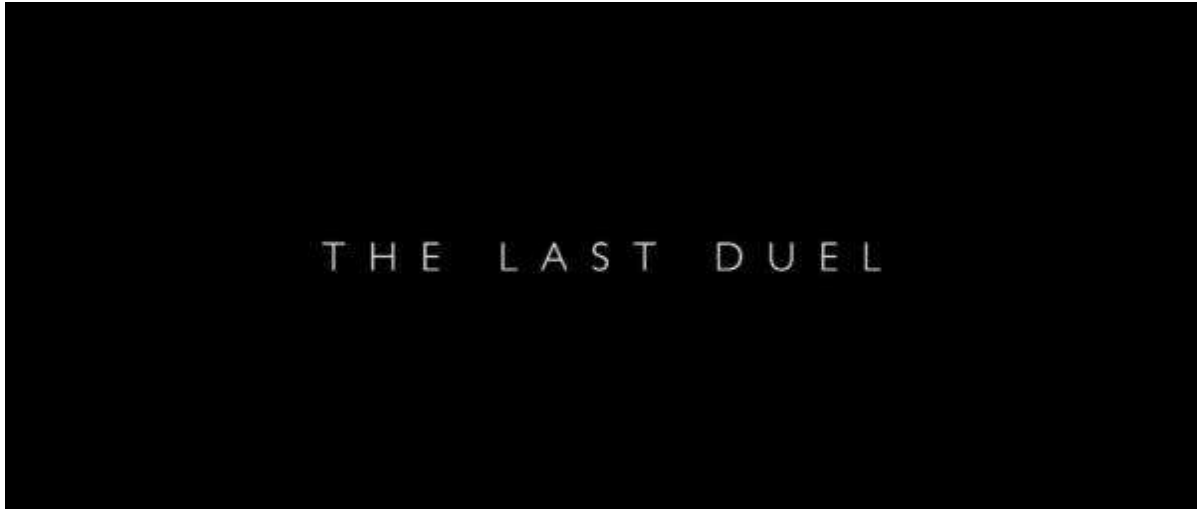
Branagh's style more obviously portrays Buddy's encounters with the transporting pleasures of cinema, theatre, and TV as windows of colour in his world by literally offering them in colour, offered as counterpoints and also as medium for understanding Buddy's life quandaries. The sight of Raquel Welch in *One Million Years B.C.* (1966) awakens romantic impulses, the airborne family in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (1968) becomes a vehicle for understanding the looming emigre adventure, and a visit to the theatre to see a production of *A Christmas Carol* evinces the dawn of a different, life-long love affair. More cheekily, Branagh includes a glimpse of Buddy reading a *Thor* comic. *High Noon* (1952) and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), both glimpsed on television, provide a teaching analogue as emblematic moral Westerns for the chaos engulfing the town as Buddy comprehends his father as the outmatched reasonable man caught between the swaggering bullies, and the street's erstwhile defenders keep watch for more raiders to the strains of "Do Not Forsake Me, O My Darling," a flourish returned to more earnestly in a fraught confrontation late in the film. There the already nudged Western overtones in Clanton's name become more pressing in a gunfight-like confrontation between Pa and Clanton, in a brilliantly staged sequence that gyres from comedy ("It's biological!" Buddy anxiously crows in explaining why he stole a carton of pricey washing powder from the looted shop) to high melodrama.



The main problem with *Belfast* is that the memoirist structure is inevitably episodic. To bridge the movements Branagh leans heavily on interpolated songs by Van Morrison, appropriate enough in their way but also emphasising that singer's most aggravatingly treacly streak, and this imbues the movie with an air of tranquil sentiment that doesn't entirely suit its proper blend of tart wit and unforced warmth. Branagh's familiar tendency to tip his hand to his ardour for choreographed, emotionally soaring musical sequences is more effectively fulfilled as Pa performs a barnburning rendition of "Everlasting Love" at a wake, a vignette that reaffirms his and Ma's love as they cavort on the dance floor, and opens the door to finally moving on and out. Balfe dominates the film in her performance, although everyone does excellent work. Branagh facilitated Dench's movie career resurgence with *Henry V* and they remain a sterling director-actor unit, so it's salutary that Branagh saves the movie's last note of quiet pathos for Granny, left alone to see out her days after quietly and firmly urging the rest of the family on their way: it's the sort of moment that, all proportions maintained, Kurosawa might have been proud of. *Belfast* isn't the deepest or most original film ever made, but it does manage to be Branagh's best and most complete film since perhaps his barely-seen adaptation of *The Magic Flute* (2007), and an example of artfully crowd-pleasing moviemaking that's become rather dismayingly scarce of late.



## The Last Duel (2021)



**Director:** Ridley Scott

**Screenwriters:** Ben Affleck, Matt Damon, Nicole Holofcener

*By Roderick Heath*

Ridley Scott's first film in four years wields the unavoidable feeling of a culmination, and repudiation, more than forty years after his debut feature, *The Duellists* (1977). Scott's career hardly seems finished yet and yet if he had retired after making *The Last Duel* the sense of circularity in regards to *The Duellists* would be irresistible, particularly in coming after his divisive but brilliantly grim and meta revisit to the *Alien* series, *Alien Covenant* (2017). Here he offers another film with "duel" in the title, sustaining in part the same driving theme of irrational and self-destructive resentment and fixation and acts of antiquated violence, as well as casually casting two American actors as period Frenchmen and avoiding Old Vic accents, to the consternation of some. The differences are revealing, of course. *The Duellists* was made heavily under the influence of Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* (1975), whilst *The Last Duel*, whilst paying overt homage to Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1951), sees Scott truly wrestling with only one master, himself. It's also now more than twenty years since Scott revived his stature as a major Hollywood director with *Gladiator* (2000), one of his most popular and beloved movies, albeit one that dated with punishing speed. Scott's been returning to and improvising variations on that hit since, partly for obvious reasons – sticking "From the Director of *Gladiator*" on a movie poster featuring some hairy, sweaty dude clutching a sword seems an easy sell, even as these revisits have generally failed with audiences – but also, as has become increasingly clear, because it was the gateway into his late career obsessions.



So Scott has been revising *Gladiator's* straightforward, even simplistic exalting of heroically bemuscled men resisting tyranny (I've long thought of *Gladiator* as less a modernised sword-and-sandal film than an transposing of a sports movie, in its exalting of the physically dynamic sporting hero as the only figure left to use who can transcend pure commerce in determining outcomes) from different angles of questioning, in the tangle of religion and sectarian identity explored in *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) and *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014), and the exploration of emerging democratic impulses as presented by folklore in the violently uneven but doggedly interesting *Robin Hood* (2010). All of those films dealt in varying ways with Scott's recurring late-career fascination with the birth of a modern concept of individual worth and identity in relationship with raw tribal identity and political power. *The Last Duel* completes the arc in essentially renouncing *Gladiator's* fantasy, by recounting an obscure but fascinating nugget of authentic history, involving a duel to the death. The battle between Jean de Carrouges and Jacques Le Gris was one of the last to gain official sanction as a holdover of the old chivalric faith that trial by combat invoked direct deistic judgement, held outside Paris in 1386, and fought after Carrouges accused Le Gris of raping his wife Marguerite.



Through its very nature and moment, the event of that duel rests on a fault-line in historical consciousness, confronting our lingering fascination for the days of old when knights were bold and

ladies fair walked with wafting silk trailing, with our simultaneous cynicism, which is also the period setting's, an emergent scepticism close to the cusp of the Renaissance when, whether the powers that be admitted it or not, people knew damn well God didn't express his will through two guys trying to murder each-other. It's the sort of subject one could imagine an array of great filmmakers tackling with very different art – Robert Bresson, say, casting his dour eye on men wrapped in cold grey metal bashing each-other to death, or Richard Lester, impishly smirking at the absurdity, or Ken Russell, relishing the ritual of bloodshed and locus of wilful lunatic energy. For Scott, it's a story that engages multiple strands of his career long concerns and stylistic explorations. *The Last Duel* offers a chance to bind together ways of seeing, ways that unfold on multiple levels – the narrative itself proffers multiple versions of the same events according to different viewpoints, correlated with the way the film operates as both a definite portrait of a historical epoch and a parable for contemporary concerns.



Unlike *Rashomon*, *The Last Duel* doesn't hinge on a disinterested party's viewing of events. Instead it presents the viewpoints of Carrouges (Matt Damon), Le Gris (Adam Driver), and Marguerite (Jodie Comer). After a brief prologue showing the preparations for the title duel in all its careful ritual measure presaging the unleashing of pure physical force, the relationship between the three characters is sketched in Carrouges' opening narrative. Carrouges, the son of a respected Norman knight, sees himself as a doughty, unappreciated, wronged and justifiably frustrated man who has to pay his way through the brutal and dangerous life of a professional soldier. He saves Le Gris's life when the two men are involved in an ill-advised but honourable attempt to lift the English siege of Limoges in 1370. Whilst they remain friends for a time afterwards, their bond sours as Le Gris becomes a trusted agent of their mutual lord Pierre d'Alençon (Ben Affleck) and is increasingly favoured by him to the extent of being handed both Carrouges's father's former title and estate. Carrouges marries Marguerite, the daughter of Sir Robert de Thibouville (Nathaniel Parker), an aristocrat held in general odium for formerly siding with the English: Carrouges is willing to overlook the disgrace in the face of Madeleine's beauty and the opportunity to get hold of fine new estates.



One valuable parcel of land, Au-le-Faucon, which Carrouges firmly insists Thibouville give as part of his dowry, is instead claimed as recompense for feudal dues by Pierre and then handed over as a reward to Le Gris. Carrouges sues Pierre over the title to the estate, but fails, earning the lord's peevish enmity and convincing Carrouges that Le Gris is plotting against him. Carrouges and Le Gris reconcile for the sake of accord amongst Pierre's vassals, but the peace doesn't hold, and Marguerite eventually reports to her husband that Le Gris assaulted her whilst Carrouges was in Paris collecting payment for one of his military ventures. The second narrative presents Le Gris' perspective, seeing himself as a man of talent and intellect suitably rewarded. Pierre, disliking what he sees as Carrouges' stiff-necked, charmless, and resentful persona, prefers Le Gris as an industrious employee and friend, inviting him into his inner circle and nightly orgies. Le Gris sees himself as tested to the utmost by Carrouges' increasingly paranoid and irate streak and generally poor judgement, and feels an immediate connection with the multilingual and well-read Marguerite when he encounters her after reconciling with Carrouges, a connection which he interpreted as inevitably romantic. When questioned about his visit to the Carrouges castle to expiate it, Le Gris explains, "Of course she made the customary protests, but she is a lady." The third chapter illustrates Marguerite's experience, a perspective from which both Carrouges and Le Gris are seen as stripped of their pretences and self-delusions.





In terms of the film's interlocking units of storytelling, each bearing the contrasting imprint of a different screenwriter which Scott has to stylistically unify, the impossibility of knowing crashes against the certainty of result. Damon's chapter hands himself a part that hinges on his screen persona as a man who people tend to underestimate, for his curiously nondescript good looks, turned increasingly heavy-set in middle-age and matching capacity to play men driven by deeply repressed social or class resentment. Affleck's chapter is as much a lampoon of Hollywood players in the fashion of his own movie *Argo* (2012) as it is a portrait of a destructively egocentric pair of men. Holofcener brings the feminine perspective, forcing a uncomfortably close identification with Marguerite as she sweats through several different forms of abuse. The real history invoked in *The Last Duel* is opaque: just what really went down between the Carrouges and Le Gris is unknowable beyond what they themselves said happened. The film itself finally is not. I gritted my teeth just a little bit as Scott designated the first two chapters as "the truth according to" but the last, more than a shade archly, sees "the truth" as those words fade more slowly from the screen. The ultimate point of *Rashomon* was that people inevitably see events that encompass them with a slanted perspective, according to the way they think of themselves and of other people. But fair's fair: *The Last Duel* has a different end in mind, that yes, there can be a specific and ultimate truth that other people don't always want to see, for whatever reason, and that people can also edit their own reality to make sense of what they do.



With a kind of irony allowed only to deities and film directors, Scott can make his film equivalent to the proposed metaphysical reasoning behind the concept of the trial by combat itself, as a vehicle to reveal such hidden truths. Only at a couple of points in the film does Scott and his trio of screenwriters entirely contradict what has already been portrayed, a way of approaching cinema that has a controversial aspect, as it requires the camera which reports narrative to us to lie. But it is used here with exacting purpose. Thus, where Carrouges remembers his attempt to intervene when the English slaughter French hostages at the Battle of Limoges as a valiant if doomed charge demanded by honour and humanity, Le Gris recalls as a calamitous surrender of reason to emotion that cost victory in the battle and almost got him killed. The event binds the two men in their erratic orbit, whilst also defining their relationship to Pierre, whose power over their lives and careers plays no small role in what happens. Carrouges becomes increasingly convinced that Le Gris, perhaps constantly aggravated by owing his life to the older, tougher knight, has become pathologically fixated on taking his stuff and showing him disrespect. Le Gris sees Carrouges as increasingly ridiculous and impossible in his lack of moderation and reason, and that he himself is merely the accidental beneficiary of Carrouges' self-invited bad luck. Pierre's personal detestation of Carrouges, sparked by his actions in the battle and reinforced when Carrouges sues him, and his indulgence of Le Gris, reinforces the deeply personal nature of power the age, as the lord has the right and facility to award and strip favours and posts, to

oversee and manipulate legal contests, and generally make life easier or harder. Moreover, as Pierre admits to Le Gris in speaking of Carrouges, “He’s no fun.”



Affleck, in a performance reminiscent of the kind Peter Ustinov once gave in movies like *Quo Vadis* (1951) and *Spartacus* (1960) in the way he manages to offer levity and glimmers of satirical anachronism without despoiling the overall texture, portrays the medieval lord as a man with a strong streak of smug brattiness, but also a keen sense of his own prerogative and a good sense of which people will meet his needs and those who will not. Pierre comes to lean on Le Gris as both an intelligent manager of his affairs who can get things done, chiefly by employing standover and shakedown tactics to get money out of his vassals and tenants, and as a friend and confederate who comes increasingly to share and enjoy Pierre’s predilection for hedonistic pleasures, pleasures that are readily served up by the in-built pyramid scheme that is medieval social structure. Affleck helps to also bridge the film’s period setting and the more contemporary concerns, pitching Pierre as an indulgent friend and protector for Le Gris, and coaching him on how to handle Marguerite’s accusation: “Deny, deny, deny.” Affleck and Damon of course owed much of their breakthrough as major Hollywood players to the now disgraced and jailed Harvey Weinstein, and this line had the stinging quality of something they might have heard bandied about the Miramax offices at some point. Scenes depicting Pierre playing the easy, jocular host for his circle of friends, making a tart speech farewelling his pregnant wife as she heads off to bed, similarly lampooning a certain kind of Hollywood grandee as he and Le Gris then settle down to the proper business of buttering up the gathered with choice bawdiness.



A key encounter in the course of the tale as a whole sees Pierre deftly counter Carrouges' scarcely controlled fury in reminding him of what he has every right to do, in a scene where Carrouges confronts Pierre and Le Gris at the celebration of Le Gris being given his father's title. This scene is cut away from in Carrouges' chapter, as he reports to Marguerite that he feels he spoke well, whereas through Le Gris' eyes it's the spectacle of his old friend making an ass of himself before a much-amused crowd, where Carrouges' anger is self-defeating, and his attempt to argue to Pierre that Le Gris is a snake in the grass falls totally flat. Carrouges sees himself as a kind of working stiff of the aristocratic warrior class, the guy who, robbed by The Man and unfairly penalised for standing up for his rights, has to go to Scotland to find work, risking life and limb, gaining a knighthood in the process but still returning home to what he feels is snooty disdain. Glimpses of combat in the film in which Carrouges fights at Limoges and in Scotland exemplifies the famous formula of life being nasty, brutish, and short, but battle is also a realm where Carrouges is at least comfortable and competent. This self-portrait is undercut to a degree later when Marguerite learns Carrouges neglects collecting rents on his estate, and takes it in hand herself. Which is actually a nice depiction of one rarely elucidated aspect of medieval life, when the running of a great estate was a task that needed intelligent and competent people and often fell to wives to perform when their husbands were off at war, which tended to be frequent.



*The Last Duel* in this fashion assiduously details the mores and structures legal, military, and financial that underpinned feudal Europe, and examines the way those things meshed with the people who inhabited it. Part of the challenge in making such a film is to animate the very different ways the society of the age understood cause and effect, truth and falsehood, and individual identity itself, even as the actual people are entirely recognisable to us in their motives and emotional and behavioural extremes. Carrouges, for instance, is revealed through signing his name with a mark, to be illiterate, not uncommon for his time but giving a fascinating and revealing dimension to his feelings of paranoia and persecution in the face of Le Gris' learning and competence in abstract matters like finance and letters: this represents an entire world that is at once entirely visible to Carrouges but also entirely incomprehensible, much in the same way that much biliousness today stems from the simultaneous ubiquity and incoherence for many of dominant areas of specialised learning like computer technology or high finance. As the titular duel itself confirms, this was still a time when a fearsome price to be paid in physical suffering was supposed to both substitute for, and potentially alleviate, spiritual suffering. Or, to take another attitude towards the same idea, fear of the latter was made more palpable and therefore more impressive and real by the threat of the former, helping create a kind of mental surveillance system to ensure good behaviour.



A very crucial part of the plot of *The Last Duel* as it reaches its home stretch is the revelation that loss in the duel for Carrouges also means an even more terrible fate for Marguerite too as the accuser, placing Marguerite in an impossible situation according to the sexist and doctrinaire rules of the time: Marguerite would be brandished a liar and heretic through the failure of her husband's muscle rather than through any reasoned parsing of her testimony, and whilst Carrouges himself certainly risks violent and gruesome death in the hunt for satisfaction, still rather pleasant compared to being burned alive. Marguerite doesn't even learn this until they've travelled far too far down this road to turn back, but she successfully maintains a façade of adamant poise in front of the hearing. Carrouges, knowing that Pierre controls the local courts and can therefore ensure Le Gris' acquittal, as he does, instead petitions the king for the right to trial by combat, which means weathering a hearing presided over by the king and his Parlement including church elders. Le Gris, for his part, turns down the plea by a cleric, Le Coq (Zeljko Ivanek), to take advantage of a loophole that will let the case be heard in an ecclesiastical court instead, nullifying the risk of the combat, insisting that to do so would be tantamount to cowardice and a tacit admission of guilt, which means he is, more subtly, a victim of a similar bind to Marguerite.



At the same time, the contemporary likenesses are hardly disguised as the film's driving concern is winnowed down to the offence done to Marguerite, an offence that to gain any kind of justice entails risking still worse suffering: the familiar cliché of "he said, she said" trotted out in ambiguous accusations of sexual misconduct played here as a particularly lethal game of chicken. The problems identified in the period are the problems of today when it comes to such matters: Marguerite has the right to have her accusation taken at face value and seriously delved into, but faces the presumption that she's a pawn, or a harlot, or a conspirator in her husband's desire to revenge himself on Le Gris, who himself has friends in high places who can stymie any semblance of justice, and so she must submit to questioning tantamount to another form of rape as her sex life is probed. Meanwhile by this stage she's grown heavy with child, an event that might be the ironically late fulfilment of her marriage contract with Carrouges or the product of Le Gris' assault. It would be more than a bit rich to call Scott the inventor of Hollywood feminism, but what he did do was create, with Ripley for *Alien* (1979) and later *Thelma and Louise* (1991) and *G.I. Jane* (1997), templates for how popular cinema approaches such things. Marguerite is a particularly potent extension of this facet of Scott's oeuvre, in the way her presence is used to purposefully unpack the kind of warrior mystique Scott served up so ripely in *Gladiator*. But she's also something of a critique of that kind of iconography of strong women: Marguerite is at the mercy of the men around her, be they officially protective like Carrouges or predatory like Le Gris, and her attempt to stand up for herself never really escapes this zone. *The Last Duel* dismantles the idea of the white knight standing up for his abused lady, but it also firmly reminds that the kinds of empowerment fantasies we see in a lot of movies today are just that.



Carrouges' self-perception laid out in the first chapter is undercut in the second and finally laid totally bare in the last, particularly when his reaction to Marguerite's rape is revised from calm sympathy to one of raging peevishness, seeing himself wronged before Marguerite and demanding she prostrate herself so he can try and efface Le Gris' imprint on her. It's an ugly scene that largely dispels what little sympathy one has for Carrouges by this point. But the film succeeds in being more nuanced than expected on this score: Carrouges' anxious desire to sexually please his wife whilst knock her up avoids the standard vignette in a lot of recent historical dramas of a brutishly indifferent husband, and even in this scene there's the feeling this is another of Carrouges' incoherent emotional expressions, beset by the absurdly provoking notion that he can literally fuck Le Gris' taint out of his wife's vagina. Driver has perhaps the most perfectly medieval face to appear in cinema since Ron Perlman with the added advantage of being considered handsome, and he gives perhaps his best performance to date as Le Gris, particularly in his playing of the crucial rape scene(s) where he seems to be acting a little drama to which he's written the script in his head with scarce reference to reality, a playlet in which he's the ardent suitor locked in a game of erotic hide-and-seek with a proper but lusty lady, much like the games played in Pierre's chambers every night. Indeed, Scott films one such game, which culminates in the beginning of an orgy, and then recreates the framing in Le Gris' version of his attack on Marguerite, suggesting the degree to which his reality is by this point forged by the bubble he lives in.



The shift to Holofcener's presentation Marguerite's viewpoint adopts a similar tactic to Affleck's but with a different frame, ticking off chick flick clichés. Marguerite contends with her haughty and critical mother-in-law Nicole de Carrouges (Harriet Walter) whilst being left alone with her for long stretches of time, and hangs out with her social circle amongst the real castle wives of Normandy like Marie (Tallulah Haddon) as they assess the local male talent, with all agreeing Le Gris scores high in the looks department, casual fun which provides another bitter consequence as Marie later resents Marguerite for her accusation against Le Gris. Marguerite weathers her returned husband's anger over showing excessive quantities of boob, having adopted the queen's latest, risqué fashion, and experiences bewildered frustration over her primary function, trying to bear children for Carrouges, with her clueless husband shooting blanks and leaving her resolutely unsatisfied, although in her inexperience she has no way to express this, much in the same way her husband cannot himself articulate his most powerful needs.



More substantively, Marguerite is able to put her intelligence and learning to beguiling use in running Carrouges' estate and expertly assessing Le Gris' real character whilst seeming to charm him, a foray that leads her to ultimately agree with her husband that Le Gris is a cunning but facetious personality, but also backfires as she hooks Le Gris' interest. Comer, hoisted to prominence playing a globetrotting assassin in the TV show *Killing Eve*, gives a formidable and completely different performance here that immediately and firmly establishes her as a major movie actor. She's particularly interesting in portraying not just the more spectacular dramatic moments, but in touches like her Marguerite suddenly crying whilst trying to sustain a conversation with Marie, and her slight air of pleased self-approbation as she reports her observations of Le Gris to her husband as they dance and notes the advantages in her way of handling problems. A crucial moment comes late in the film when the Carrouges matriarch confronts Marguerite and accuses her of stirring up dangerous strife to suit herself, and mentions that she herself was raped once when young, a secret she kept for the sake of avoiding more trouble, exposing a vast gap not simply in attitude towards such a crime between her and her daughter-in-law but in their methods of survival, as Marguerite notes the cost such stoicism has inflicted, solving nothing, salving nothing.



*Alien Covenant* achieved a mode of brilliant self-indulgence for Scott as a garish self-satire, restlessly rearranging and re-enshrining horror and melodrama canards whilst using them as fodder for the theme of a creator moving forward with eternally dissatisfied hunger, inventions both great and flawed left in a billowing wake. *The Last Duel* encompasses a similar reflex, albeit it more applied, in its triptych of auto-critiquing storylines. As well as allowing Scott to revise and complicate his own popular mythologies, *The Last Duel* unifies strands of his cinematic reflexes evinced throughout his career. Scott's exactly wrought and densely layered visual tableaux have sometimes been purely decorative but in his best work also support his attempts to weave a holistic vision of a created, or recreated, world, in movies as diverse as *Blade Runner* (1982) and *American Gangster* (2007). The latter film tried to do something most similar gangster films avoid and show how the criminal enterprise worked from the mastermind to the junkie at the bottom of the food chain, shedding light on the antihero's wilful blindness to the misery he causes, and *The Last Duel* exhibits the same top-to-bottom thoroughness. *The Martian* (2015) was more jocular and light-footed in its similar preoccupation with process, exploring the manifold forces human and cosmic required to save one stranded human being. *Blade Runner* wove dreamlike visual textures from a rigorously detailed setting, and touched on a similar fascination for the depth of the cinematic frame as a zone where every grain or digit can contain meaning, most particularly in the long sequence of Deckard exploring a photograph for clues in the mystery he was unravelling, a sequence of which *The Last Duel* can be described as the feature-length extrapolation.





The business of husbandry is codified in a sourly funny and cunningly layered vignette, in which Marguerite looks on in bewildered anxiousness whilst her husband gets furious over a big black stallion breaking into the stall of his in-season white mare and trying to mount her. This potent unit of imagery comes straight out of Shakespeare's *Othello* but converted from verbal usage to visual. This image doesn't just comment on their marriage and the impending act of sexual violence, but delves to the bottom of things, establishing how everything in this world is the attempt to desperately control the power of natural forces over the tentative stability of social structures, a world where dynamic, daemonic urges are scarcely leavened by fear of hellfire or a well-swung mace, and the weak are at the mercy of the strong. More subtle but most vital as a visualisation of theme and character are the three different versions of one kiss, which Carrouges bids Marguerite give Le Gris as part of their ritual of reconciliation. What is for Carrouges a glancing, purely polite gesture is for Le Gris a striking moment of chemistry and for Marguerite a perturbing signal, conveyed through both the actors' actions and the variation in Scott's camerawork. Such dramas that eventually finish up consuming a nation's attention, as well as ultimately threaten three lives, can pivot on such fleeting yet intense moments, infinite realities packed into such junctions of human attitude.



The portrayals of the rape itself, depicted directly in both Le Gris and Marguerite's chapters, again exemplifies the filmmaking care even in depicting something that isn't pleasant to watch. Small details tellingly differ – where, say, Le Gris sees Marguerite leaving shoes behind her like a saucy maiden discarding clothing, Marguerite remembers as simply accidental in the course of her flustered fear – and so too does the visual language. Scott holds back for the most part in Le Gris' version, filming mostly in wide shots that emphasise the physicality of the event, Le Gris as lanky coyote after Marguerite's darting roadrunner, before concluding with a point-of-view shot of Le Gris looking down at Marguerite's face in contorted profile. Le Gris' version of sex is duly pornographic, defined not by connection but by the erasure of need, and his self-created fiction resumes as he makes his apologies and leaves. In Marguerite's version the shots are more intimate and urgent, climaxing in a long close-up on her shattered expression as Le Gris penetrates her and then leaves her, the storm having visited and then departed like some deeply ugly and surreal dream, reminiscent in a way of the imagery of violation and sudden, sundering ugliness in *Alien*.



The attack can only be properly avenged in the trial by combat, which means the Carrouges must work tactically, making their friends and social circle unwitting confederates by telling them and using them in the project of forcing the King to pay attention, circumventing Pierre's control, essentially the medieval edition of a social media campaign. The hearing the King calls eventually sees the parties grilled by legal minds, a sequence that's used to encompass the most egregious aspects of the period's approach to things like sex and justice. The young monarch, Charles VI (Alex Lawther), essentially treats the event as a particularly juicy entertainment, whilst the duel itself is a spectator sport that's also like watching a movie in that everyone has their rooting interest. Scott builds suspense as the film nears the duel as the potential price Marguerite must pay becomes clear, a truth that displaces the tension over Carrouges and Le Gris' fates onto her, as she stands up to her irate husband with intense and righteous anger but then finds both a source of solace and further worry when she has her child and wonders if the infant will soon be orphaned after such a long effort by the parents to have him. Carrouges meanwhile is left isolated in both his alienation from Marguerite and most of the onlookers who want to see him fall, and Damon does an excellent job in invoking pathos in the character even when that's not the focal point through his stolid, chastened affect as the moment of confrontation with mortality looms.



The duel, when finally returned to, represents an apotheosis for Scott in terms of sheer moviemaking craft, capturing with concussive immediacy both the awful violence of the fighters and the nightmarish state of watching it with the certainty that life and death acted out on the sand is also one's own fate being settled. The cinematography by Dariusz Wolski, with its stern, frigid, muted grey-blue palette only swapped out for the honeyed glow of candlelit interiors, mostly rejects the penchant for beauty found in Scott's other historical films, and here become furious and alive in a way that feels as cutting-edge as anything Scott's ever shot – beautifully dashing tracking shots cleaved brutally with inserts of mounted camerawork pursuing the duellists into the joust. Thunderous editing of both images and sound helping lend you-are-there palpability to the shattering lances spraying splinters, horses colliding with walls, and cold steel blades sinking into soft warm flesh, and none of it seems to be augmented with special effects, a particular blessing in this accursed moment in action filmmaking. Every blow and movement communicates physical effort and cost. What it isn't is a cheer-along struggle of good and evil, even as Scott finally allows Carrouges to become what he wanted to think of himself as, the plucky, honourable underdog with a righteous cause, as he faces not just Le Gris' unexpected fearsomeness in the fight but the general disdain of the aristocrats in the crowd, including Pierre, who want their charming favourite to win.



The fight comes to its terrible, gruesome end as Carrouges manages to outwit Le Gris and tries to force him to confess, before showing his dagger into the man's mouth, a bloody and awfully intimate mirror to his assault on Marguerite. Carrouges, still faintly hapless even after proving himself awesomely tough as he needs the king's cue to face and embrace his released wife, now exhibits sufficient poise to offer Marguerite to the crowd for exaltation as well, before leading her to an under-construction Notre Dame, whilst Le Gris' corpse is hung up naked and pathetic. Even Pierre is offered a moment of pathos as he's left clearly mourning his friend. Carrouges fails at being a hero but finally triumphs in offering the crowd a better story, of a knight who has vindicated his wife. Scott nonetheless suggests the awful, lingering bleakness under the relief nonetheless as he cuts out the noise of the cheering mob and has only the sound of Marguerite's strained breathing on the soundtrack as she rides in slow motion. A brief coda does give a modest dose of reassurance as Marguerite is glimpsed as a happy mother whilst Carrouges has gone off to get himself killed in the Crusades. But it's with that image of Marguerite after the duel where the film should have ended, with that feeling that won't go away, like standing on the beach with a colossal wave about to crash down upon you.

## The Matrix Resurrections (2021)



As someone who runs the gamut from tolerating to disliking the individual entries in the original *The Matrix* trilogy, I had no reason to join in with the orgiastic wave of millennial nostalgia provoked by the prospect of another entry. But I can't shake glimmerings of affection for the films' makers, the sibling Wachowskis, who made one really good film with their debut, *Bound* (1996), and once they dispensed with the chitinous hipster-fascist chic of *The Matrix* films they expended their clout and inventiveness on boondoggles including *Speed Racer* (2008), *Cloud Atlas* (2012), and *Jupiter Ascending* (2015), films that oscillate unpredictably and fruitfully between disaster and charm, and exhibit a knowing edge of campy good-humour that seems sourced in a desire to get as far away from the more self-serious *The Matrix* fans and interpreters as possible. *The Matrix Resurrections* only has one reason for existing, a reason the film commendably puts front and centre, as one of the few, big, still fairly beloved units of exploitable intellectual property not yet franchised to the max. With just the one Wachowski, Lana, returning for this jaunt around cyberspace, working with two co-screenwriters including David Mitchell, the author of *Cloud Atlas*' source novel, *The Matrix Resurrections* proves intriguing in its first quarter as it turns the commercially-driven urge to revive the franchise, and the sense of personal unease in rehashing an old hit for a creator, into the very stuff of the plot.



So, when we meet Mr Thomas A. Anderson, aka Neo (Keanu Reeves) again, he is presented as a successfully video game designer who scored an epochal hit with a video game franchise called, yes, *The Matrix*. Everyone in his world knows and loves the game, its ideas and imagery, which were sourced in his diagnosed mental breakdown that left him unable to sort reality from fiction, which an Analyst (Neil Patrick Harris) is helping Neo work through. Soon he's confronted with a demand from the honchos upstairs (the game developer company is called Deus Machina, one of many touches in the film so on-the-nose it almost feels charming) to make a new entry in the series. A great, ingenious starting point for this enterprise. Trouble is, Wachowski insists on making the game she's playing more obvious from the start through a knowing insistence on reproducing the original film's beats. So the film proper begins with a restaging of Trinity's (Carrie-Ann Moss) rampage after security forces almost corner her, now with the extra wrinkle of being watched by a pair of hacker intruders, Bugs (Jessica Henwick) and Sequoia (Toby Onwumere), visitors from the world outside the Matrix and who know the story beat for beat like any good fans, only to note new and unpredictable developments despoiling the familiar flow, including an Agent who finds himself transformed into a functional likeness of Morpheus (Yahya Abdul-Mateen II).



This opening preempts and spoils the cleverly sustained uncertainty once Neo reenters the picture as to just what's going on, and how meta Wachowski intends to get, which ultimately proves to be not that much. Neo is forced to sit through brainstorming sessions with colleagues, trying to unpack the mystique of the great hit, which boils away the many layers of psychological, social, and political musing inherent in the material to the one element, the pure dazzling spectacle of "bullet time." Neo's increasingly frazzled mental space as he winces his way through these meetings whilst maintaining a daily regimen of antidepressants (all blue pills, of course) and gym sessions is established in a montage set to Jefferson Airplane's "White Rabbit," a song I had thought should never be played again in a movie and yet is used to tremendous effect here, and sporting an amusing cameo from Cristina Ricci as the maniacally upbeat focus group runner.



Neo also has encounters with a woman named Tiffany in his favourite downtown coffee shop who is the very image of his creation Trinity. She admits to him when they converse that she shares traits as well as looks with the mighty heroine and sometimes feels alienated from her seemingly happy marriage and children. Long story slightly shorter: both Neo and Trinity are both alive, but trapped once again within the Matrix, their bodies repaired and restored by machines and subsisting in vats in a vast robot city, lost to the outside world for sixty years. Various hackers and helpmates come to extricate Neo from the Matrix, attracted by the programmes he's been experimenting with as expressions of his semi-conscious doubt about his reality, which in turn finally gave away his location. Once plucked out of the digital world again, Neo sets about finding a way to extricate Trinity too, but finds that demands moving heaven and earth.



The first third of *The Matrix Resurrections* is surprisingly witty and nimble in making fun of its own *raison d'être*, and avoids any hint of the possible pomposity to be had in the co-creator of a hugely successful, pop culture-inflecting fiction work confronting that success, creation and creator as a mutually tormenting Ouroboros. Wachowski is, instead, good-humoured and affectionate in parsing the accumulated meaning as well as its more reductive fan readings, as well as evoking, through Neo's discomfort, the way such a success can be a millstone as well as a boon, as something that can swallow an artist up, particularly when it locks them into a uncomfortably symbiotic relationship with corporate prerogatives. Not since *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* (1994) has a franchise extension been so determinedly meta-fictional in its approach, or, at least, for a little while. Abdul-Mateen's entertaining performance as an entity created by Neo to combine the best qualities of Morpheus and Agent Smith, which results in a being who takes licence to dress in flashy clothes and move playfully through scenes as if suddenly enjoying self-aware existence, points to the film's overall new aesthetic. Similarly, that Bugs appears in the Matrix with a thatch of purple-dyed hair signals Wachowski's been paying attention to both trends in anime influence, and also a continuation of the shift in the Wachowskis' post-*Matrix* work to a more colourful and playful look and feel. This is partly justified through the way the Matrix seen in this film is supposed to be a new creation, more sophisticated in appeal to the visual cortex and much slyer in its exploitation of human psychology.



Once the narrative finally reaches its inevitable crux, however, the cobbled-together contraption starts to prove very rickety. Wachowski and her coscreenwriters try damn hard to avoid sliding into godforsaken “It’s bigger!” sequel shtick a la *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015), and also refuse to run away from the audience’s awareness of passed time and substituted elements: the film employs plenty of stock footage from the earlier entries, under the guise of cutscenes from the video games, contrasting, say, Laurence Fishburne’s visage with Abdul-Mateen’s. But it can’t escape a powerful bottom suction when it comes to listlessly introducing new elements, and the rest of the movie leaves behind the inventively self-referential for the duly self-perpetuating. Neither Wachowski was ever particularly great at characterisation, and that still holds true despite the absence of one and new creative hands. Most of the crew hovering around Bugs on her ship are an anonymous collection of bad hairdos and alt-culture affectations. The more developed community that’s supplanted Zion, called Io, built by both humans and the mechanical factions that respected the truce Neo managed to broker at the end of *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003), feels even less well-defined and organic than its precursor. Nothing like the infamous orgy scene from *Reloaded* gets in, but neither does anything else: despite the big new digital special effects spectacle this hidden civilisation is as depopulated as an old *Doctor Who* episode’s alien city.



A now-ancient Niobe (Jada Pinkett Smith) seems to be the only authority figure in the city, constantly chewing out Bugs and acting fierce with Neo but failing to actually act with authority – she has Neo locked up at one point, only for him to be rescued with rather senseless ease by Bugs and her crew. Also Pinkett Smith is swathed in old age makeup just about as bad as the makeup jobs in *Cloud Atlas*, and that’s as bad as it gets. That said, there is fun and a definite heartening quality in the vision of humans and robots in fruitful harmony, and I appreciated that Wachowski resisted merely and cynically winding back the positive outcome of the previous entries for the sake of a reboot, unlike, say, the revived *Star Wars* and *Terminator* films: the storyline here at least has a coherent and interesting explanation for why things didn’t entirely stay hunky-dory. Reeves and Moss still have their old chemistry, which always did more to give their characters specific identity than the scripts ever did. Here they’re purposefully kept at arm’s length in inhabiting their Matrix identities, which prove to be thin skins – the film’s one real “hell yes” moment comes very late when Trinity’s authentic pith starts to break loose.





And yet it's clear that even eighteen years after the original trilogy wrapped up Wachowski still doesn't have any good new ideas for evolving the property beyond its basic settings, and indeed the film obeys a general sentiment many fans have that leaving the Matrix itself as a bad idea. So action outside the Matrix itself is minimised, but nothing much new is brought to the table within it. The narrative is obliged to touch base with familiar antagonists. There's a new version of Agent Smith, who has had a digital makeover and poses as the head of Deus Machina. Jonathan Groff subs for Hugo Weaving, a great pity given that Weaving's taunting, slurring arrogance was a great part of what made the original films work at all. Lambert Wilson also turns up briefly as The Merovingian, who seems to have fallen on hard times in the new Matrix, but only gets a little ranting and raving before dashing away again. The one thing you could count on in the earlier entries was a succession of brilliantly-filmed action interludes, but mostly here they're straightforward and conceptually cramped, despite what is still the infinite wealth of elbow room for such things in this simulated realm. The film touches base with a couple of solid shoot-'em-up scenes, with one on a Japanese Bullet Train the hacker team use as a way-station in escaping the Matrix that makes good use of the limited space and the eye-forcing lines of the train interior.



The old élan and inventiveness in action staging proves lacking elsewhere. A set-piece kung-fu battle in a warehouse proves plodding, and the climactic scenes are more busy and messy than properly spectacular. Wachowski can't blame that lack on aging stars, seeing as Reeves has been ripping up the screen in the *John Wick* movies lately. Abdul-Mateen's pseudo-Morpheus is a strong new addition, but in the second half is reduced to a special effects presence, as he utilises fancy tech to manifest outside the Matrix and pull off the rescue of Trinity's physical body. Henwick fares better, even if, particularly in the Matrix with that hair, she resembles a sort of digital composite of online avatars. There's still a somewhat clueless and cliché edge to the official veneer of PC self-congratulation, too: where before we had the Magical Negro Oracle, she's been swapped out for the Magical Indian Sati (Priyanka Chopra Jonas), aka the little girl Neo encountered in a subway station in *Revolutions*, now evolved into a high priestess of exposition and plot workarounds. The stabs at social commentary and meaning, like tableaux of people gawking at their phones and tablets to suggest that, gasp, we're all in the Matrix now anyway, and The Analyst complaining to Neo, "Can't you control her?" as Trinity wails on him, are so blatant and old-hat as to move through the hyperspace of cringe and emerge into a new metaverse of cornball. The much-discussed element of the series rooted in trans experience is, at least, given new overtones of barely suppressed panic, located in the imagery of Neo and Trinity being torn apart and rebuilt by robots, and their attempts to deal with the disphoria that is their simulated existence. The idea of the original trilogy's impact as parable for people dealing with that or just being general purpose misfits is explored, with a certain amount of cleverness, in conjunction with the exploration of legacy itself, as Neo's legend has become the foundation for new, emulating generations, as testified to by characters like Bugs, expressing their appreciation of being liberated by the example of the old heroes and stories.



There are also some lovely sci-fi tableaux illuminated by the newly bright and vivid colour scheme. There's an impressive flashback vignette depicting a civil war that erupted between the machines as their energy supplies started to dry up, and images of Neo and Trinity being rebuilt/tortured by the machines are vivid and nightmarish as well as perversely beautiful. Harris' Analyst proves to be the new essential villain by the way, the fresh sentient programme and visionary who supplanted The Architect and engineered the new Matrix. His great innovation was to provoke the component humans' anxieties with contrived storytelling, because then they generate more energy: even dreams, he tells Neo with relish, stir up the kind of squirming that gives more juice to the overlords. This is a pretty good concept, and one that unsubtly tries to make thematic capital out of concerns of the way many feel the internet has stoked social division in the past decade. Casting Harris as a supervillain was a dicey move, but he plainly relishes playing one meant to evoke your average tech mogul with his aggressively jocular patronisation (the shift of exterior shooting locale from Sydney to San Francisco underlines the association) and clever-by-half confidence. Eventually, when Trinity is finally freed and breaks through

the conditioning The Analyst has tried to keep her in check with, she and Neo form a gestalt capable of seizing control of the Matrix, paying off in a climactic twist that's both eye-roll-inducing on a cosmic level, but also evinces a weirdly cheerful confirmation that the couple's love affair was the centre of the franchise all along: no longer the One but the all-powerful Duo, the force that unifies the binaries. And it's that unreconstructed hippy-dippy enthusiasm that redeems the film somewhat.

