Journal of American Studies of Turkey
40 (2014): 171-197

Film Reviews

What Maisie Knew. Dirs. Scott McGehee and David Siegel. Perf. Julianne Moore, Onata Aprile, and Steve Coogan. 2012. Millennium Entertainment, 2013. DVD.

There is a line in the first chapter of Henry James's 1897 novel *What Maisie Knew* that slyly alerts readers to the nature of appearances and encourages them to take a deeper look beneath the surface of its narrative events to discern their hidden meanings. Guided by the perspective of its young female protagonist, the novel reveals, "It was to be the fate of this patient little girl to see much more than she at first understood, but also even at first to understand much more than any little girl, however patient, had perhaps ever understood before" (11). This relation between sight and understanding pervades James's tale of a little girl forced to absorb the shocks of her divorced parents' attempts to use her to hurt the other. As the title indicates, the question of what it is, exactly, that Maisie knows, invariably draws our attention to what Maisie sees and experiences.

Unlike other adaptations of James's work, *What Maisie Knew* has been contemporized by its screenwriters, Nancy Doyne and Carroll Cartwright, and takes place outside Europe. What makes this change so successful is that it seamlessly translates the wealth and grandeur of its literary antecedent to the careerism and cosmopolitanism of the Big Apple, a detail that preserves the pace and life of privilege enjoyed by the main characters in the novel. The significance of this detail lies in its subversion of commonly held assumptions about the connection between low socioeconomic status and child neglect. For Maisie, played with great subtlety and watchfulness by Onata Aprile, is a little girl who, on the surface, appears to lack nothing. However, her father Beale (Steve Coogan) is a preoccupied, globe-trotting art dealer and her mother Susanna (Julianne Moore) is a narcissistic rock star in search of a comeback. And for the most part, Maisie is looked after by her starry-eyed nanny Margo (Joanna Vanderham)—who is more than a

little smitten with Maisie's father—while her parents selfishly pursue their personal and professional interests.

It comes as no surprise, then, when Beale marries Margo after winning custody of Maisie, a calculated move that prompts Susanna to follow suit by marrying Lincoln (Alexander Skarsgård), an infatuated young bartender. Neither of these unions are anything beyond marriages of convenience, a fact that escapes the newly acquired spouses who, like Maisie, always come last in Beale's and Susanna's list of priorities. Frequently tasked with coordinating Maisie's custodial transfers and care, Margo and Lincoln become her primary caregivers, offering Maisie a semblance of the familial stability that eludes her for much of the film. Once the ruse and their respective partners' true intentions are discovered, Lincoln and Margo both exhibit strength of character sorely lacking in Maisie's parents by shielding Maisie from their abandonment. My guess is that in the Beale/Susanna and Lincoln/Margo pairings, we are shown two sides of the same coin, an impossible concentration of the worst and best aspects of human nature, for a purpose that only becomes clearer in the film's final sequences.

On one level, *What Maisie Knew* is simply a story about a young girl's observations of her parents' (and step-parents') behavior as she is shuttled back-and-forth, sometimes unsuccessfully, between them. On another level, like its source material, this film presents a reflexive meditation on the ways in which vision informs what is known. We see what Maisie sees and what she does not see. As such, the advantage of this adaptation is that the directors, Scott McGehee and David Siegel, use a child's point of view to make *strange* that which has become commonplace. Lacking the sensationalizing affect of its original temporal context, the subject matter is refreshed by this rare portrayal of young female subjectivity. By aligning us with Maisie's perspective through visual strategies like low-angle, fragmented shots and truncated sequences, this film exposes her epistemological limitations and hints that deeper meanings underlie the events taking place onscreen. We imagine we know these deeper meanings because we see *more* than Maisie does; we have a wider context within which to interpret what appears onscreen. In this respect, our awareness of the epistemological chasm between our comprehension of the events that transpire and Maisie's (whatever that understanding may be) fosters tenderness toward an already likable and sympathetic figure.

And yet, there is a sense in which the quality of Maisie's watchfulness suggests that she may not be letting on about how much she does understand of her parents' petty jabs and manipulations. In the novel, James's descriptions of what Maisie knows of her parents' schemes call to mind the world of shadows in Plato's cave *and* intimate a keenly disguised willfulness to deprive them of the pleasure of using her to hurt each other. Whether the film fully captures and communicates this admixture of unblinking observation and intuitive deliberation is debatable. What is more clear, however, is the way in which Maisie's understanding of the relational dynamics at work between Beale and Susanna, and between Lincoln and Margo, informs her own behavior. We are only able to make this comparison in the film's final sequences, when Margo, Maisie and Lincoln enjoy a holiday together at a beach house. As Maisie's carefree personality emerges at the beach house it contrasts starkly with the "Maisie" we have seen for much of the film: a guarded and pensive little girl whose affect is punctuated by brief moments of lightness. Asked and answered by this bright adaptation, the question of what Maisie knew—about the strengths and failings of human nature—is one we also learn to satisfy over time for ourselves.

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The Immigrant. Dir. James Gray. Perf. Marion Cotillard, Joaquin Phoenix, Jeremy Renner. Worldview Entertainment/Keep Your Head/ Kingsgate Films, 2013. Film.

The heavy music of violins plays in the first scenes of the film as new immigrants file into the Ellis Island processing center. The men wear old-style hats, and the women wear traditional long skirts. The scenery and clothes are impeccable for this 1921 period of American history. The world was going through postwar convulsions after the Great War. Poland had been carved out of northern Prussia and western Russia for the first time in modern history, but its residents had been victimized for years by armies from both sides, so emigration to the United States became the norm for many Polish families. America was beginning a rapid industrial expansion, and it needed cheap European workers for the new factories, so the immigration system was ramped up to process people in high volume through Ellis Island.

Because of these and other related social pressures, this time period of enormous population upheaval produced the beginnings of today's modern American culture. The new immigrants came in larger numbers than in the past, and for the most part, without English language skills. As a result, American culture, society, and education were completely transformed—with such new components as mass consumer oriented economics and middle class education. In short, the money was flowing.

Certain needs emerge in society when economic growth occurs, such as greater demand for entertainment: movies, burlesque, gambling, and prostitution. Enter into this picture (on Ellis Island) two sisters, one very healthy and determined to overcome all odds, the other sister very ill with a contagious disease—probably tuberculosis. The sick sister is immediately culled out and put in quarantine isolation. The healthy sister, whose name is Ewa (Marion Cotillard), is expecting another sister and brother in-law (who are established in New York) to sponsor her (since she is a single female). However, they never show up. The officials accuse Ewa of being "a person of low morals, and liable to become a public charge," when in fact she was gang-raped in the ship; not her fault at all. She is immediately ordered to be deported. While waiting in line to be processed to await deportation, a mysterious man walks through and asks various

women if they speak English. Ewa does speak some English, so he pays the guards to allow her to be released into his custody. The woman is desperate enough to accept his help, but is suspicious from the beginning. Her suspicion is evident in her face, skillfully played by Cotillard in a very convincing performance. At first she tries to be careful and refuses his offer to live in his apartment, but eventually he convinces her that he can buy her sister's freedom, but it would cost a lot of money. Joaquin Phoenix plays the clichéd pimp Bruno, with a not-so heart of gold. He gradually coerces Ewa into a life of prostitution in order to obtain the large sum of money needed to free her sister.

If most of this seems familiar compared to other movies of this period, it is; but as soon as Ewa arrives in Manhattan, only a few minutes into the film, complex forces come into play, and not everything is as it seems. A steam whistle blows at several key situations, such as when she hides a knife in the coal bin next to her bed when she collapses asleep. When the man awakens her, she almost stabs him with the knife, and the steam whistle blows again, as if a warning of dangerous times to come—which they are.

The Immigrant is not a Hollywood film, instead being independently produced by New York companies, on location in Queens. The scenery is very realistic, and the story is complex. Flashbacks are rarely used, if at all. The story is linear and presented sequentially. Where the complexity enters is in Ewa's personality, and in the immediate environment and complicated situations she goes through. Her life centers on a stage where Bruno Weiss's (Joaquin Phoenix's) company of women run a small burlesque show off Broadway, and in her small apartment. The stage is a central location in the story, and the women in the burlesque play different stereotypes. The film narrative flows similar to the classic story of Homer's *Odyssey*, with Ewa as a female Odysseus. She meets strange creatures and people along the way, while keeping her goal no matter what the adversity. In the burlesque show onstage, Ewa plays "Lady Liberty" in a costume like the Statue of Liberty—representing her goal of finding freedom for her sister, herself, and eventually others too. At the same time she is enduring her difficult life prostituting for wealthy clients who attend the show.

Although Cotillard's Ewa is a victim, and appears to be weak and helpless, in fact, her personality is very strong and commanding through

most of the film. She manipulates nearly everyone she lives and works with—with the one goal of staying safe so she can free her sister. Her new job goes against her integrity, but she manages to let it not overcome her. She does not succumb to Bruno's romantic advances, and he does not force her to have sex with him. She somehow maintains power in most of her scenes. During the middle of the story, it seems as if a heroic figure, Orlando the Magician (Jeremy Renner)—will intervene and rescue her in typical Hollywood style, but in a surprising twist, this character is discarded and leaves the story. When it seems that Orlando the Magician will produce the romantic magic to free Ewa and her sister, Ewa instead replaces Orlando as the hero when she finds a red scarf (representing blood), and wears it. Through sheer will and perseverance, Ewa eventually becomes her own savior and that of her sister. By the end of the film, her moral power becomes so great that she is able to emotionally rescue the previously monstrous Bruno from his own weakness and human failings, while at the same time destroying his power on earth in a remarkable climax ending after Bruno is severely beaten by the police (his face disfigured), and all their money is stolen by them. Ewa becomes a figurative Christ-like figure who not only escapes death (and finds the money—not from prostitution), but frees her sister and Bruno from their literal and figurative prisons.

The film serves very well a dual purpose as both an accurate historical perspective about Polish immigrants and interactions with American society (including the Irish police who were once from immigrant families, but are now natives), and as an even stronger purpose of a morality narrative concerning integrity, perseverance, and the importance of family.

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Kill Your Darlings. Dir. John Krokidas. Perf. Daniel Radcliffe, Dane DeHaan, Michael C. Hall. Killer Films/ Benaroya Pictures/ Outpost Studios, 2013. Film.

In recent years, the Beat Generation has enjoyed a burst of presence on the screen. Ever since Robert Frank's experimental short *Pull My Daisy* (1959), which affectionately captured its lasting spirit, the Beats were rarely the subjects of mainstream films. However, contemporary American filmmakers are increasingly turning back to the Beats and attempt to contextualize this radical literary tradition. For example, the documentary *Corso: The Last Beat* (2009) examines the life and work of its youngest poet Gregory Corso; *Howl* (2010) investigates Allen Ginsberg's eponymous poem and its subsequent obscenity trial; and, finally, Walter Salles's *On the Road* (2012), a long overdue adaptation of the movement's best known novel by Jack Kerouac. *Kill Your Darlings*, a promising debut feature from director John Krokidas, contributes to this cycle of films by exploring the early days of the Beat Generation, specifically looking at the developing friendship between Allen Ginsberg and the movement's lesser known, but largely influential, unsung poet-hero, Lucien Carr. While Carr in fact did not write poetry, his radical envisioning of the course of American literature and illuminating conversations with others greatly contributed to the extraordinary works of the Beat Generation.

The film begins in 1943, the year Allen Ginsberg (Daniel Radcliffe) enrolls at Columbia University and meets, amongst others, Lucien Carr (Dan DeHaan). Their mutual appreciation of great artists such as Rimbaud, Brahms and Whitman initiates a series of intellectual deliberations on the value, purpose and role of poetry. Other leading Beat figures, such as William S. Burroughs (Ben Foster) and Jack Kerouac (Jack Huston), attend these radical discussions and form, in Ginsberg's words, "the Libertine Circle." However, this creative group dynamic is frequently disrupted by David Kammerer (Michael C. Hall), an old acquaintance of Burroughs and an insecure literature professor, who obsessively pursues Carr through a number of Midwest cities up until his arrival in New York, where he takes up a job as a janitor. Kammerer's increasing predatory behavior and continuing exploitation of Carr's sexuality culminates in the eventual descent of all characters into a vortex of passion, obsession, jealousy and murder.

Director Krokidas is particularly adept in drawing out performances from his talented actors. Radcliffe gives a solid and delicate portrayal of Ginsberg and DeHaan's enigmatic presence as well as physical attributes eloquently capture Carr's mystique and personal bravado. Other performances that deserve praise include Jennifer Jason Leigh's touching portrayal of Ginsberg's mentally ill mother, which perhaps deserved more attention in the script, and Ben Foster's laid-back, cool and measured rendering of Burroughs.

As a character-driven independent production, the film largely exceeds its modest ambitions as there is also a great deal of period detail conveyed through costume, location, music and lighting. For example, location shooting at Columbia University's historic buildings and the use of genuine vintage clothing establish a sense of authenticity. Moreover, the Beats' admiration for jazz music also receives treatment in one of the early, crucial scenes, where the writers visit a Harlem bebop club to discuss their work. At the end of the scene, they witness the police escorting gay men out of the bar—a powerful moment of realization of the conflict between their own, individual inclination to homosexuality and the intolerance of American society towards gay rights. Furthermore, the fact that bebop was a type of jazz music almost wholly exclusive to the African American neighborhoods of Harlem, with the few exceptions of a handful of vanguard artists such as the Beats, needs to be considered. In this respect, while the film seldom alludes to the repression of homosexuality, the racial tensions that routinely characterized everyday reality within that period are often neglected. While the script is powerful in its development and depth of character and sense of authenticity, it could nevertheless provide recurrent and explicit reflection on themes of sexual and racial discrimination.

This point is important because, as the Beat Generation was by and large an anti-establishment movement, its authors ultimately aimed at challenging generalized assumptions about class, race and sex through a literary language that can best be characterized as provocative and spontaneous. Not surprisingly, this cultural legacy was significantly felt in the widespread counter-culture and civil rights movements later in the 1960s. The term "Beat," of course, has a variety of connotations. On the one hand, it refers to the tired, bohemian weariness of its characters against the tragic backdrop of the Second World War (which the film poignantly displays through Kerouac's distant relationship to his war buddy), and on

the other, poses a reaction to and rejection of the progressive conformity arising in the following post-war period. More importantly, however, the Beat refers to the swift tempos of bebop jazz, which guided a hurried sense of pacing to the style of Beat poetry as it was often written with the intention to be read aloud. Director Krokidas finds a straightforward visual equivalent to this poetic strategy by rhythmically juxtaposing Harlem scenes of bebop melodies with the group's creative activities, for example, the wonderful scene in which they perform Tzaraesque cut-up techniques in their living room.

"Kill your darlings, your crushes, your juvenile metaphysics. None of them belong on the page—it is the first principle of good creative work," lectures Ginsberg's old-school literature professor at Columbia. As the film does not adopt a radical style in narration, one wonders whether the filmmakers had to kill their darlings in the creation of this rather mellow and conventional, yet admirable and noble example of independent cinema. Nonetheless, this should not prevent viewers from indulging in this humble film, not least for the fact that it explores some of the greatest minds of twentieth-century literature and allows younger audiences to engage with and be inspired by their poetry, but also for its brilliant evocation of and glimpse into mid-1940s American society.

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On the Road. Dir. Walter Salles. Perf. Sam Riley, Garrett Hedlund, Kristen Stewart. MK2 Productions/ American Zoetrope, 2012. Film.

Pull My Daisy. Dir. Robert Frank, Alfred Leslie. Perf. Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Larry Rivers. Independent Film, 1959. Film.

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The Secret Life of Walter Mitty. Dir. Ben Stiller. Perf. Ben Stiller, Kristin Wiig, Sean Penn. Twentieth Century Fox/ TSG Entertainment, 2013. Film.

At a crucial moment in *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, photographer Sean O'Connell (Sean Penn) describes one of his photos as "a beauty." This line succinctly encapsulates a film that is both about beauty and a film of beauty. This includes the beauty of the world around us, the beauty of images and the beauty of imagination. Combined, these create the beauty of the film and of cinema itself.

As an actor and director, Ben Stiller is best known for comedy, his star persona established with films like *There's Something About Mary* (1998), *Zoolander* (2001), *Meet The Parents* (2000) and its sequels *Meet The Fockers* (2004) and *Little Fockers* (2010). Based on the story by James Thurber, *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* continues this vein, with much comedic dialogue and some outlandishly funny sequences, but overall, Stiller turns in a performance and indeed a film of remarkable bathos, presenting both the sublime and the absurd through the film's central theme of beauty.

Walter's daydreams demonstrate the beauty and danger of the imagination, as he fantasizes about himself in heroic situations such as rescuing a dog from a burning building, being a mountain explorer or astronaut, and engaging in a hilarious chase with his boss. These sequences could make Walter appear pitiful but Stiller skillfully avoids this pitfall by emphasizing the value of daydreams, as it is Walter's flights of fancy that make the drudgery of his life bearable. Walter therefore comes across as a sympathetic and relatable protagonist, especially within the film's context of corporate downsizing that gives the film an all-too-familiar real world resonance. Furthermore, who among the audience does not indulge in daydreams now and again? Escapes into imagination are private and can even be embarrassing, but they are something we all need to do. Equally though, the film emphasizes the importance of engaging with reality as Walter misses key events when he "zones out" to his fantasies, and reality remains inescapable as no salvation is offered from the downsizing and enforced redundancy. But the inescapability of reality need not make it grim, as Walter's quest for a photographic McGuffin takes him to some (actual) startling and beautiful places.

These locations receive significant attention by Stiller and cinematographer Stuart Dryburgh: the dramatic scale of Iceland (shot as itself as well as Greenland, Afghanistan and the Himalayas) captured in wide-angle shots that capture the majesty of the landscape. In doing so, the film explores beauty and the transcendent effect that this can have. Walter's embrace of the beauty he encounters allows him to go beyond his (perceived) limitations, including a breathtaking scene as he skateboards down an Icelandic highway. Not only are these landscapes beautiful in their own right, but they also express Walter's unification of his imagination with his experience, taking him ever closer to his goal of O'Connell and the crucial photograph.

Nor is beauty confined to landscapes, as the film features many shots of Stiller's face that render the lines of his features and the shades of his eyes startlingly beautiful. This could be interpreted as vanity on the part of the director/star, but it also serves to express the beauty of the mundane. O'Connell describes people like Walter as what makes *Life* magazine special, and the film's visual attention to Walter's face, equal to that of the landscapes, underlines this. The film's villain, Ted Hendricks (Adam Scott), oversees the downsizing of *Life* and treats Walter and indeed all the Life employees with contempt. Not only does the film condemn Hendricks, it also emphasizes the opposing position that there is great value and beauty in everyone. This conceit is maintained through the colorful characters Walter meets on his travels, including the object of his affection, co-worker Cheryl Melhoff (Kristin Wiig); O'Connell when he finally appears, a drunken helicopter pilot; some children that Walter trades with; a motorist who saves him from a volcanic eruption; Afghan warlords who give directions in exchange for cake; teenagers playing football in the Himalayas and Todd Maher (Patton Oswalt); and a customer service advisor from *eHarmony* that Walter talks to throughout his adventures and who rescues him from Homeland Security. The help and advice these people give Walter illustrates the beauty to be found in ordinary people, something the mentality of Hendricks is unable to grasp. The beauty of Walter himself is a mirror for the beauty that he encounters.

Walter's encounters with people and their beauty are only possible because his imagination leads him to the various locations he visits. When faced with the prospect of a dangerous helicopter ride, a fantasy of Cheryl singing persuades him to take the trip. The initial impetus for

him to go on his quest is a fantasy of O'Connell beckoning him from a photograph. Despite these flights of fancy, the film remains grounded in reality. Walter's downtrodden nature makes him an everyman, an everyday victim of corporate targets and statistics, and his daydreams are therefore every bit as familiar. Through this familiarity, the film invites the viewers to see themselves in Walter and, like him, find beauty in both dreams and reality. This is a metaphor for cinema as a whole, which is the expression of imagination through practical tools of image capture, manipulation through editing and cinematography, and creation through digital effects. *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* both performs and expresses the unification of dreams and reality, and suggests that we, the viewers, can also make our own lives beautiful if we dare to dream and to act on those dreams.

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There's Something About Mary. Dir. Bobby Farrelly, Peter Farrelly. Perf. Cameron Diaz, Ben Stiller, Matt Dillon. Twentieth Century-Fox, 1998. Film.

Zoolander. Dir. Ben Stiller. Perf. Ben Stiller, Owen Wilson, Christine Taylor. Paramount Pictures/ Village Roadshow Pictures, 2001. Film.

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Inside Llewyn Davis. Dir.Joel and Ethan Coen. Perf. Oscar Isaac, Carey Mulligan, and John Goodman. CBS Films/ Studio Canal, 2013. Film.

Inside Llewyn Davis opens in the Gaslight Bar with a close-up of Llewyn (Oscar Isaac) under a bright spotlight performing a folk song that resonates in the film's end. The setting is 1961 New York, a pivotal time in post-war American history and culture. The song sets the tone for a meditation on existentialism and dystopia that the Coen brothers achieve through an evocative and subtle celebration of Americana and particularly of uncompromising American songwriters faced with the adversities of the commercial industry and, ultimately, with life's tragicomedy.

Llewyn's performance conveys the strife and emotional undertones of the song that tells of a man who traveled the world, encountered its absurdity, experienced hunger and despair only to end up getting hanged. It is not however the hanging that unsettles him as much as the long wait inside the grave. This is reminiscent of how 1960s European filmmakers conveyed themes of postmodern dystopia by showing their protagonists sing a song that evokes the film's underlying theme and very often forecasts the fate of the protagonist(s). In this respect, *Inside Llewyn Davis* is centered on the structure of the folk song: Llewyn will embark on a journey "all around this world" (ironically from New York to Chicago and back) only to return to zero in anticipation of an eternal wait for what is persistently denied from him—a chance in the music industry that is as unforgiving as the harsh weather. This perpetual state of suspension in a grave (which resonates with the absurdity of life as inertia in the literary world of Samuel Beckett) is the film's driving metaphor.

The song also sets the tone for a long and winding odyssey that the Coen brothers brilliantly conceived through their adaptation of Homer's *Odyssey* in *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000) which showcased country and folk music similarly to *Inside Llewyn Davis*, which simultaneously echoes the former's surreal encounters, its evocation of life's comedy and the twisting trajectory of an endless odyssey, contrary to the homecoming myth of Ulysses (it is no coincidence then that the cat which Llewyn carries around like dead weight, named Ulysses, eventually returns home, while the distraught hero remains adrift).

It is this absurdity, which is an integral feature of the brothers' signature black humor, that bookends the film in a scene which replays in the end, functioning as a chorus in a folk song, rehashing the fate of the traveler. The latter also marks the brothers' first attempt to set in motion a circular narrative that evokes life as a repetition of the same praxis.

Llewyn is summoned outside the bar where a dark tall figure wearing a cowboy hat accuses Llewyn of "opening his mouth," before giving him a beating and leaving him in a ditch. This is the first portrayal of the derelict corners of New York which throughout the film is covered in snow, dark shades and obscurity. At the same time, establishing an omnipresent dystopia, the filmmakers subtly showcase some background elements of 1960s America, such as the Cold War and the fear of nuclear warfare, the clandestine existence of communists and the emergence of Bob Dylan whose uncompromising attitude is mirrored in Llewyn. The scene fades out as we enter an apartment where it is assumed Llewyn was given shelter.

From this point on, we follow Llewyn through a one-week odyssey, encountering the endless hurdles that are thrown at him by an unforgiving universe. Day after day he struggles as a solo act without any appeal to popular audiences, as his only record release has minimal sales and the local Greenwich scene caters to songwriters of a pop genre. It is no coincidence therefore that the only songwriter who enjoys royalties for his hit singles is played by Justin Timberlake. Simultaneously, driving dystopia deeper, we discover that Llewyn had a partner who committed suicide, for unknown reasons, alluding further to the dead end career of "true" artists and their uncompromising struggle with life. Llewyn's last flame (Carey Mulligan) approaches him with news of pregnancy and an anathema for his very being. At the same time, she enjoys popularity; performing pop songs alongside Jim (Timberlake) that impress industry moguls, none of which match Llewyn's creative bravado, his heartfelt lyrics which talk of a profound experience, evoking the pain of birth, the wanderlust of common fishermen, the pointlessness of a mortal life and the melancholy of separation. Much as Dylan, whose shadow literally lurks in the background, Llewyn is ahead of his time and not made for "this world" as the song reminds us. His odyssey prepares him for a departure as he becomes increasingly excluded, outcast from the music business, the merchant marine (his only potential source of employment) from every home, bar and even from a gutter in the road.

His seemingly endless journey to Chicago and back is riddled with the obscure iconography of American indie road movies and the lonely roadside diners painted by Edward Hopper. His ride comprises of two shady figures—one of whom, played by John Goodman, reminds us of the absurdity of the latter's embodiment of the Cyclops Polyphemus in *Oh Brother Where Art Thou?*, but also conveys a sinister impression associated with dystopian narratives. In Chicago, Llewyn performs for a music producer in a scene that showcases the capacity of the Coen brothers to combine heartbreaking emotion with black humor as, after performing "The death of Queen Jane" in its entirety, Llewyn is rejected since he "is not green." Back in New York he is faced with no alternatives.

The film ends on a chorus as the first scene replays revealing that the beginning was the end. Foreclosing dystopia, Llewyn is (once again) performing the same song, getting beaten and thrown in the gutter. Before the end credits, he casts a sarcastic look, saying "Au revoir" implying that he will inevitably get beaten again and so forth. As his first and last song retells, it is not the hanging that he loathes but the long wait in the grave.

Works Cited

Oh Brother, Where Art Thou? Dir. Joel and Ethan Coen. Perf. George Clooney, John Turturro, Tim Blake Nelson. Touchstone Pictures/ Universal Pictures, 2000. Film.

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In Your Eyes. Dir. Brin Hill. Perf. Jennifer Grey, Nikki Reed, and Zoe Kazan. Bellwether and Night and Day Pictures, 2014. Film.

In Your Eyes was written and produced by Joss Whedon who also created *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003). While *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* empowers women, celebrates queerness, is creative, unconventional and open to deep reading, *In Your Eyes* is gendered, homophobic, and formulaic. One explanation may be that Whedon (born in 1964) wrote the script for *In Your Eyes* when he was twenty-eight. After gaining success in the film industry, he chose to work on his old script in his late forties but apparently he did not work on it enough. His wisdom and creativity did not make it to *In Your Eyes*.

The film tells the story of two typical characters. Rebecca Porter (Zoë Kazan), a fragile woman married to a successful doctor, lives in cold New Hampshire. She has no passion in life, spends her time shopping, tending to her husband's shirts, and accompanying her husband to frequent formal business dinners. Her counterpart is boyish ex-con Dylan Kershaw (Michael Stahl-David) living in the desert in New Mexico who was once arrested for stealing. Dylan is on parole and works at a car wash. Rebecca and Dylan are connected in a paranormal way; they can feel each other's most intense emotions and physical pain. They feel the connection first in their childhood, then discover that they can literally talk to each other across time zones by speaking aloud.

Being able to talk to each other without using any technology makes Rebecca and Dylan look schizophrenic. Simply wearing a headset would have made them look "normal" but they stop caring about the outside world. Dylan loses his job and Rebecca's husband puts her in a mental hospital. Even though they do not use technology, their situation parallels that of users of contemporary technology, being in two places at one time with the use of Skype, texting, and sexting. As the technology gets smaller and is embedded into the human body, the challenge for pure presence will increase. For example, in the future, a person wearing a contact lens derived from a Google Glass will be able to surf the internet without giving any visual clues to her conversation partner and will have a stronger challenge for being in the moment. As the technology becomes even smaller the metaphor of this movie is going to be literal. Without any visible technology, we will talk with people who are far way and sense

some of their feelings. In that sense, *In Your Eyes* portrays the dilemma of the contemporary cyborg.

Rebecca and Dylan's telepathic ability is also a symbolic representation of being in love. The lovers are in a magic bubble that no one can understand and this magic bubble forms the filmic atmosphere enforced with the music video aesthetic. In several montage sequences, characters do work in front of an interesting background such as a junkyard along with country music. As montage sequences indicate the passage of time, their love transforms each other: Rebecca becomes more courageous and Dylan becomes more organized and motivated.

Whedon's script resembles the work of Charlie Kaufman but is less creative and more fearful. In Spike Jonze's *Being John Malkovich* (1999), Kaufman's script bravely explores sexuality through a similar paradigm. Malkovich's mind and body are accessible through a portal. While one of the female characters, Lotte (Cameron Diaz), is in the body of Malkovich, another female character, Maxine (Catherine Keener), makes love to him. As a result, the two women have access to each other through Malkovich's body and they discover their repressed side by getting attracted to each other. Kaufman's fearlessness brings many layers of humor and meaning to *Being John Malkovich*.

Whedon chooses to address the mainstream audience and does not confront the norms. Rebecca is mentally connected to Dylan at every possible moment but not in bed when she is with her husband. Through Rebecca's body, the two men could have interacted in the bed and that could have led to a resourceful area for humor and more complex narration. Rebecca helps Dylan to flirt with a woman but the scene is underdeveloped and does not challenge heteronormativity.

Krzysztof Kieslowski in *The Double Life of Véronique* (1991) explores a similar dual existence in an elegant and unconventional way without putting the two sides in a conversation. Weronika and Véronique (both played by Iréne Jacob) are doubles of one another. Véronique lives in France and Weronika lives in Poland. They feel each other's presence in their psyches. Their paths intersect; they get a glimpse of each other once but they don't have a conversation. Different to Kaufman's and Kieslowski's experimental approaches, Whedon follows a Hollywood formula.

In *In Your Eyes*, when fragile Rebecca is trapped in the mental hospital (damsel in distress), Dylan goes to rescue her going through

several adventures. He sells his car to fly to her. He cannot rent a car in New Hampshire so he steals a car and gets in trouble with the police; however, he makes a couple of driving tricks in the mud and gets rid of them. On the way, he helps her via their mental connection and guides Rebecca to unlock the hospital door. While Dylan is running from one action to another, Rebecca's assistance for him is insignificant. She tells him to go to the main street.

While the movie narrates the story of two good looking Caucasian characters, it does not forget to be politically correct and places one African American character as Dylan's parole officer (Steve Harris), a role that has authoritarian power. The integration of race into the casting does not create further meaning and the parole office character is a merely a token character.

Dylan has a dead-end job and the subject matter of the script has a lot of potential for portraying the ex-convict's challenges in finding employment. Whedon chooses not to touch these charged subjects and remains on the light side. In addition to Dylan, the movie represents two criminal friends of his beginning from their childhood but does not integrate the social reasons to become a criminal into the narration.

In Your Eyes is not designed for stimulating ideas. It is mindless entertainment for viewers who are never tired of seeing formulaic stories written for active males and passive females.

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The Raid 2: Berandal. Dir. Gareth Evans. Perf. Iko Uwais, Arifin Putra, Tio Pakusodewo, Roy Marten, Julie Estelle. Pt. Merantau Films/ XYZ Films, 2014. Film.

2011's *The Raid: Redemption* was a masterclass in martial arts filmmaking. Not overly concerned with trivial things like narrative impetus or emotional resonance, the film gave only enough story elements to set up the main attraction: one man against some thirty stories of enemies. The simplicity of the premise allowed director Gareth Evans, lead actor (and martial arts champion) Iko Uwais, and cinematographers Matt Flannery and Dimas Imam Subhono to subject the audience to 101 minutes of the most innovatively choreographed and beautifully filmed fight sequences in cinematic history. Lauded by critics and enthusiasts alike, *The Raid: Redemption* was one of the sleeper hits of 2011, and remains a cult favorite.

The Raid 2: Berandal picks up in the days following the end of the first film, as the head of Indonesia's anti-corruption squad, Bunawar (Cok Simbara), tasks Rama (Iko Uwais, reprising one of the few surviving roles from the first film) with bringing down the Bangun and Goto gangs. Police commissioner Reza (Roy Marten) has been turning a blind eye to much of the illegal activity going on in his jurisdiction, and Bunawar is intent on exposing this miscarriage of power. Rama is separated from his family and sent undercover in prison, where he befriends and defends Uco, the ambitious son of Bangun himself. On his release two years later, Rama commences work for Bangun, living in a luxurious penthouse apartment provided by the gang. Tensions between the Indonesian and Japanese gangs reach boiling point when Uco goes behind his father's back and seeks independent mob boss Bejo who, incidentally, killed Rama's brother. Bejo and his cronies destroy Bangun and his gang, with Uco's help. Rama then singlehandedly dispatches Bejo's crack assassins, including Hammer Girl and Baseball Bat Man, who are as uniquely talented as they are named. Uco kills Bejo once it is revealed Bejo tried to have him killed in prison, and Rama then kills Uco. The film ends with Rama refusing an offer to join the Japanese Goto gang.

The film lacks the simplicity of its predecessor. An increased budget (though not by too much; *Redemption* cost just over $1 million, while this sequel cost $4.5 million) necessitates a deeper attempt at cinematic

justification. Sadly, in this instance, Evans interpreted this to mean the need for a more complex storyline. At times, it is tough to follow even this relatively simple, *Infernal Affairs*-like storyline. While the expositional scenes give the audience time to breathe between action sequences, they often leave viewers wanting. The scripting is sometimes overly deliberate and florid, and while any attempt to replicate the slow burn of directors like David Fincher or Walter Salles should be applauded, Evans fails to grasp the beauty of the sparseness of screenplays like *Zodiac* or *The Motorcycle Diaries*.

Scripting and exposition, though, are small flaws, as they comprise a very low percentage of this film's substantial 150-minute duration. Fans of the early film will not be subjected to narrative for too long before the limbs start snapping, and the blood begins to spill. The build-up to any fight sequence in *The Raid 2* is masterful. Time slows to almost a standstill, eyes close, sound ceases. You can almost feel your own heartbeat ringing in your ears, before there is a snap: eyes open, and the onslaught begins. Men are tossed, crushed, impaled, impacted, slashed, torn, and everything in between. The body count is upwards of thirty before the 30-minute mark, and rises well into triple figures by the end credits. The *pencak silat* fighting style that Evans popularized in the first film (and his first film *Merantau*) is still depicted in *The Raid 2* as the seemingly physics-defying, headache-inducing, impossibly fast combat that it actually is. Treated with such admiration and respect, it is hard not to see what Evans loves about it, and why he was so keen to give it the cinematic spot in the sun it deserves, alongside more frequently used film fighting techniques such as kung fu or karate. The cinematographers of the first film return, and their jerky but calculated camera movements do not confuse or trick: the audience is left questioning which of the hits are choreographed—missing by a millimeter or less—and which might have actually connected. Highlights include the melee at the porn studio-cum-drugs den, where the camera seems to be tossed through windows, under men, and around obstacles as the fight escalates, and the final assassin fight, featuring curved handblades that, when combined with immersive sound design by Brandon Proctor, are filmed to make you feel every swipe and slash.

While he may have missed the mark slightly with scripting and character development, Gareth Evans still owes a great debt to the Second Hollywood New Wave spearheaded by the likes of David Fincher and

Christopher Nolan. The cinematographic treatment of space, architecture, and interior design, and the placement of bodies within that symmetrical orientation, is combined with an attention to aural detail that would fool many into thinking *The Raid 2* had a much higher budget. This will be another sleeper hit and cult favorite, as will the third film in the series, when it is released. I hope that Evans gives the third script another draft, though, so that this series becomes a real contender in the genre, and solidifies Indonesia's place as a film industry to keep an eye on for the future.

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Chef. Dir. Jon Favreu. Perf. Jon Favreu, Robert Downey Jr., Scarlett Johansson. Aldamissa Entertainment, 2014. Film.

Chef serves up a delightful treat for all movie goers. It has all of the right ingredients for a "feelgood" humorous movie. Carl Casper, the Chef (Jon Favreau) is a middle-aged, somewhat out of shape, man, who was celebrated in Miami as one of the great young chefs ten years earlier by prominent food reviewer Ramsay Michel (Oliver Platt). Casper is about to be reviewed again by Michel at a Brentwood (an affluent suburb of Los Angeles) country-club patronized restaurant and The Chef wants to impress The Reviewer with his most imaginative and daring food creations. Enter Riva (Dustin Hoffman), the restaurant's owner, who heavy-handedly convinces the chef to prepare his "tried and true" hit dishes to the disappointment of his kitchen staff, including sous chef Tony (Bobby Cannavale) and line cook Martin (John Leguizamo), who The Chef started cooking with in Miami. The result is a mediocre review of The Chef ("his dramatic weight gain can only be explained by the fact that he must be eating all of the food sent back to the kitchen") which goes viral on Twitter and is followed up with an in-person "caught on video" confrontation between The Chef and The Reviewer which also goes viral. The Chef loses his job and cannot get hired.

Thus begins an odyssey that takes us from staid Brentwood California to an energized Miami Florida Cuban community and on a road trip back to the West Coast. The chef is amicably divorced from Inez (Sofia Vergara) and they have a son Percy (Emjay Anthony), a computer savvy 10 year old who would like to spend more time with his father and see his parents back together.

Casper's solution to his unemployment (with the prodding and financial support of his ex-wife who provides a plane ticket to Miami and the loyalty of his line cook who returns to work with his old boss) is to renovate a Food Truck which is named "El Jefe" which can be translated into English as: chief, leader, ruler. "El Jefe" reminds Casper of his roots and the power of being his own boss with the freedom and excitement of cooking and serving innovative creations. He drives "El Jefe" to the West Coast selling his creations with a twist on local delicacies as he crosses the country. His son and line cook join him on this adventure.

The film's ingredients include: the desire of a chef to be great, creative, and in control of his destiny; how to select, prepare, and cook great food; how to create and nurture loving relationships; how to take a dilapidated food truck, renovate it, and create a thriving business while driving it across the country. The photogenic road trip from Miami through Austin and New Orleans and back to California while serving up Cubanos (pressed-pork sandwiches) flavored with local color brings the film to a fun-filled and satisfying conclusion.

The family members are outstanding: Percy, the son, is believable and Inez, the ex-wife, is sensational. The characters, even the bad guys, are likeable. The cooking is mouth-watering. I am looking forward to seeing the kitchen scenes that were cut from the film as special features (and hearing the soundtrack once again) on the home video release. Social Media is almost a character here, including some of its positive aspects (creating a Vine, a picture taken each day, which is edited into a video), its pitfalls (the public and everlasting reality of our Twitter and Facebook comments and actions) and its marketing possibilities (creating a thriving —and geographically moving—business with Twitter tracked food vending stops). This beautifully photographed, delightfully humorous film with its credible story line moves at a very fast pace among the subplots, always with an "eye" on the prize.

The quality and humor of the script (as well as Favreau's connections from directing big budget studio films (including *Iron Man*, *Iron Man 2*, and *Cowboys & Aliens*) attracted big name Hollywood stars (Dustin Hoffman, Scarlett Johansson, and Oliver Platt) to appear in cameo roles, some of which are high points of the film, including a very funny segment with Robert Downey Jr. as the Chef's ex-wife's, germ-phobic, ex-husband.

You will be hungry when you leave this film for more films of this quality, humor and pathos. Favreau's next project is directing another adaptation of *The Jungle Book* with (it is rumored) Ben Kingsley and Scarlett Johansson. It will be interesting to see how Favreau takes the experience of *Chef*, a small budget independent film, and applies it to a big budget Disney studio release. On his IMDb biography page, Favreau said about *Chef*: "It was nice to work on a little movie like this again, where I have so many responsibilities between writing and directing and acting, and you live and die by your own talents. I missed the feeling of doing something

small and personal, where I wouldn't have to explain my vision to anyone but the people I was collaborating with" ("Biography").

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Godzilla. Dir. Gareth Edwards. Perf. Aaron Taylor-Johnson, Ken Watanabe, Elizabeth Olsen, Juliette Binoche. Warner Bros., 2014. Film.

If one were to understand a film remake and the original as in some sort of father-and-son relationship, then the latest *Godzilla* would unquestionably qualify as a good son. With filial devotion, the offspring is faithful to the parent as it recreates in many details the eponymous monster of the 1954 Japanese original, from the monster's sturdy frame to its back plates that glow whenever the lizard belches its radioactive flame. In various ways, Edwards also nods knowingly to the fans of the Japanese series, as in using the surname of the scientist in the 1954 film for the Japanese scientist Dr. Serizawa (Ken Watanabe) in the remake. Furthermore, the remake appears to allegorize its status as the legitimate son of the original film through the recurring motif of sons endeavoring to accomplish tasks passed down by their respective fathers: the protagonist Ford (Aaron Taylor-Johnson) sets out to follow the words of his father Joe (Bryan Cranston) to "keep [the family] safe," something the father could not accomplish fifteen years earlier; likewise, in his determination to prevent another nuclear catastrophe, Dr. Serizawa carries the baton received from his own father, who survived Hiroshima in 1945. With blind love and respect for the original enhanced by state-of-the-art CGI technology, this fresh recreation completely overshadows Roland Emmerich's first Hollywood *Godzilla* (1998), which had introduced a black sheep to this reptilian family, a monster that seemed more fit for *Jurassic Park* than for the Japanese franchise.

Among the treasures that the new *Godzilla* inherited from its "father," the most prominent is the use of a nuclear crisis background, but with a notable difference. The 1954 film emerged following a series of American nuclear tests at Bikini Atoll, during which the crew of a Japanese fishing boat were exposed to radioactive fallout, resulting in one death. Using the pretext of a monster movie, the original film tacitly criticized the US military's nuclear development, at the time a taboo act in a country which, having suffered defeat in the war following the dropping of A-bombs, was subsequently occupied by US forces until 1952. Although the two films seemingly share the same nuclear background, Edwards's remake is not channeled toward a straightforward anti-nuclear message. Rather, the

nuclear testing of the 1950s is reinterpreted, and even justified, as an early military attempt to kill Godzilla. Moreover, though evoking the memories of the 2011 disaster in Fukushima, the film's nuclear reactor meltdown is attributed to the action of the MUTO, a villainous creature that feeds upon radioactive substances.

The notable lack of an anti-nuclear message, however, does not make the new *Godzilla* a brainless, popcorn movie. On the contrary, the nuclear background setting in the film enables expression of skepticism toward political secrecy and public indifference concerning nuclear issues. For example, in the opening credit sequence, numerous words are concealed under bold white lines, implying censorship and cover-up. This concealment foreshadows Joe's suspicion that the authorities have used the quarantine zone of the meltdown disaster for hiding something. Driven by the loss of his wife Sandra (Juliette Binoche), Joe's "long crusade for the truth" drags Ford back to the past, from which Ford had been turning his eyes as if subconsciously covering up his trauma. Given the collective, and seemingly willful, amnesia within both Japan and the rest of the world concerning the Fukushima nuclear disaster and the ongoing radioactive contamination, it is significant how *Godzilla* uncannily reawakens the sleeping monster of suppressed anxiety.

Another departure from the Japanese original is in the characterization of the monster. Unlike the 1954 film, in which Godzilla is a threat to humanity that must be destroyed, the remake presents Godzilla as a hero who saves humans from destruction caused by a pair of MUTOs. Though a good Godzilla is not surprising to those familiar with the original film's numerous Japanese sequels, the remake seems to lack any underpinnings for Godzilla's act of leaving his undersea den in order to pursue the two MUTOs. If the MUTOs are indeed lethal parasites for the Godzilla species as claimed in the film, wouldn't the lizard probably prefer to keep away from them rather than risking its life to chase them? In order to make sense of the unreserved benevolence of the new Hollywood Godzilla, one may need to think of this CGI monster not only as a son of the Japanese original, but also as *the* Son, in the Christian sense. Transplanted to the Western cultural context, Godzilla appears, (nearly) dies, and rises again for the benefit of humanity, in order to "restore the balance" wronged by the humans' arrogant attempt to nurture the uncontrollable nuclear monster MUTO. The religious overtone can be sensed even in a news

headline displayed at the end of the film, "KING OF THE MONSTERS—SAVIOR OF OUR CITY?"—a phrase which, while alluding to the initial English title of the original film, raises the lizard to a status near that of the biblical messiah sent by God, the Father.

In this story where father and son dominate the central stage, mothers are shown to be strikingly dysfunctional. Ford's mother, a nuclear specialist, dies at her work, embittering her son's memory of his childhood. Moreover, while fulfilling her duty as a nurse, Ford's wife Elle (Elizabeth Olsen) reluctantly leaves her son to her colleague and unintentionally brings him in dangerous proximity to Godzilla. Even the female MUTO, which poses a greater threat to Godzilla than does her male counterpart, fails to protect her eggs during her fight with Godzilla. Through such portrayal of mothers, the film appears to resurrect age-old sexism, the view that the mother's profession—be it nuclear research, nursing, or fighting Godzilla—is detrimental to her fundamental role of guarding her offspring. Is this perhaps an emotional hang-up of the son who cannot monopolize his working mother whenever he wants? Correspondingly, is Godzilla's act of kissing his flame into the female MUTO's mouth symbolic of a matricidal love-and-hate relationship between the son and the mother? I sincerely hope that the recently green-lighted sequel of this remake resolves these unanswered questions by delving more deeply into Godzilla's own family background.

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