

FILMS

These are my responses to interesting and frequently beautiful and touching films many of which, but not all, tend to disappear under the radar, hardly remarked on and then forgotten when they deserve better. There is no doubt in my mind that we are living in a golden era of independent film making, passion projects which demand commitment as well as technical skill and resources. The focus here is on films which I want to recommend.

INDIE HARVEST: QUEER CINEMA

In the last decade there has been a revolution in film making and film viewing. Queer cinema has been a dam bursting. High time, after decades of pussyfooting, and being grateful for the occasional A list production giving a nod to the queer experience in films like *Brokeback Mountain* and before it *Philadelphia* when the best directors managed to persuade top stars to take the plunge. These were rewarded with Oscars for their courage. The trickle of films dealing with AIDS and painful coming-out experiences grew in volume throughout the 1990s until they became a flood in the first fifteen years of this century: all stories needing to be told and mostly by dedicated filmmakers who, as they say, ‘beg borrow and steal’ as well as put all their life-savings into the ventures which can at best receive recognition at independent film festivals like Sundance, and generally disappear into the video market. Most of them go under the radar and receive no critical attention which might otherwise persuade people to watch them. This is why I make a point of buying queer cinema DVDs. That way there is a chance that the film makers will recoup costs and maybe even save up for another production.

Deborah Orr in the Guardian recently praised the work of Todd Haynes who started in the queer cinema independent sector where his films were made with skill and flair, unapologetically individual and not pulling their punches. They attracted enough critical acclaim to turn him into an A list director. Her comment on this cinema phenomenon gives added reason for my book. Talking about the past she observes sweepingly but correctly that: ‘Denial and suppression of those stories narrowed and compromised all of human art and culture.’

The purpose of this book is to give positive critical attention to as many of the dam burst of queer cinema as I have time to see and comment on, films that came out unnoticed and unremarked, or which received cursory attention and then forgotten. More than a few are astoundingly well made and well worth anyone’s attention. These are film makers who in the old days would have hidden their sexuality and become major directors in Hollywood studios, skilled artists like James Whale and George Cukor. Now they can tell their stories without disguise or subterfuge.

I observe that each country has a particular style of queer cinema, which reflects the individual national character. French queer cinema tends to be more in your face, fearlessly stripped down, often violent and hyper-sexual, frequently shocking, but always serious with a political edge. The French celebrate being both intellectual and sensual at the same time. As one director commented one of the main purposes of cinema is to celebrate the beauty of young people at the peak of their allure. These films are therefore made to arouse the viewer, sexually and intellectually. American queer cinema tends to sermonising and caution but the technical skill manages to entertain and express challenging commentary on mid-American values, especially its entrenched religious and moral bigotry. On the other hand there is a strand of American queer cinema which sticks its tongue out and flamboyantly celebrates sexuality with humour, using Hollywood tropes familiar in soap operas and main stream

films to subvert them. Australian queer cinema tends to be shockingly abrasive in its challenge to typical homophobic male machismo. This remains a disturbing reality down under, as I know from experience. Australia is the only place I have had beer bottles thrown at me from passing cars, just because I happened to be walking down the road with a friend. Films like *Drown* are typical of the Australian style, difficult to watch but ultimately cathartic.

Many independent films miss out on the distribution and attention afforded by the big studios which control cinema markets. Unrestricted by the studio system, these films are the creation of individual or small groups of artists collaborating on a shared vision. Often, and to me personally on the whole more interesting than big budget mainline cinema releases, they deserve wider circulation. Media critics do not have the time to pay more than a few of these films adequate attention. This book sets out to give these little-known, and sometimes even overlooked modern masterpieces consideration, analysis and attention. Their directors are dedicated artists. They have substantial knowledge of cinematic art and learnt from the best. Because they work within the restraints of tiny budgets, a factor which encourages imaginative creativity, they preserve individuality and make their films exactly the way they want. They depend for their income and survival on the DVD marketplace, and I make a point of collecting their work. Every DVD that is bought helps these directors break even and perhaps even encourages them to continue with other films.

There is no doubt in my mind that the most intelligent, sensitive and penetrating analysis of our present times is to be found in independent films. They examine the most important questions of existence, relationship, politics and the state of the world, in depth, often to strikingly moving and suggestive effect. The films look like works of art, with a painterly attention to composition. Equally the scripts are literate in the manner of great writers. The scores are also evocative in the tradition of great composers. To my mind cinema from its

beginnings, rapidly became the most representative art form of the time, in the manner of Renaissance painting, opera in the 19th century, drama in Ancient Greece and Elizabethan and Jacobean England, or the novel in 19th century Russia.

Independent Cinema provides an excess of riches: so many great and interesting films pouring out, that it is natural that many disappear with hardly any notice. This book seeks to rectify that in a small way, and will focus on films that slipped beneath the radar and hardly anyone knows about, but which in my opinion deserve not only attention, but to be discussed and celebrated, and their makers to be encouraged.

The main strand of this book is Independent Gay films, a genre that seems to be geared to a niche market, and therefore attracts even less attention than others. These include among the finest films to be found anywhere, such as from the French directors like Lifshitz and Techine, who are celebrated in work that crosses genres. For instance Techine's *The Witnesses* covers the AIDS tragedy in France from the perspective of both gay and straight people, the main protagonists being a straight couple in which the husband has a passionate affair with a young man, and the wife becomes the conscience for the tragic consequences, the story being viewed with sympathy and understanding from her perspective. The French directors are generally the boldest, but each country, including those making films that break taboos in their own nations such as Poland, produce films that deserve attention and praise. This book is about celebrating them.

I will describe the differences in the characters of each national film school.

American gay cinema divides between sermons and frothy comedy which offers a gay twist to Hollywood tropes. English gay cinema tends to be both earnest and ironic, but rarely sexy. German gay cinema is generally serious, political, psychologically astute, socially and historically aware, but telling stories with delicacy and beauty. South American gay cinema is

in a class of its own, bold, erotic and challenging. French gay cinema is to my mind the greatest at the moment because it not only breaks all taboos, and deals with every aspect of gay life in its social and political perspective, but manages to be sexy at the same time, not pornographic but erotic. This is because sex is a driving force of gay experience. For this reason French directors while being serious, unashamedly intellectual, challenging social and political commentators they also like to make their films sensually arousing: 'we are casting the best looking young men available, let's show them having fun and draw in the audience as lucky participants.'

Most of the films here are queer cinema, but I also include underrated classics, documentaries and interesting independent films without a queer context but which tend to disappear under the radar.

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A DECENT MAN

Just watched the film about Himmler (*A Decent Man*)... interesting. It focuses on that pitch black gap between how people see themselves as decent, civilized, even pious human beings and the atrocities they commit. The present day resonances (Bush-Blair warmongering to Europe's attitude to immigrants being left to drown, killing by remote control with all the attendant errors accounting for deaths of non-combatants, accepting the cost of collateral damage, etc etc) are deeply disturbing. I mean, all these people who knowingly kill honestly believe that they are 'decent' people. The film is important to watch for people involved in charity and peace work because it highlights fundamental flaws and blind spots in Western European attitudes, especially unawareness of hypocrisy and allowing for unbridgeable gaps between who we genuinely believe we are and what we do. A strong stomach is required for this lean in-your-face film, which pulls no punches and does not waste time. Concentration is

essential. It does no more than quote excerpts from diaries and letters read against newsreel footage of the time, but edited with exemplary skill. The film relentlessly stares into the black chasm between what we are hearing and what we are looking at, It's harrowing not just because of the familiar images, yet again (and worse than ever), but also to hear the words. I had to keep leaving the room with my head in my hands it was upsetting me so much. But to repeat: it is the resonances for today that are most disturbing. We really do not learn from history, and the errors we make just get worse.

Muslim atrocities are rightly and regularly criticized by the people who at the same time ignore the atrocities committed in our name, not just as recently as World War 2, but today.

For me it was dispiriting to hear the Nazi propaganda that I heard ceaselessly in the Balkans. For instance the Serb militia who carried out massacres like Srebrenica and in the Prijedor region in Bosnia begging for the same mindboggling sympathy as SS storm-troopers suffering nervous breakdowns over having to liquidate so many Jews and other undesirables. Himmler and no doubt Mladic visited them in psychiatric wards, cheering them up with declarations that they were doing important work for the 'fatherland'.

Sadly it is Israel and not Germany which backed the making of the film. This sore point, proving how hard Germans still find having to face up to atrocities their parents and grandparents carried out, is made even more painful by the information that Himmler's daughter, far from expressing sorrow and repentance for what her father did, spent the rest of her life raising money to support Nazi mass murderers living out long prison sentences. These details are in the end credits, and can easily be missed.

The footage is effective, some of it unfamiliar. Himmler was no doubt a loving and attentive father when at home, but the diaries and letters indicate that he led a double if not triple life. Running the SS, establishing concentration camps, finding ever more efficient ways to carry

out genocide against Jews, Gypsies, Poles and gays in particular, and helping Hitler were his main life tasks. He even found time for a mistress, so as to make more Aryan children. His wife and daughter suffered from lack of attention, but were devoted to him.

The documentary moves so fast that it is easy to miss telling bits of information. For instance the cost of the new expensive home the Himmlers built in the country was made possible by a Jew buying the wife's business. The wife complained about the Jew's unreliability, making anti-Semitic remarks as a matter of course, but the money came through. What became of the Jew however is not mentioned.

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AIDS FILMS: 130 BEATS A MINUTE

130 Beats a Minute is one of the best films about the epidemic, and probably the most detailed so far in its approach to the political, social and physical reality. As someone who lived through that panic time and lost several close friends I can make that judgement. For me especially moving and disturbing are the scenes after the death of the main character. The reactions of family and friends are filmed in relative silence with no background music to tell us what to feel. The director Campillo, another contemporary, took part in the protests which are the political theme of the film. He narrates from first-hand knowledge. He captures the pain, the awkwardness, the grief, the unresolved matters and above all the tragedy of the vibrant young life of a beautiful sexy young man being snuffed out.

AIDS makes up an important subplot of the English film *Pride*, which tells the story of the relationship between a radical gay protest group and a community of Welsh miners. The leader of that protest group lives with the diagnosis of being HIV positive and is constantly aware of the precariousness of his existence. This explains his passion and occasionally disruptive behaviour. The short scenes where he faces up to his fate deliver massive

emotional punches because of the way they are scripted and acted. *130 Beats a Minute* reminds me of those scenes in *Pride* which match the power of the French film. There is the moment in the British film when the leader has a chance encounter with the man who infected him, and the look of hurt on his face is unforgettable. He later meets and challenges a young man who is struggling with coming out to his family and having doubts about protest. He tells the young man to be decisive, to act, to do something because 'life is short'. Again, the way the actor punches out those three words is unforgettable. We don't see his final moments, although we are told in the end credits that he died within the year. Another HIV positive character, the one acted by Dominic West, is based on a real person whom I had the privilege of meeting at an exhibition in Liverpool shortly after the film came out, and who therefore survived the infection. In the film he delivers a similar carpe diem message to one of the coalminer wives in whom he sees an unusual strength of character and purpose. She takes life into her own hands and becomes an effective politician.

130 Beats a Minute takes us through those brutal gut wrenching moments of death by AIDS in a way I haven't seen in any films on the same subject. They match my experience with the three friends I lost in the 1980s. For me the most moving moments in the film happen after the death. While the mother dresses the corpse, friends enter, embarrassed, grief-stricken, some who had fought alongside and with him, and therefore with unresolved issues still hanging in the air. These moments lead to the cathartic final scene when the man's ashes are spread in protest over an elegant banquet being held in honour of scientists researching a cure but who for political and financial reasons are withholding information and treatments which could save lives.

There is however a crucial point both these magnificent films don't emphasise enough, although it is briefly acknowledged. The mid 1980s to the mid 1990s were the height of the epidemic and, in the UK, time of the notorious, nasty, cruel and immoral Section 28

legislation which discriminated viciously against gays in every part of society and made it illegal to teach gay matters in school just at the time when education was most needed. To my shame, and to the shame of the great majority of the gay population at the time these protest groups, Act Up, Outrage and others, were not only shunned by society as a whole but were poorly supported by gays themselves. The majority of gays just wanted to carry on quietly with their lives, and actively disapproved of the noisy protests being made on their behalf. This was the heritage of having to 'be in the closet', fear of homophobic abuse and violence, a desire to be an invisible part of 'normal' society. (Didier Eribon gives a sharp analysis of this condition in *Return to Rheims*, his seminal book on the subject of class and being gay, essential reading.) In those days any attacks on gays, even murders, could be dismissed in courts under the convenient defence of 'homosexual panic', in which presumed solicitation triggered an uncontrollable and therefore pardonable violent response. Most gays remained ashamed of their nature. Protest groups threatened that false security. Now these same groups are being justly celebrated in films like *Pride* and *130 Beats a Minute*, but at the time they were reviled and even hated by the very people they were trying to help. These protesters were actually braver than the films indicate.

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BEACH RATS

The camera couldn't get closer or be more intimate than in this jewel of a film with a bleak personal story at its heart. What's more is how the endlessly caressing but sometimes intrusive camera forces us to get inside the skin of an adolescent criminal lay-about. The violent ending is pre-figured in the dark mysterious opening shots, so the feeling of unease as we approach the inevitability of a mugging builds to a nasty climax, but from the perspective of the attackers rather than the victim. We don't even know if the victim is killed or just

badly beaten, and has hopefully returned home shaken, like many of us who found ourselves in similar situations and hopefully wiser than me. What we are made to see is the despair of the young man who led him to his doom.

These beach rats are not the same as Bunuel's *los olvidados* who commit crimes out of poverty and are as the title says 'the forgotten'. The beach rats steal to buy expensive drugs to relieve their boredom. Life seems to offer them so few alternatives to mooching about, picking up girls for unsatisfactory relationships and playing desultory games. The film focuses on one boy's life and his emotional state. Frankie has to cope with the grief of his father dying. On top of that he is sexually attracted to older men while having to conform to a group of homophobic friends. His emotional confusion is the main theme of the film. It helps that the boy is not only beautiful, in the words of his girlfriend, but manages to convey every shift of the uncertain young man's varying moods and desires with conviction.

Frankie may be the focus of our attention, but it is the camera in the hands of a fearless woman director which is the dominant character of the film. Male directors tend to keep a distance from their players, unless it is to humiliate and abuse them. Not with Eliza Hittman. We can almost smell the young man's body. When the girl comments on his slightly dirty odour we sense it too. We are right next to him as he makes love to her and to the men he picks up. The eroticism is incandescent. We share in the love making and are inside his skin. By the end of the film we know Frankie intimately and share his confusion.

The same actor, Haris Dickinson, who happens to be straight, appears in another film with a gay subject, *Postcards from London* in which he takes a passive and less interesting leading role as a beautiful rent boy with cultural pretensions, setting himself up as a 'muse' to his arty clients. Haris Dickinson's beauty which drives the narrative in *Beach Boys* is here only decorative. His fellow escorts have more interesting characters but their stories remain

untold. Whereas the American setting of New York and Coney Island is observed in sharply observed detail, in contrast the Soho setting of *Postcards from London* bears only vague resemblance to the district I knew well for a number of years. I did meet a few arty people like those in the film, but they were only a small section of a community which on the whole derided them precisely for the pretensions the film celebrates. To call oneself a 'muse' would have been greeted with howls of laughter. The theme around Stendhal syndrome is not dealt with credibly: the notion of a work of art's beauty causing the viewer to faint with excess of admiration. It may be the actor could not portray such a response, but it is more likely the film does not understand the nature of the syndrome which deserves closer analysis: the relationship between a work of art and the emotions it evokes. Stendhal was referred to experiencing opera, in which the intensity of feeling can induce states of almost catatonic ecstasy. Films could and should be made about Soho. The district became a Mecca for gays, a place where gays could freely meet each other, make relationships, socialise, have sex and build a strong community of resistance against a society resolutely intent on oppressing us. This also meant danger in the sense that the law could not be depended on for protection. Much of the time the law actively tried to entrap gays, in the notorious guise of 'pretty policemen' tricking us into criminal activity and then inflicting punishment. In this time of murky insecurity the mass murderer Dennis Nilsson could prey on young men. That story raises many questions about the vulnerability of gay life, the comfort of sleaze and the dangers. *Postcards from London* exists on a fantasy level remote from the reality of that Soho which makes it difficult to empathise with the characters, however attractive. Beautiful Haris Dickinson acted a more truthful and therefore more interesting part in *Beach Boys*.

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BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE

The Bosnia War comes to England; literally so at the start of this film.

Without any preparation, as though chucked out of the sky like Arnold Schwarzenegger at the beginning of the Terminator series, we are on a bus in central London, the camera up tight and uncomfortably close like one is in a sweaty crowd of strangers. Every person on this bus is a character, not just some generic background group, from the tired woman tidying her hair and trying to ignore the small boy banging at the back of her seat to the patient driver focused on navigating a busy street. Suddenly a fight breaks out. One unshaved shabbily dressed man is violently attacking another unshaved shabbily dressed man. Uproar, screams, shouts. The driver tries to separate the men and eventually chucks them out of the bus. They continue the fight all the way to the Houses of Parliament, slugging each other, shouting and ending up bruised, bloody and in an ambulance.

Like Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, the basic matter of the play and film are summed up in this viscerally arresting opening scene. In neither case do we know who these people are and why they are fighting. All we know is that something nasty and frightening is going on with connection to a wider conflict which is only hinted at.

The confusion continues. We are still trying to find our bearings and being introduced in rapid succession to lots of new characters. Only gradually do we come to realize that the foreigners, including the two men fighting, are Bosnian refugees, and if you are lucky by the half-way mark in the film you'll begin to understand who everyone is, what they are doing, and how they are related. By the end of the film everything becomes clear. The effect is of a hand grenade, one of the central images of the film. The pin has been taken out and in those few seconds, extended to the length of this whirlwind of a film, we wait for the explosion. It comes in the penultimate frames and is devastating.

What makes this confusion work is the scintillating direction by the Bosnian Jasmin Dizdar, the razor sharp editing, the montage, the potent performances by everyone and above all the

pitch black humour. This is a farce; and as great comedians know, farce works best when it is on the knife edge of tragedy.

Among films about the Bosnia conflict this for me is the crown jewel. *No Man's Land* rightly won an Oscar, this one won the Un Certain Regard at Cannes, but deserved an Oscar too.

Whereas *No Man's Land* reserved its harshest criticism for the international community, specifically politicians and the media, *Beautiful People* damns no one, not even the ethnic cleanser. It has the rambunctiousness of Kusturica, a Serb with partisan allegiances whose provocative films fizz with flare and ideas. Dizdar dares more. He searches for the humanity in everyone, the paradoxes that can turn criminals into sensitive carers and vice versa.

Another quality of the film is the perspective which places a foreigner in an English milieu: a kind of *Under Eastern Eyes*. The Czech director Milos Forman made *Taking Off*, one of his best films, when invited to America. Like Dizdar his observation of American attitudes came from the perspective of someone not only fascinated but enchanted by a different culture. As a result both films say as much about the new country, as their own.

The two unshaved shabbily dressed men provide the film's bookends. With the earthy pungency of characters from a Shakespeare comedy they thread through the chaos, confusions and dramas of the whole film. Only later do they explain that one is a Serb and the other a Croat, neighbours who destroyed each other's houses. Like children in the playground they can only shout 'you started it first!' The Welshman sharing the ward is confused: 'So you are the Croat and you are the Serb', getting it the wrong way round, nailing the absurdity. Add an extra layer to the scene, the Welshman turns out to be a failed arsonist, who aimed to burn holiday houses bought by rich Englishmen in Wales, but ended up with the bomb blowing up in his own face. For me the key moment in the film is when the wonderfully no-nonsense matron in charge of their ward separates them in one of their most murderous fights, shouting: 'You are here to heal! Start healing!'

Where to start with the many stories and characters, each glittering brighter than the other?

The breakneck pace means we have hardly time to laugh or cry before the next situation hits our senses.

Apart from the admirable matron and her noisy charges, I empathise with the UN soldier suffering from Bosnia Syndrome, alarming his wife and all around him with insistent demands that his perfectly healthy leg be amputated. In that brief vignette we have an analysis of the bleeding heart syndrome, of which I am unapologetically a prime victim, in which guilt about the horrific suffering of others in war leads to extreme forms of identification. I also love the hyper active boys who tease their father, a divorced doctor at the end of his tether and performed by Nicholas Farrell with a wide range from desperate fury to benevolence. But when the Bosnian husband and wife with a baby from a rape come to stay, the boys celebrate the presence of these asylum seekers by insisting on them being part of the family. 'Come on Izet,' shouts one of them, dragging the husband to meet the boy's divorced mother. Nicholas Farrell adds particular poignancy to the scene when the young Bosnians teach him a folk dance in the living room and for the first time he laughs and feels happiness as he stumbles over the furniture. Similarly I can't help loving the trio of druggie skinhead louts, one of whom finds himself in the middle of the Bosnian warzone by accident (you will see how in one of the most outrageous sequences) and ends up a war hero being interviewed on television news for rescuing a boy who has been blinded by enemy gunshots while trying to retrieve aid parcels thrown from a plane. The skinhead's parents watch the news item, gob-smacked having only recently been laying into him for being a no-good failure. His private stash of heroin turns out to be a godsend at the field hospital which has run out of drugs. An unorthodoxly anaesthetised man floats into nirvana while having his leg sawn off. One of the funniest scenes shows the most psychopathically violent skinhead leader, who has spent most of the film attacking, robbing and kicking people, now shushing the rescuer skinhead's

mother, high on accidentally inhaling some of her son's drugs, while he sits on the blinded boy's bed tenderly reading him a fairytale.

It is impossible to describe all the narrative threads, which would take longer than the film itself. A film like this deserves to be seen many times, and I can assure you that each time is better than the one before. The performances and the direction shine ever brighter.

I need to mention the hand grenade which appears in a sock half way through the film. It is important enough to be on the film's poster, juxtaposing the object of death and mutilation with an attractive cleavage. However nothing in the film is more shocking than the penultimate scene in which one of the film's most overtly sympathetic characters, a romantic, intelligent, charming man who on top of everything is a brilliant pianist, makes a truly shocking confession. The various expressions on the faces of the stupefied guests sum up Western European attitudes to the atrocities of war on their doorstep: smiling disbelief and an inability to process the truth. That horrific but also comic moment underlines one that happened earlier when a diplomat has smugly informed the intended bridegroom that 'ethnic cleaning won't catch on here'.

The film ends with the matron and her three unruly men playing cards, channelling their violence into the game. However the final freeze frame of a raised fist indicates that resolution is still far away. As the end credits roll we are reminded of the terrible tragedy at the heart of this conflict, as distilled in the figure of the young bride, filmed on a shaky video-cam by her husband. She is dancing happily in a beautiful garden, but we now know the horror that is about to happen to her. Angelina Jolie's film *In the Land of Blood and Honey* deals with this kind of war crime, showing the act and its consequences in grim detail. Dizdar shows nothing, only the before and the subsequent trauma of having to accept an innocent baby that shouldn't have happened. The delicacy of such a treatment only enhances the

effect. We are meant to be haunted by this beautiful young bride dancing in ignorance of the horror that is about to happen to her.

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Here are some quotes from the film maker, which offer insights into the serious purpose of this enjoyable film:

I much prefer to find those characteristics that seem to resist culture, history and education. In other words: the common denominators which unite us rather than separate us as human beings.

(About late British folk singer Kirsty MacColl): This is a low-budget film, and we didn't have money to pay her. But she said she'd really always wanted to sing that song ("Sail Away" by Randy Newman), so she just came and set up the microphones and sung it for us.

(On Beautiful People) I wanted to make a film about people who have so much to say and they don't know how to do it. I love to make stories and films where you actually combine things in a way that you usually wouldn't, that you see things slightly from a different perspective.

Anyone who wants to make a film should learn their craft through the Russian silent classics, through Dovzhenko, Pudovkin and Eisenstein. This is where you learn how to capture ambiance and lyricism; where you learn how to construct a film at the cutting table.

When you enter a new culture, you're a bit like a teenager, you start learning again. You're extremely sensitive, and you absorb everything.

Playing with meanings is very 60s. I like that. Toying around is easier for an outsider like me.

(On his beginnings): *I used to write stories at school and the teacher would read them out in class. One day she put them in for a big competition and I won. I did a little book of cartoons in my room and then I was encouraged to make a film of it. The great thing about communism was that every town had to have a film club. So they had to start one for me and my older friend to make our films. My father, who has a very dry sense of humour, refused to be impressed by all the prizes we won and told me I should be out getting into trouble on the street rather than living in a fantasy world in my room.*

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CENTRE OF MY WORLD

In a year when positive gay narratives are entering the cinema mainstream, films like the American *Moonlight*, a good one without doubt, and the to my mind over-praised Italian *Call Me By Your Name*, are unfairly pushing others below the radar. In fact I've seen three this year which put the second of those films in the shade. The French *Four Days in France*, the English *God's Own Country* and the German *Centre of My World*, go deeper and more honestly into the nature of gay relationships, especially the coming of age in the last named. The wonderful *Moonlight* tells its story in three episodes at different stages of a man's life that manage in their distinctness to describe all of him, in the manner of a Chekhov novella, by suggestion and leaving much between the lines. *Call Me By Your Name* though beautiful to look at, well performed and occasionally touching, tiptoes round the theme of tumultuous youthful passion with little chemistry between the leads, so I for one am not persuaded that the boy and the young graduate played by Timothée Chalamet and Armie Hammer are sexually attracted to each other. They flirt and play emotional games, but they do not convey that feeling of inevitability and overwhelming desire described in Plato's *Symposium*, where

lovers are like two halves separated that need to be united. The protagonists in *Gods Own Country* go for each other with an appetite and the emotional heart of the film is their need to be together for life. Straight critics praised the moment in *Call Me By Your Name* when the camera turns away from the climactic moment, but unfortunately all I could think was: 'At least these two straight actors don't have to pretend to make love.' This is a straight film with two straight actors playing gay for a straight audience. *Moonlight* focuses on emotion and life, so sex doesn't have to be shown. None of the three films I prefer avoid sex. Without being gratuitously sensational they show everything so we understand what a sexual relationship actually is. The actors in *God's Own Country* are also straight, but they enter into the spirit of the film with commitment and such uninhibited gusto that they make you believe they are in fact gay. Josh O'Connell mostly known for his louche lovable womanising Larry in *The Durrells*, gets deep under the skin of his character, the vulnerability, the neediness, and blatant horniness for a man... any man. Straight actors playing gay have a long history, sometimes honourable, as for instance Jake Gyllenhal and Heath Ledger credibly falling in love and having rough sex in *Brokeback Mountain*. The normally stiff-necked staid Tom Hanks gives an unexpectedly sharp and touching Oscar winning performance in *Philadelphia*, but in deference to an A list film his partner Antonio Banderas, who plays gay parts with gusto in Almodovar's films, has hardly any role. The producers didn't want to embarrass audiences by showing the reality of them even kissing let alone having sex. A lot of the time straight actors appear to be gaining their spurs by playing gay, to prove how well they can act someone totally different from themselves just as they win Oscars by performing Holocaust survivors or disabled people.

Maybe the actors in *Centre of My World* are also straight, but the film and the performances as in *Gods Own Country* are so poignant, credible and sincere that it really doesn't matter.

You can believe these boys are wild about each other. Social background and family are

significant elements in both films; the relatives and incidental characters as important as the main couple. Loneliness and work pressures guide the narrative in *Gods Own Country* as much as lust and love. *Centre of My World* works in the same way as a classic German Bildungs Roman about the sentimental education of a young man, a tradition started by Goethe in his *The Sorrows of Werther* and *Wilhelm Meister*, carried on through the 19th Century culminating in Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*. These novels describe coming of age in a social setting. The mother in *Centre of My World* dominates the story, influencing and even directing it. The boy is starting out on life whereas the mother has lived an emotionally chaotic one. Perpetually putting her own interests first and ceaselessly fighting for independence she makes decisions that affects sometimes negatively the life of her children and for which she has to take responsibility. The scenes with her son are for me the high points of the film, especially the moment when she acknowledges her mistakes, explaining why she decided to leave the boy's father. The lack of a father is the film's undertow. The relationship between the son, his mother and twin sister is the main story. The love affair is incidental. The narcissistic lover breaks the boy's heart. A life lesson is learned, with tears and pain, but the boy becomes stronger, with the help of a lesbian couple who appear to enjoy the most stable relationship in the film. Though the narcissus is the loser, the film is sensitive enough to have sympathy and understanding for him too. He is a man with no notion of love who steals other's belongings and collects people to fill a gaping hole in his emotional life. He is ashamed of his family and a home that is lifeless in its arid cleanliness, in contrast to the creative messiness where his boyfriend lives. The film deserves more than one viewing because the narrative structure can be confusing, jumping back and forth in time. Only on second viewing does it become clear and I can appreciate the significance of so many details, as for instance the disappearance of the glass snow globe. The narcissus stole it

surreptitiously when they first met and returns it at the end, a gesture which closes a chapter in the son's emotional Bildung, and helps him move on.

The snow globe recalls a similar object in *Citizen Kane* that evokes a childhood memory and haunts a life of interrupted innocence after which worldly demands bring problems and disappointments. The storm and the forest recall those Grimm fairy tales where children get lost and have to overcome monsters. These quotations and references enrich the narrative, opening up different interpretations and possibilities. Just as the conscious quote of *Brokeback Mountain* in *Gods Own Country* serves to offer another more positive solution to a socially unacceptable affair, so these quotes and recollections widen and develop the experience not only of the main protagonists but also the viewer. We eavesdrop on a life being enjoyed, suffered and pushed in different directions.

The twin sister's story is a significant part of the narrative, and closely linked to the storm which wreaks such havoc on the woods and relationships.

Everyone in the film is a pleasure to watch naked and clothed. They are beautiful because they are real. We love them all, even the difficult mother. Especially the difficult mother who is as human as we are: full of faults but trying her best. It is a marvellous moment when her new man refuses to be bullied into leaving, a familiar pattern in her life. He takes hold of her in such a way that she is able to break down in catharsis and so enabling her to open up to her son, who is then in turn liberated to go out into the world and make his own life.

Great drama is supposed to be cathartic. *Gods Own Country*, *Four Days in France* and *Centre of My World* are cathartic experiences for the viewer. This is why they are great films.

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FATHERS AND SONS

FILMS REFERENCED

DADDY

FATHER

MICHAEL

AYA ARCOS

XENIA

GERONTOPHILA

THE BOYS CLUB

MOONFLEET

OUR PARADISE

MY PRIVATE IDAHO

WHAT WE HAVE: CE QU'ON A

IVANS CHILDHOOD

Daddy is a sermon from the US, taking a tricky taboo subject, but skirting around it, sweetening a mixture of strict moralising with cautious sympathy. The plot, imitating familiar Hollywood formulas, leads to a neat ending. The French would attack the same topic with maximum provocation and be unconcerned by any controversy.

A popular gay anchor man is intrigued by the attentions of a young man at the studio and with the subtle skills of an experienced seducer eventually beds him. The boy seems hesitant

at first, even though he seems to have initiated the encounter. To cut a long story short, the boy turns out to be the man's son. The man reacts furiously in shock at realising he has committed incest. A weakness in the narrative is the lack of back-story. Who was the mother, for instance? What kind of relationship did the man have with her? The last part of the film describes how with difficulty the man and boy start to relate as father and son.

Incest between fathers and daughters is a taboo subject for obvious reasons. Incest between fathers and sons is equally taboo, but for different reasons, because inbreeding is not the issue. Both are abuse, especially and always when children or even older minors are involved. In Alan Bennett's *The History Boys* the teacher, who has no qualms groping those students able to react to the molesting with a mocking shrug, rejects the one gay pupil. The boy reaches out to him, in hope, but the teacher knows he cannot confuse him because the older man understands the danger of emotional abuse. The moral majority were outraged when the play and film came out. Alan Bennett makes no judgement, although he allows disapproval to be expressed through another teacher and the headmaster. As it happens the transgressing teacher is punished at the end by being killed off in an accident. This play is a modern classic because of its many layers and dimensions concerning education and growing up while daring to broach the taboos around sexuality between generations. In a lesser more formulaic play, the teacher would be seen solely as a predator to be caught, arrested and punished. However the fact that he is a gifted teacher who inspires his pupils in ways that enrich their knowledge, and also their lives, creates ambiguity and raises questions about education and sex that always need to be asked and examined. The Ancient Greeks dealt with the intensity of relationships between teachers and pupils situation by elevating the link between education and sexuality to an ideal. Moralistic Christian Puritanism on the other hand either ignores or condemns such links. As Bennett's play indicates, ignorance and condemnation lead to repression, social unacceptability and abuse.

Daddy focuses on father son sex in a work environment even though the incest happens by accident when a young man approaches his father who has no idea this is his son. The father is a promiscuous gay, and thinks he has made another conquest. After initial resistance, because this had never been part of his plan, the son submits, because his need for a father's love trumps taboo. The moment of discovery shatters the father, and the film takes a dramatic turn. However the film ends with a neat resolution, the message being that love and friendship can correct mistakes and put an end to 'abominations'.

To complicate the matter the father is full of himself and unpleasant to his best friend as well as exploitative of his as-yet unknown son.

The question remains unanswered: how is a relationship that is by choice passionately sexual able to change into something that is not incestuous?

A French film would have been more in your face: the father and son embarking on an amour fou, fingers to the rest of the world. The father would be aware of the young man being his son, the film probably ending in violence.

US independent films being in constant need for funding and sponsorship can't afford to be so challenging. The father had to be shown reacting negatively, and rejecting his son, despite the passionate love that has grown between them. At the end, in the manner of a moral sermon, the father begins to accept the former lover as his son, and reconciles with the best friend who despite being treated badly came to the rescue with a sermon.

A film like this for all its pussyfooting does however raise necessary questions about incest and the nature of the relationship between gay fathers and sons, and between younger and older men where this scenario is often played. (I should know – at my age the only attention from younger gays is that of sons wanting fathers.)

Sitting in the hot pool of a gay sauna in Paris many years ago I watched the attractive young men making moves on far older males. The Frenchman sitting next to me observed drily, as though this should be common knowledge and I must be some naive visitor from outer space: 'They are looking for their fathers.' It sounds better with the French accent and sensually rolled 'r's: 'Zey arrr looking forrrr zayrrr fatherrrrs.'

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Abusers and accusers control the perspective of paedophilia. When the child suffers there is understandable demand for justice and punishment, because in this tricky relationship where the power is invariably on the older and stronger side, the weak need protection. Then there is the gradation of the relationship from affection and tenderness to violence. Public opinion favours zero tolerance, so that even tenderness and affection between children and adults is suspect: a thin line is being crossed, a slippery slope embarked on.

What about the child's perspective, not the one being manipulated and abused, but the one who is needy for affection? The taboo insists that the child has no choice in the matter, whatever his needs. When it comes to the expression of affection, the inevitable erotic overtones become a tricky territory to negotiate.

No time was ever innocent, but even so artists and writers managed to broach these taboo subjects, subversively, usually by quoting Greek mythology. So, for instance, Ganymede became an excuse for artists to explore taboo imagery without fear of being put on trial or persecuted. This also allowed for witty commentary, as in Rembrandt's sly portrayal of Zeus's rape of the shepherd boy in the guise of a ferocious eagle snatching a small boy who pees with fright. There is no sense at all of anything erotic going on in this painting, although Rembrandt was never averse to eroticising his subject matter while portraying the un-buffed truth. A number of his drawings and etchings are frankly sexual. But he resisted depicting

Ganymede as anyone other than a child pissing in fright. The poet Goethe explored resonances of the relationship between youth and the cosmic divine in a manner that transcends the clearly sexual theme of the myth: after all, Zeus has fallen in love with the shepherd boy, and pursues him in a similar fashion to his many female victims, adopting a disguise to ensure successful seduction and satisfaction of his desires. Goethe poem, set beautifully by both Schubert and Wolf, is entirely from the boy's perspective and is not so much about erotic longing, emotionally implicit in Schubert's yearning phrases and sensually explicit in Wolf's heady version, but a surrender to nature: the transcendent embrace of an 'almighty father'.

There is also a surprising and disquieting Andersen tale about a boy seducing and flustering a susceptible old man. The boy is disguised as Cupid, who in mythology generally aims his darts at someone who then falls for another person. But Andersen's tale is explicitly about the boy making a move on the old man who is pathetically vulnerable to his advances. Andersen explores the taboo directly, and focuses sympathy on the bewildered older victim, the boy being in total control of the situation.

Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* is a satiric portrait of the Roman Empire at a time when the wealthy gorged on power and luxury, while everyone else did what they could to survive (plus ça change). Seduction of minors is just one of a variety of sexual plotlines and incidents. A substantial part of this early picaresque novel is written in a totally different non-satiric vein, poetic and serious. It tells the story of the courtship of Cupid and Psyche, the mischievous God of desire and the soul falling in love with equal intensity and having to overcome impossible tasks to finally be united. Like one of Beethoven's sublime adagios framed by boisterous, witty and often aggressive fast movements, this story may seem to have nothing to do with the shenanigans surrounding it, but is in fact the book's heart and soul. While the rich and powerful of Rome idle their lives away in luxury and pursuit of

satisfying every physical desire, they pay no attention to other people's needs. These sybarites have lost interest and contact with their souls. Apuleius is reminding his readers of a Greek myth they would have known. The union of desire and the soul creates offspring which is called Hope. The poignancy of the tale lies in its perspective, that of Psyche, the soul. She falls in love with the God of Desire and submits to the rigour of the tasks laid on her by Venus, the god's angry jealous mother. Andersen in one of his most famous tales riffs on this theme by turning Psyche into a mermaid who falls in love with a human 'god', and is willing to sacrifice parts of her body to be with him. Whereas Apuleius celebrates an ultimately successful union, the 'soul' in Andersen's tale fails wretchedly and painfully. Andersen's view of humanity is so bleak, that to an extent his tales can only be understood by adults while children receive just an inkling of how difficult life can be. His basic message is that regardless of the obstacles put in our way, and especially of the likelihood of failure and rare success, we need to nurture our humanity. Andersen never says it outright, but constantly poses a question we have to answer, whether it is better to perish aiming for this humanity rather than surrendering to our worst instincts. In that sense his tales can never be read as sentimental, moralistic or even judgmental. The question lands in our laps and we have to make a decision. The end of *The Little Mermaid* illustrates this perfectly. There is a need for her suffering to be transcended, and the only way to do that is to turn her into an angel who encourages our better instincts. Andersen though often surrenders to darkness as in his greatest and most disturbing tales like *The Shadow*, which pessimistically shows how our worst instincts can completely obliterate our best. In *A Naughty Boy* about the seduction of an old man Andersen also manages to question the nature of taboo. He makes no judgment, and we are left to imagine and be disturbed into thought.

I have strayed way offline, but the point about desire and what it means to be human is part of understanding all kinds of love, desire and need, especially when taboos are being broken.

Back to the theme of incest, *Daddy* leads to the next film I happened to watch, a Greek film *Xenia* which has as its main storyline two Albanian brothers going on the search for a father who abandoned them when they were boys. The difference between these two films underlines the point I always make about many US gay films being either moralistic or escapist comedy. *Xenia* has a message about brotherly love and desire for a father figure, but is set alongside political awareness of nation-less people, refugees trying to establish roots in a world that rejects them. The gay boy in search of his father enjoys sexual relations with father figures, who, while he is not an escort, give him money for his life needs. His straight brother has to find a different solution to grief and anger about being abandoned by the father.

Gerontophilia is another film about the relationships between young and old, but not about incest or father figures. This American film is unusual for not being a sermon, but simply looking at the life of a handsome young man who happens to desire much older men who could be his grandfathers. He loves the bodies of old men, choosing a job in a care home that brings him into physical contact with them, makes beautiful drawings of them, and eventually falls in love with one of the men. They run away together, and the old man dies, exhausted after a wild night of sex, leaving the young man bereft. The grief is that of a person who has lost a lover, but he also recovers, understanding that this will always be the downside of his addiction. The film ends wittily with the boy eyeing another unsuspecting old man, who may or may not be interested, but looks bemused at the young man's sly attention.

My Frenchman's statement in the Paris hot pool, 'they are looking for their fathers', sums up the dynamic of these proto incestuous relationships. It is the search, and not necessarily the finding, that matters. In my experience as a 'father figure' to young men who set their sights on me, is that it rarely has to do with love. The needs are mostly materialistic. These sons are in need of help more often than not financial. This help does not necessarily preclude

relationship, but without the help there is rarely a chance of that happening. The spectrum of this personal transaction covers the range from escorting to friendship 'with benefits'.

Escorts have written books about their exploits, but very rarely do their clients write about their experiences. Shame has a bit to with this, as well as discretion. I have paid for sex one way or another most of my adult life and made relationships with younger men who for one reason or another had to rent their bodies out. The father-son dynamic is central. Eventually the son needs to leave the father. It is not a matter of regret and money really does help.

Deeper or lasting relationships are a bonus. Professional escorts are a different matter because the transaction depends on precise strictly kept boundaries of time with minimum emotional commitments. A wit once correctly observed: 'you are paying for the escort to leave.' Given that the sexual act is more than a physical activity, the fine line between business and emotion is tricky one to negotiate and as one escort told me, it is often the client who is more vulnerable. In *The Boys Club* (another exception to my general rule about US films being sermons), there is a significant sub-plot which examines this fine line in the relationship between an escort and his elderly client. The client is subtly played by an actor who when younger appeared in French New Wave films, Erich Rohmer in particular who famously focused on the emotional quagmire of sexual relations. He insists on paying for the escort's presence on condition that there should be no sex, not until the escort feels a genuine desire for it. There is a time when the escort mistakenly feels the time is right, but the old man pushes him gently away. When that moment does eventually come and they engage in a passionate mutually enthusiastic encounter, the escort on departing leaves the cash envelope untouched. A point is delicately made: the relationship has changed. With equally delicate irony, since money has become such an intrinsic part of sex for the escort, the young man who becomes his lover and partner readily agrees to payment. In a final shot we see a large jar on the bedside table. It is packed with tiny coins: a cent a time.

In contrast the equally superb but far more disquieting French film, *Our Paradise*, follows the fortunes and mostly misfortunes and violent crimes of two escorts and comes to the grim conclusion that there is no loving or trusting relationship possible between escorts and clients. The film is up front about the nature of this trade. Escorts are insecure, and clients are arrogant. The latter pays for sex, which implies possession. The film, as typical of the best French cinema, also makes a trenchant observation about politics and society. Since money reduces emotions like love and sex to a material transaction, behaviour is longer determined by decency, let alone morality, but by need, even if that means crime and murder. Ruthless greed is on both sides. The film approaches the relationships between controlling father figures and emotionally starved sons with such shocking in-your-face intensity, that however repellent and disturbing, the narrative gets under the skin. This film demands more than one viewing, because it explores exceedingly amoral murky territory. No other film I know examines more challengingly the complexity and deadly dangers of relationships in a materialistic world. I write about this film, *Our Paradise*, in more detail separately. The title gives an indication of the film's irony made more bitter by the central relationship between the two escorts, one young and relatively innocent, the other older, still handsome but in the eyes of clients past his sell-by date. They love and care for each other. At the same time they embark on a vengeful murder spree. This amour fou, two damaged souls clinging passionately to each other, is nourished by the shared dream of a paradise where they can lead a peaceful fulfilling life together. However, neither have the social skills to make it happen, even when the opportunity presents itself. They resort to violence in their pursuit of what they feel is rightfully their due. The truth faced in this deeply disturbing film would have given grit and depth to the American more cautious *Daddy*.

Carl Dreyer's silent film *Michael* deals with homosexuality directly, focusing on the relationship between an older successful artist and the young man he loves unconditionally,

the purity and generosity of his emotion causing stress to the venal object of his platonic desire. If film is about image rather than word, the expression of inner conflict in the young man's face at the end of the film is searing. Walter Slezak became a respected star of later sound films, for instance matching the formidable Tallulah Bankhead in Hitchcock's *Lifeboat*. There he is a manipulative Nazi U Boat captain. As the eponymous anti-hero of *Michael* he cannot be heard and acts entirely with his eyes which searingly manage to express the conflicted emotions of sorrow, cunning and guilt.

Moonfleet is Fritz Lang's interpretation of a celebrated adventure story involving smugglers and betrayal, but the film examines the fractious relationship between a boy and a father unwilling to take responsibility for him. Despite being rejected the son saves his father's life twice, and the film climaxes in a touching declaration of fatherly and filial love. Stewart Granger did nothing better to my mind than the father. Lang elicits a powerful performance that plays on his saturnine dangerous good looks with glaring dark pools of eyes challenging convention, rebellious and irresistible. It is considered a minor film by Fritz Lang but for me it is a gem, and explores challenging relationships no less potently than in such acknowledged masterpieces like *M*. The film boasts a stellar cast. George Sanders, Viveca Lindfors and Joan Greenwood provide wit and drama. I saw it as a teenager and understood the subversive message, that there are all kinds of relationships, and the one between father and son has a special intensity. That the son spends the whole film looking for his disappearing father, and refuses to let go once he has found him struck a deep chord in me. It is about emotion. Finally the bond with his son trumps wife, mistress and even criminal ambition. This craving lies at the heart of many men's searches for their fathers.

In Andrei Tarkovsky's *Ivan's Childhood*, fatherly love for a boy runs like a soulful thread through this most powerful film, which along with Efrem Klimov's *Come and See* is about war and its effect on children, the terror, the atrocities, the brutality and despair which knows

there is no good ending. The boy is orphaned by war and helps the army in spying expeditions across enemy lines. The soldiers take loving care of him, and he returns their affection with unstinting devotion, that will eventually cost him his life. Although there is nothing erotic in these relationships there is one delicate and affecting scene in which the commanding officer observes the boy bathe. The man looks with touching adoration at the boy's vulnerable naked skinny body. The man is protective and sorrowful, knowing how fragile life and love are in time of war.

If you can surrender to the visual oddities, incoherent conversations, silences and opaque narrative, *Aya Arcos* examines an ersatz father son relationship from both the sexual and loving perspective, but with a role reversal. Although passionately in love with him the 'father' resists the emotional demands of his 'son'. The protagonists are human, therefore flawed, but also sympathetic, so their dilemma fascinates. The attractive boy is a hustler who enjoys his trade, and the older not so attractive man is a writer, an artist. Of course I would be interested to know how their relationship can develop. Traditional attitudes and friends of both conspire against it, so in the end the two men have to part. It is both liberation from an almost suffocating mutual passion, and also sadness, as is the case with all love affairs that come to an end. The boy loves the man for his art and for being a 'father'. He loves him with solicitude, as though he were the more emotionally mature of the two, at one point becoming the father, introducing the older man to a particularly powerful hallucinogenic drug to cure his depression and stress. The generation gap is not only physical it is also mental and social. The boy has no complexes about sex, enjoying it freely with his friends, fellow hustlers as well as other clients. The older man cannot cope with this sexual freedom, even though the boy would like him to join in his way of life. Given the beauty of his mates I would not have been able to resist. In that sense I do not experience that generation gap as negatively as this father figure. The film has a tendency to lose rhythm, but perhaps the jerkiness reflects the

difficulty of this relationship, which comes to an abrupt ending, not even fizzling out.

However in a gentle coda the two meet up again, maybe by chance or planned, and although each feels some regret, there is also an acceptance that the relationship is over. The boy has his own life to lead. He continues to hustle, but aims to educate himself and prepare for a different life. There is a maturity in the young man's ability to accept life and others. The father figure has always felt uncomfortable and unable to sustain a close loving relationship. This is made clear when he meets a past lover on the streets, and we learn that he had rejected him years earlier. The writer confides to his woman friend that he had up to now not taken into account how his actions are perceived by others. Belatedly he acknowledges his selfishness. By then it is too late to rescue the relationship with the 'son'. Critics can pull this chamber work to pieces, but I appreciate its style and seriousness. It also has beautifully sensuous moments, especially between the lovers. The acting by the hustler is subtle and telling, the eyes exceptionally expressive. Anyone would be happy to know this young man.

Gus Van Sant's *My Private Idaho* unpacks the taboo sub-text of Falstaff's relationship with Prince Hal in the two Shakespeare's Henry IV plays. An elderly reprobate hippy encourages the sexual hustling of a young man. Keanu Reeves' performance as the rich boy with father issues makes clear that this is less to do with sex than rebellion against family expectations. A good performance of these stupendous plays will not shy away from the physicality of the prince's relationship with the fat old man. The brutal rejection scene is more than just a young man leaving bad habits behind in order to become king, but symbolizes the surgical excision emotion. This love story has a downbeat ending.

The disturbing ramifications of this theme of difficult, thwarted and unresolved father son relationships are explored in a number of Russian films made since the fall of communism. The ghosts of authoritarian father figures like Stalin needed to be exorcised. Also the love between fathers and their sons who need independence from parental control has to be

acknowledged. Chukrai's *The Thief* and Zvyagintsev's *The Return* both focus on the tricky mechanics of this relationship. Sokurov's *Father* deals with it directly but when commentators pointed out the homo-erotic elements the director reacted defensively. He had tried to avoid these elements, but the intense love between parents and children can verge on the erotic, and therefore the taboo. Society's unwillingness and fear in dealing with the matter leads to aggressive moralising to the extent that even looking at naked children becomes a crime, as for instance in the puritanical controversy around an exhibition of photographs by a mother of her children cavorting naked in nature. Sokurov's *Mother* avoids this pitfall because the mother is old and dying, so the love between her and the son is entirely maternal and filial. The single parent in *Father* is still young and handsome, so the physical closeness of parent and sibling is more ambiguous. Although never consummated the love is no less intense and total. After all, the father sees his dead wife in his son. This creates an inevitable frisson of taboo and explains the son's need to escape the embrace of his father. The father must deal with grief of loss, which by the end of the film becomes doubly painful when he is abandoned not only by his wife dying but also his son. The father is left completely alone. Sokurov's film *Mother* focuses most of the time on the son coming to terms with the passing of a mother who has been his protection and anchor. Knowing his vulnerability she tries to ease his fear of approaching loneliness. Sokurov's film *Father* focuses on the father's resistance to and the necessity of accepting his approaching solitude, while the son must break with his father, and build a life beyond the oppressive emotional demands made on him. The film is specifically non-sexual. But it is unavoidably erotic. *Mother* and *Father* are bathed in Sokurov's dreamlike atmospherics, like Tarkovsky: 'painting with light'. Melancholy suffuses both films, which haunt with unresolved questions about life, parting and death. Dialogue is woven into a cloth of images that harks back to Russian art of the 19th

century, poetry, novels as well as painting. In this way these films transcend taboo. The love between parents and children soars beyond the physical.

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What We Have, Ce Qu'on A from Canada examines underage incest in a sober, almost deadpan manner, managing to weave into the deliberately opaque narrative bullying and destructive social attitudes. Without resorting to hysteria or melodrama it focuses on the way incest damages a boy's life when he becomes a man. The film delivers little explanation, except to indicate the abuse was not violent, and the love between man and boy reciprocal, which makes the damage cut deeper, emotional as well as mental and physical. While avoiding a simplistic conclusion, it leaves the viewer to make his or her mind up. The easiest solution is suicide, which the man attempts, only to give up. Light fills the screen and the title of the film takes on a special meaning: we must make the most of the life we have.

GAY ROAD MOVIES: DAYS IN FRANCE and DROLE DE FELIX

The misleading cover on the DVD for *Days in France* did not prepare me for a film of deep feeling and subtlety that is about love and not sex. I settled down for a raunchy French gay film about hot young men fucking their way round the country. It is more along the lines of the equally beautiful and substantial *Drole de Felix*, about couples who separate for different reasons but then meet up again after a road journey across France encountering people with their own problems, playing around with a few of them, facing challenges and finding resolution in love. They are examples of epic road movies which are about life journeys, the need to explore, have adventures, experience the country, meet strangers, learn and eventually, if you are lucky, arrive at a homecoming. The classic road movie *Easy Riders* ends

in violent death, Disaster is indeed always a possibility. But fear and danger cannot stifle the desire and need to make such a journey. These two French films do bring the characters safely home, which for gay people after centuries of oppression and persecution is a happy ending to be cherished.

Both films focus on the nature of different human relationships. *Days in France* has an extra important character: nature. Mostly taking place in the Auvergne, land of the haunting folk melodies set to lush orchestrations by Cantaloube, the landscape with snow peppered mountains, gushing streams and calm rivers, quiet small towns, isolated houses and views is so breathtaking that one wants to visit immediately. The Dordogne had the same effect in Chabrol's *Le Boucher* which similarly attracted coach-loads of tourists in the 1970s. These films celebrate the exceptional beauty of the French countryside.

Days in France is a non-judgmental meditation on the age of Grindr with its infinite promise of immediate sexual gratification in contrasted to the long-term security of love that is also friendship. A young man leaves his partner, who for some reason is sleeping on the sofa in his underpants (has he been banished from the bed?) and drives out of Paris in their white Alpha Romeo car intending never to return. This is a wealthy cultured successful couple. The face of the young man is mysteriously blank and throughout the film we cannot read his thoughts or emotions, implying that he is unable to express them. There is initially little about him and his behaviour to attract sympathy. His readiness to follow up easy hook-ups on Grindr and ring contact numbers on lavatory walls indicates a disturbing tension between desperate neediness and emotional reticence. The vain attempts at meeting bring smiles of recognition when he is occasionally led on an only too familiar wild goose chase. In a lengthy sequence he kindly offers a lift to a woman stranded by the roadside when her car breaks down. She is a singer who performs at retirement homes. In their strained conversation it becomes clear the young man is in a personal crisis, unable to communicate.

Gradually landscape takes over the film's substance along with the possibility of human connection. He spends the night with a beautiful young man, the one hook-up which delivers. The next morning he rejects the young man who wants to develop a relationship. He then later bumps into a handsome travelling salesman at the hotel they are sharing. They flirt and drive around together in the Alpha Romeo, tentatively getting to know each other. Our man wants to make love but the salesman gently rejects him. Instead, in a surprisingly erotic sequence they masturbate on either side of the partition wall between their two hotel rooms. This is the substance of the film made visual: sexual fantasies taking the place of relationships. In another encounter an older man who just wants a casual hook up says that if a friendship starts first, the desire goes. Without being didactic the film comments on the different ways people relate to each other. Meanwhile the partners chase through the beautiful landscape of France, either screaming in frustration or succumbing to the sound of solitude, the rustle of wind, the tread of stones, the splash of water.

There is a particularly telling moment early in the film which indicates that the film is more interested in philosophy and poetry than sex. In one long tracking shot lasting several minutes the film counterpoints two narratives. The one shows the retirement home entertainer preparing for her recital, changing and walking into the room where the mostly passive audience of elderly inhabitants waits, and gives them a touching performance of a popular song. She is about communication, even if the listeners only clap politely and are either sunk in thought or oblivious. Simultaneously the camera follows the young man walking out of the light shed by the interior where the concert is taking place and into the darkness of the night. The screen stays black before slowly tracking back to the light. Throughout the rest of the film the young man gradually moves out of the darkness of his existential crisis, although sometimes he falls back into it. It is a long dark night of the soul.

It is his partner who propels the narrative with a chase across the Auvergne, as he tries to find the man he loves.

The more I think about this film, which on first viewing baffled me for the first half hour or so, the more it moves and inspires me. It gets under the skin, particularly in the edgy encounters with some challenging women, including a religious maniac but also women who have experience of life. One is an actor who recites passages from Racine and Corneille separately to the two men. Another is a relative or an older woman friend of the beautiful boy with whom the young man enjoyed an intimate passionate encounter. This woman lives alone in the isolated depths of the country, and seems at one with nature and her life.

Nothing in the film is incidental, even the choice of opera. *Così fan tutte* is about the perils of love and relationships, bad behaviour by all the characters and searching for a resolution which as in life is hard won and uncertain, needing healing and forgiveness. Incidentally John Schlesinger's *Sunday Bloody Sunday* makes evocative use of the same opera to underline the film's melancholy yearning, specifically the celebrated trio which wishes a safe journey for departing lovers.

EVEN LOVERS GET THE BLUES

Another lovely French film that has no inhibition showing sex for what it is, passionate, messy, even lethal (a man dies after climaxing) and complicated. Failure seems inevitable but love does find a way of resolving the crises. Focus is on the relationships between men and women, so the theme of bi-sexuality throws a spanner in the works. The straight relationships examine themselves and find pain and dissatisfaction. The young widowed woman's narrative affects them all. Unable to handle her grief she finds comfort in indiscriminate sex

before a chance meeting with a stranger, who doesn't take advantage of her. He helps her through the delayed emotional breakdown. Then the woman caught between her bisexual partner and the gay man becomes a key character. When she encourages the totally gay man to enjoy her breasts, the bisexual interrupts them to declare his love for both of them and provides a hopeful ending to a narrative full of pain and confusion.

GODS OWN COUNTRY

This Yorkshire set drama matches the French films for emotion and honesty. It shone brilliantly for a short while to deservedly high critical acclaim then just as quickly disappeared under the radar. I didn't write about it initially because it had such a high profile with fulsome reviews, but now feel the necessity make a point about the deliberate *Brokeback Mountain* quotes. They enhance the film by showing how that unlikely coupling which in the earlier film falls apart tragically, in this one, against all odds, ends up with hope and optimism. Those quotes turn the narrative of two working class people who fall in love on its head. While paying tribute to a celebrated gay film the new one manages to offer another definitively positive resolution.

There's also a point about casting non-gay actors. In both films that fact, in my opinion, actually made it easier for the actors to perform together in an uninhibited way, which is what makes the films so emotionally intense. It's not as though gay actors haven't for years been performing convincingly as passionate straight lovers. Women loved to act opposite Rock Hudson, because his gayness allowed physical and emotional freedom, a non-threatening atmosphere on set with the added bonus of non-abusive sensitivity. This is what makes the relationship between Jane Wyman and Rock Hudson in their two Sirk films so effective and credible. There is a heart-squeezing poignancy in the doctor's attempts to cure his lover's

blindness in the one, and the aching threat of failure in the other, both enhanced by the sensitive heartfelt performances by Rock Hudson, a gay man in a straight role.

Both actors in *Gods Own Country* explore their gay sides with commitment, so the love scenes have especial poignancy. Just look at Josh O'Connor squeezing his fist, and stretching it in frustration as he fights to deal with the power of his emotion and need for love. As for Alec Secareanu, I just want the character he plays to come and live with me, whatever his sexuality. Every house should have him. When the results are as powerful as this I'm all in favour of straight men playing gay.

These two films aren't road movies, but a journey becomes the turning point in the narratives. It is about going outside the familiar often inhibiting home space and being challenged at a life-changing level. Josh O'Connor's character's journey, the first outside his Yorkshire area, culminates in an epiphany. He realizes that solving the crisis will make all the difference to the rest of his life, and at the crucial moment opts for opening himself up rather than closing down. Alec Secareanu's character, having already experienced exile from homeland and suffered discrimination against foreigners, displays more maturity. At the crunch moment he decides to accept love rather than walk away from it. The director manages to draw the audience into this emotionally most intimate of encounters, so the effect is overwhelming.

The young people in *Even Lovers Have the Blues* also make a journey away from the city into the country, gather by a lake and confront uncomfortable unspoken truths. Relationships fracture. It could end in tragedy. Bonds of friendship are however resilient and withstand the pressures. People face what they need from each other and from themselves.

Resolution is not so clear or as optimistic as in *God's Own Country*. Questions remain in the French film. How for instance, physically and emotionally, do the three lovers manage their relationship?

There are many other pleasures in the British film, such as the moment when the Romanian opens the eyes of the young Yorkshire farmer to the beauty of the countryside he inhabits. The man from a different tradition brings new ideas as to how to make the farm more productive. Also the parents, a sickly father and harassed mother, are given poignant and detailed performances. They see the invigorating possibilities of the relationship between the young men, that the Romanian could be the answer to their son's loneliness. The film is for me one of the most powerful responses to the Brexit debate: a rebuke to those who want the country to cut its human ties with the rest of Europe, stopping the free movement of people, even though they are needed and can contribute so much to the country. In this film the foreigner is a saviour. S

One of my favourite scenes is actually cut from the final film. The Romanian teaches the farmer how to make delicious cheese from ewe's milk. This film is about love, work and family, embracing the new and acknowledging that foreigners can be a blessing if we allow them. The foreigner brings something fresh and new to our lives, expanding them with new possibilities.

ESTEROS AND FILMS ABOUT YOUNG GAY LOVE

After centuries and millennia of suppressing and oppressing gay people the floodgates have opened and our stories can be told. This explains the explosion of gay films in the last couple of decades, experiences to share, especially positive ones about coming out, stories that don't hide the challenges of being gay in a world much of which still discriminates and doubts our validity as humans who deserve equal rights. Too many places persecute and criminalise us. Too many governments approve policies that aim to discourage and even eliminate us. Social

liberalism is now under threat from a backlash which aims to turn the clock back to times of suppression and oppression.

Esteros, Estuaries, is a tender jewel of a story that focuses on acceptance and how to lay the foundation for a long term relationship. Each of us has enough problems of our own coming to terms with who we are. There are thankfully no villains, no scenes of horror and violence, and no nasty twists, although the threat of alligators and snakes hints at possible dangers.

These make no appearance. Two men love each other. They loved each other as boys and the parents accepted the intimacy of their relationship: the mother in particular who takes photos of the boys and their physical closeness. Then the families moved apart for work reasons and the boys lost touch. One grows up an out and proud gay; the other is in an uneasy relationship with a woman. Two different characters, one unashamedly demonstrative the other uncertain and introspective are drawn together not only because of desire for each other but also shared interests. Together they negotiate the bumpy journey to becoming a couple. The moments of conflict are significant stages in the narrative, delicately handled, as the shy one tries to come to terms with his feelings, painfully resisting them, while the other has to take emotional knocks and learn patience.

The setting in the estuary countryside plays a vital role in the story with the sound of insects, birds, animals and lapping water expressing the unspoken spiritual nature of their relationship, its depth as well as passion. This film celebrates love. That it happens to be the love between two young men gives it long overdue validity.

GETTING GO

This is an example of the kind of intimately personal, challenging film art which cannot compete with the commercial features that have big stars, but which has as much to say, if not more.

This is about the growing relationship between two unlikely types: a geeky graduate and a raunchy go-go dancer. The fine acting makes the film feel like a documentary. It subverts expectations. The graduate is an innocent. The dancer is an artistic free spirit who in fact guides and controls the relationship, bringing the graduate out of himself.

HERCULANEUM and THE RETURN

A short gem of a film is like a great short story packing everything necessary into a few minutes but suggestive of a novel. Skilled brevity in the manner of Chekhov leaves so much to the imagination that the audience becomes involved in the creative act. In *Herculaneum* a fleeting encounter develops into a fully fledged relationship. At least that is what the film implies, never spelling it out. All lies between the lines and images. Each viewer might have a different story, and each is valid. The back stories which make each character interesting are only hinted at. In my case I like to think of the lovers going to Herculaneum and enjoying a long future together. The image of spooning lovers fixed for eternity by volcanic ash seems to suggest that.

The Return packs a thriller into another few minutes and leaves the resolution entirely to the viewer who has to imagine what happens next. It is satisfying to see the tables turned, and what could have been a cliché about an escort terrorising his client is undermined by the client's resourcefulness. Again everything is between the lines and images. The client loves the escort who is exploiting him. The escort carries out a brutal plan to rob the client, tying him up, gagging him and threatening pepper spray to get the safe's key number. The client

simply says: 'you only had to ask,' and then cleverly delivers his own revenge by disabling his attacker. Will he call the police? Will he help the desperate young man he clearly loves? Or, as his sideways look of sadness implies, will he accept that the relationship has no future?

Both films are for me the most effective on a disc called *French Kisses* which showcases short films. The others are provocative and a couple are incomprehensible but French directors generally offer a wealth of images and ideas to fascinate the viewer even when the films are hard to decipher. They are also refreshingly uninhibited showing the messy hot reality of sex. These films celebrate passion.

HORROR FILMS POLITICS AND PYOTR495

For me the most interesting and effective horror films are those with a political and sociological subtext. *Get Out* is a good recent example: the horror depicting and analysing the effect of the threat to black lives in present day US from a black perspective. Classic horror and sci-fi like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* are forms of edgy satire finding indirect ways of criticising social and family attitudes as well as state of the nation. Horror like satire is able to exaggerate and go over the top. No one can miss the point.

Pyotr 495 is a 15 minute horror gem that distils a feature into a short. Made by a non-Russian in Germany but with Russian actors and in Russian, it encapsulates the brutal consequences of Russia's state encouraged homophobia into a narrative that begins by pleasing Putin and his hyper masculine followers. The film gleefully panders to their worst instincts, so just as the President would sit back approving of the violence and the politics against gays ('we are torturing and then killing you for your own good' 'we only want to help you'), the film suddenly and unexpectedly turns the tables. The gay community is saying you can push us

only so far and then we will take our revenge that is worse than anything you can imagine. There are several neat touches, as for instance the parody of femininity where the woman torturer dresses uncomfortably to exaggerate her breasts and hips, made up like a tart in order to please her macho men. She can barely move, imprisoned in her glistening skin-tight costume and has every element of her real nature suppressed. She represents the President's ideal of Russian womanhood, servile, obedient to her male masters and channelling her frustration into violence against an even more oppressed person. The Christian imagery is a sinister touch, implying the Russian Orthodox Church's complicity in the barbarism.

Steel is not a horror film in the traditional sense of monsters. The supernatural element has sinister overtones, to do with nightmares and unresolved past pain and guilt. In a cautious manner typical of most current American films with a gay subject made palatable for as large an audience as possible. The up-market setting and the main characters are filmed with an other-worldly glow. Which is fitting because it turns out the main relationship is a dream, a visitation of an angel who helps heal the past.

I CONFESS

Confession time for me: I have a soft spot for the Hitchcock films which aren't reckoned to be his best. Of course I love the acknowledged masterpieces *Vertigo*, *Psycho*, *North by North West*, and the jewels from his pre-Hollywood days like *The 39 Steps* and *The Lady Vanishes*, but I am equally if not even more moved by the director's personal projects *Marnie* and the ones considered lesser like *Torn Curtain*. Apart from the cinematic narrative flair they we have come to expect from him they contain unusual star pairings which not only work well

but contribute extra dimensions. Hitchcock knows how to use the stars' familiarity to audiences to add resonance and so enrich the substance of his films. Doris Day's cheerful girl next door image honed in popular musicals and comedies adds piquancy to the dark story of child abduction and political assassination in *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (another favourite of mine) and she performs with lustre for Hitchcock, rising impressively to the occasion, first convincingly distraught and angry when her son goes missing, then with steely resolution doing all she can to save him. Similarly audience memories of Julie Andrews' iconic performances in *Mary Poppins* and *The Sound of Music* are subverted in another story with dark undertones of personal and political betrayal in *Torn Curtain*. Like Doris Day Andrews rises enthusiastically to the occasion, clearly relishing the chance to break from her squeaky clean image with a challenging director. She brings a vulnerable dimension to this perilous adventure in enemy territory. Sean Connery fresh from his debut as James Bond in *Dr No* and then *From Russia with Love*, brought that whiff of menacing machismo and male privilege in Hitchcock's cunning casting to the controlling rapist in *Marnie*. He is matched by a steely man-hating woman performed by ice cool blonde Tippi Hedren also fresh from her star-making role in *The Birds* in which she played a predatory woman (a man hunter) taking the initiative and being brought to her knees pecked at by a flock of aggressive crows. Despite allegedly being abused by Hitchcock during the making of both films, Tippi Hedren turns out to have been as resilient and determined as the characters she plays, and has paid tribute to the director she respected for giving her such rare and much appreciated opportunities. James Stewart's star persona as the dependable all-American husband material is subverted by Hitchcock in *Rear Window* and *Vertigo* where he plays a physically and psychologically scarred leading man. As in *Rear Window* with Grace Kelly, James Stewart in *The Man Who Knew too Much* stumbles through a menacing situation while relying on an intelligent and determined woman to help him out of danger. Unfortunately in *Vertigo* he

ditches the woman who could save him. Julie Andrews and Paul Newman are another unexpected pairing: a commitment-phobe using his work as an escape from relationships challenged by a resolute woman who refuses to give up on him. In this Hitchcock film it is Paul Newman who plays the role of ice cool blonde. Actors perform at their best with Hitchcock despite him notoriously calling them 'cattle'. Never take this director at his word. Every outrageous statement came with a wink. In fact he gave them free reign to give the best of themselves within a tightly controlled scenario. Doris Day filmed several scenes and could not understand why Hitchcock made no comment, correction or criticism. She approached him and asked if he approved of her performance. He simply said that if she made a mistake he would let her know. A canny director he knew that leaving his actors to work out what they must do would keep them on their toes. They contributed to the creative process. One of the many factors that make Hitchcock such a successful director is his focus on relationships that develop and change throughout the course of his films, and to make this believable he needed to give his actors freedom for them to reveal their own emotional truth. The thrilling if improbable premise in *Torn Curtain* (Paul Newman a brilliant nuclear scientist who also happens to be a handsome all-American hunk?) is what Hitchcock used to call a MacGuffin, secondary to the main interest of the film, a plot line on which to hang substance.

Relationships and moral dilemmas are his overriding concern. Hitchcock recognises the potency of putting unlikely characters in unexpected dramatic settings. Part of what makes the famous death by gas oven scene in *Torn Curtain* so unforgettable is the contrast between German actors, grim experience of hard history etched on their faces and used to the necessity of committing brutal acts, with the shocked clean-cut innocent Paul Newman carrying out the grisly murder in hesitant compliance.

For me the only pleasure of being bed-bound ill is watching classic films I already know and need any excuse to see again, Hitchcock up at the top. *I Confess* is another supposedly

‘lesser’ Hitchcock which I reckon to be a masterpiece, and French directors agree with me. Again the film is blessed with an unexpected but telling star pairing of Montgomery Clift and Anne Baxter. The knowledge we the viewers share with the director of Clift being gay adds a poignant dimension to a story about a relationship that cannot be consummated. His beautiful expressive features, especially the intensity of his gaze, are particularly radiant in this tale of someone in an impossible dilemma. The bleak ending also makes this an unusual film for Hitchcock. At least *Marnie* finds resolution, even it is disturbingly ambiguous: can there really be a future for Connery and Hedren? The couple in *Torn Curtain* hide themselves under a blanket where we first met them at the start of the film before embarking on their nightmare adventures, the difference being that what started as an affair between boss and secretary ends as a full blown credible relationship forged literally in fire and water. There is no happiness of a loving partner for Clift, just loneliness: the life and fate of a decent man, a celibate priest.

A major reason for revisiting favourite classic films is the surprise of having my eyes opened to significant moments and themes that I’d either forgotten or not noticed before. With Hitchcock there is always value in frequent viewings, his films being like classic paintings that gain in depth and beauty the more we look at them. Clift, Baxter and Karl Malden play powerful characters with such intensity that they tend to overshadow the minor ones. On this latest viewing I took especial notice of the murderer’s downtrodden wife, torn between guilt about knowing the truth and the enforced duty to protect her husband. Her dilemma matches that of the priest and Hitchcock makes sure to give her a high profile. The couple’s back story is also relevant: refugees who had once been respectable people in their homeland (they are German, but it is not clear whether Nazi or Jewish) and who now resent loss of dignity as second class citizens, forever at the mercy of other people’s good will and charity. The husband cannot bear to see his wife slave incessantly as a housekeeper. Their story is one of

uprooting, persecution and fear. Resentment destroys the husband's moral compass. Violence and subterfuge are his means of survival, leading to the shooting of the wife he loves and depends on. She is the one person we see being killed and her death provides the film's cathartic moment, shot by her own husband who has ruthlessly implicated someone else in his crime. Hitchcock's mistrust of the police comes out in Karl Malden's cold-eyed portrayal of a man who jumps to the wrong conclusion and stubbornly holds on to it regardless of the damage he inflicts on the innocent.

Anne Baxter who in her subtle wheedling way almost succeeds in upstaging Bette Davis at her most charismatic in *All About Eve*, and who glows like a candle flame in Orson Welles' *The Magnificent Ambersons* is also radiant in *I Confess*. She also manages to convey the tragedy of a woman who clings to love even when it is no longer possible. She is a match for the intensity of Montgomery Clift, and needs to be because he also is at his most charismatic.

As for Hitchcock, his vision as always dominates the structure and visual potency of every scene, each frame scrupulously designed. This time I noted in particular his cinematic choreography of the final confrontation between priest and murderer, giving the wide space of the empty hall the feel of a desert in which all hope has been extinguished. The husband crazed by failure refuses to give up and his final words to the priest are a curse which we know will be fulfilled. That dramatic confrontation of course I remembered from the very first time I saw the film in my early 20s, but not so much the venue, the way Hitchcock uses the screen in which emptiness of space takes over from the human drama. Hitchcock's ambivalent attitude to the Catholicism that raised him is acutely expressed in this film which accepts the implication that whatever we try and achieve, however much we might wish to change the inevitable, whether we are guilty or innocent, in the context of time and space we are insignificant and powerless.

At the same time as dealing with these existential and metaphysical questions, as always Hitchcock sets out to enthrall and entertain, with a wink, and succeeds. He knows that an audience must be made to hang on every turn of events in order for more difficult darker matter to claim their attention. Moral dilemmas are the substance which means the inevitable necessity of challenging taboos, breaking barriers of taste and taking the audience into uncomfortable places. *Marnie* is a striking example with Connery as a man fascinated by a woman he traps and possesses. His macho controlling behaviour threatens to suffocate and destroy her, yet it is this obsession which also helps her heal. What is patently destructive also turns out to be beneficial, a typically Hitchcock ambivalence. The resolution of *Marnie* never fails to have a cathartic effect on me. I have identified with the woman all through the film. I admire her nerve, the way she stands up to men, and knowing how they behave manipulates them to her own advantage; her independence of spirit and brave insistence on being totally self-reliant. She is not without emotion, but her love is for animals, not humans. Interestingly Tippi Hedren left an acting career to care for animals. She absolutely understood the character she plays, and her performance for me is one of the most searing I know. The craftsman Hitchcock knew the audience would be shocked at seeing an ice-cool self-possessed woman break. The rape scene is particularly disturbing because of the way it is filmed. The violence is not seen because the camera latches mercilessly on to Tippi Hedren's face which unforgettably manages to express an overwhelming conflict of emotion: anger, fear and deep disappointment, as well as regret at finding herself in a situation in which she is forced to submit her independence. At the film's cathartic resolution Hitchcock refuses to solve that moral dilemma. The audience has to make up its own mind. For me there is a sense of being utterly washed out, beyond tears and worryingly uncertain about the future, yet at the same time relief that an unimaginably painful childhood trauma had at last been opened up. The question is, can it ever be healed? We acknowledge that Marnie has to end her cycle

of crime and the necessity of moving from one place to another perpetually rootless and solitary. But is healing really possible, and with the man who raped her?

Love and friendships are forged in the trials of life. Adventures, wars, conflicts and mistrust have to be negotiated. As a result of these trials initial antipathy between the leads in *The 39 Steps*, *The Lady Vanishes* and *Sabotage* grows into strong relationships. In *Torn Curtain* an affair develops through an increasingly stressful sequence of lethal threats and escapes into an unbreakable bond. These films are about love that develops and deepens. Not in the case of *I Confess*. The ending for all its hard won achievement of justice is bleak, though not as tragic as Henry Fonda suffering in *The Wrong Man* where triumphant injustice destroys his wife, a case of Hitchcock's antipathy to the police and mistrust of the law reaching a peak. Anne Baxter, realizing that Clift had put his duty as a priest before her feelings and reputation, turns to her husband and says: 'Take me home'. The door is firmly shut on any intimate personal relationship for Clift the priest. The murderer's curse takes its inevitable effect.

For all Hitchcock's pessimism about the world, it is his faith in human nature's ability to find redemption which triumphs however big the cost. This is just one reason why his films even at their darkest are beloved and revered classics accessible to all, not just to the elite of cineastes.

JESS AND JAMES

This gorgeous, sexy and ultimately celebratory film about relationships should have another name in the title, because it is also a ménage a trios. Yet another film that slipped under the radar, it charts the deepening of a love which starts with a sexual pick up that is just about

quick satisfaction, and then goes through all the insecurities of getting to know each other, even taking another young man on board who they both share openly and without stress. the film ends with challenging family demons that turn out to be a blessing.

JUST SAY LOVE and THE LAST STRAIGHT MAN

Bill Humphrey's *Just Say Love* and Mark Bessenger's *The Last Straight Man* are typical of a niche brand of gay film-making that probes the theme of intimacy between male lovers, specifically bi-sexual and gay, as they negotiate an intense and lasting relationship. They are performed as two-handers and take place in several encounters over a period of time. Both films chronicle the development of a relationship, from a crude fumbled beginning through a period of trial before achieving resolution that is both hopeful and ambiguous, reflecting the reality of life and experience. They are not about walking into a fairytale sunset but reaching a compromise that allows for emotional development. The resolutions allow for other relationships that are not explored in the film. This brand of film challenges, not just in its theme, but the subtlety and depth of its working out, acting, also style of direction and honed scripting. Emotionally these are truthful dramas not afraid to go the distance. In both the acting is outstanding, even though one has to get used to acting stiffness in the opening scenes. But as the films proceed it becomes quickly apparent that this apparent stiltedness is intentional. It allows for emotional development to the moment the protagonists become more emotionally open and honest with each other, a climactic moment in both films which has exactly the overwhelming effect intended by the directors and actors. The physical and spoken awkwardness provides protection from hurt, but love is eventually liberated by passion and honesty. The men are able to express themselves without fear and restriction.

Brokeback Mountain is a justly celebrated example of such relationships being explored on film, which examines social and family relationships, as well as cultural traditions. These lesser-known independent films focus on love between two men, with a minimum of distraction from other characters. In Bessenger's film these distractions provide welcome humour. In Humphrey's film, based on a two-hander stage play, there is no distraction at all from the relationship. The claustrophobia of this intense focus makes the film challenging to watch, but also rewarding, in the manner of a great play or work of art that makes no attempt to sweeten.

KING COBRA

This is the sort of wonderfully schlocky B feature film which brings out the best in actors usually associated with more uplifting fare and who are relishing sinking their teeth in over-the-top characters, letting their hair down and going hell for leather. Based on a sleazy real life story of the murderous rivalry between two porn film 'studios' this film has the cheek to lose its nerve by scrupulously avoiding showing cock. Porn is all about cock... which any consumer of porn knows. I put 'studios' in inverted commas because much of the porn industry, as the film shows, is run from suburban houses, the studios being living rooms and of course bedrooms.

Lack of cock is just one failing, but there are many good things to make the film worth watching. The other weakness is the narrative around the central character, a young boy from Hicksville wanting to make it big in the porn industry, as a star and also a director. He achieves his aim by the end of the film, but there is too little substance to his story, not enough examination to explain the source of his ambition and sheer metal to achieve it in a business that is shown to be dangerously corrupt and apparently run by sociopaths and some

of them even psychopaths. This is where the acting helps. Even the main character, a pretty young actor, deals admirably with his undernourished role and manages to subtly indicate the steel beneath the soft smooth body and apparently provincial naivety, but it is the major stars Christian Slater and James Franco who make the biggest meals of their parts, and are all the better for it. I've never seen Franco so uninhibited. Both play the kind of terrifyingly disturbed characters any young man should keep well away from. The film is worth seeing for those two actors alone.

The film for all its directorial expertise really calls for the daring honesty of the classic stripped bare *The Honeymoon Killers*, which depicts the bleakness of lives in a country of material acquisition and spiritual and emotional deprivation with unforgiving clarity, an environment in which serial killing burns with the intensity of repressed passion. Sex and bloody violence is more candidly dealt with in the French film *Our Paradise*, also about sex workers on the fringes of society who become killers out of disillusion, furious resentment, and a conviction that the corrupt and venal world in which people use each other as objects to be enjoyed and discarded, owes them a living. There is greater visceral charge in the French film which is missing from the American *King Cobra*, where the same themes motor the narrative. The French film pulls no punches in its depiction of sex and violence which are shocking in their extremity. Franco and his boyfriend are the equivalent of the killers in *Our Paradise*, locked in a passionate love that is both sexual and familial: they need each other body and soul. One of the couples in the American film has overspent and is in debt to half a million dollars, their dreams of running a financially successful porn industry never fulfilled. The house, the outside pool, Jacuzzi, expensive car and lavish meals fuel this debt crisis, and violence seems to offer the only way out. The film catches the pathetic weakness and cowardice of the older men who bully and plead in equal measure. These are characterised with admirable commitment and panache by Slater and Franco. The film shows the chasm

between a lavish life style continuing to take advantage of beautiful boys, even as debt increases, and the perpetually arid lives which prove disappointing and ultimately fatal, as unfulfilling as those led by suburban neighbours who pry and call names.

Perhaps the ending, when the main character achieves his aim of directing and running a studio is meant to contain an ironic twist. Will he too end up as damaged and exploitative as those who used him? There is every indication of this in his bullying behaviour with the technical team, and his narcissistic self-satisfaction, having achieved success on the backs of a murder he initiated and about which he claims innocence.

LAND OF STORMS

This is a wonderful but deeply disturbing tragic film, an art house take on the gay experience in Eastern Europe, and the terrible consequences of homophobia encouraged by state, family, church and social machismo.

Apparently based on true events, this is one story of many affecting the ongoing persecution of gay people. As *I Dream of Skyscrapers* already showed, Eastern European films on the subject pull no punches and tell it as it really is. There is a sickening inevitability to these stories of young gay men trying hard to accept and be themselves and then being brutally put to death. What makes these films so disturbing is that they pass no judgement on anyone, neither the victims nor the killers. Homophobes can enjoy these films and come out saying to themselves, 'good riddance to that scum, we'd have killed them ourselves.' This deliberate refusal to take sides challenges the viewer and one hopes homophobes too.

For me it is awful that while in Western Europe attitudes to gays have changed positively, despite residual continuation of prejudice which at least needs not go unpunished, in Eastern Europe the Dark Ages persist.

This film crosses between East and West with devastating results for the main character, a young footballer having difficulty coming to terms with his sexuality while playing for a German team and returning to his home village in one of the remotest parts of the Hungarian countryside, a place like the American mid-West. His time in Germany has liberated him to a certain degree, but once he starts to open up a closeted gay back home, the stage is set for a bad ending. One wants to shout at the young man: 'Hey you're back in Stickville! Here people really kill you for being different! Be careful'. But as all great art tells us, when desire, passion and love are awakened in a hungry lonely breast, no warnings are heeded. That theme is already addressed in Euripides' *The Bacchae*.

The film is beautiful to look at and exquisitely shot, with scrupulous care over unusually potent compositions, which describe the shifting relationships between the characters. The way faces are placed on the screen is painterly. Check the scene when the young footballer calls on his closeted lover's mother. We see the back of his head, bowed in trepidation, knowing already that his story will have a bad ending. We also see his reflection clearly in the window by the door, while the mother's face is misted by a lace curtain as she tells him to leave her son alone.

There are all too brief moments of lyrical joy when the young men make love, swim naked, fight and embrace. Their restricted perilous lives give such moments a particular intensity. But there are also indications from the start that these moments of passion could turn lethally violent. As Genet often describes in his novels sex and killing are in dangerously close proximity. So when the closeted gay in a fit of jealousy almost drowns the young friend of his

lover, there is a warning of what is to come. When that final killing happens it is part of the most loving and passionate embrace. The Agnus Dei suddenly blasts from the screen, and what might at first appear, especially to homophobes, as a moment of release for the murderer, an act known as homosexual panic, there is also a sense of loss, grief and horror at what he has done. He knows he has also killed part of himself.

LOOKING

Sex, friendship and the search for elusive love are the constant themes of this series which flits tastily by and all too briefly, leaving me, at least, wanting more. About mostly same sex relationships in San Francisco, it is an update of Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City*, which as serialized in the San Francisco Chronicle from the 1970s o celebrated liberated gay life. It was a much appreciated read for my generation, then young and now old. Both series share scintillating writing and absorbing narratives, wit, seriousness and above all lovable as well as reprehensible characters. AIDS still casts a shadow in *Looking*, but no longer with the gut-wrenching shock Maupin describes in *Babycakes*, the third book in the series which conveyed harrowingly with the directness of immediate experience the pain and ache of a catastrophe hitting the world: Africa and mostly gays everywhere else. We had already come to know and love the characters in *Tales of the City* over a period of time before disaster struck, so grief hit home. In those days AIDS killed on a large scale. This trauma was intensified not only by the experience of hideously deforming illness and death taking mostly young men in the prime of life, youth turning to blotched skin skeletal old age in a matter of weeks, but also a toxic upsurge of homophobia by both society and government, laying blame on the victim and adding punishing discrimination.

Three decades later, despite improved health awareness and greater sophistication of social media, wider liberties and better social acceptance, gays still have to navigate the same pains, dashed hopes and mistakes familiar to all relationships.

The director Andrew Haigh is an auteur with an unmistakeable voice, already in his first major film *Weekend*, which covers similar territory to *Looking*. He catches the romantic intensity of sexual encounters, and then permits the narrative to focus on the challenging consequences when emotions deepen, life problems create obstacles and painful resolutions have to be found. Andrew Haigh is meticulously observant and as skilled a director as any of the past greats. Thank goodness television gave him the resources to create two series of *Looking* and a final full length feature to tell his story.

In both *Weekend* and *Looking* he finds a touchingly uncertain resolution. Love always has to compromise at unexpectedly high personal cost. Not many directors, especially from the West, are able to portray emotion like this. It is something I associate more with Russian and Japanese cinema.

The two men who hook up for sex in *Weekend* come from similar backgrounds. Fear of commitment on the one side becomes an obstacle to the relationship, but the story ends on a note of hope with a carefully choreographed final tableau of two men on a station platform, struggling but finally acknowledging their relationship. There are three main characters and their relationships threading through *Looking*. Possibly the main one, although the other two share equal narrative attention, goes further by focusing on two young men from quite different backgrounds and class. In the first episode a well-educated white kid from the privileged background of a rich family meets an extrovert working class Mexican, a now derided immigrant community in the US. Their affair has to navigate the destructive currents of social prejudice as well as their own emotional insecurities. However by the end of the

series, and in the final tableau of the film which brings the narrative to an ambiguous but basically hopeful conclusion, Haigh allows a resolution. The sweet-natured Mexican lays his head against the chest of his hesitant white boyfriend who, from the expression of pleasure and apprehension on his face as their friends look encouragingly on, realizes it is now his responsibility to make this relationship work. As with directors who are also artists, Tarkovsky for instance, Mizoguchi and Ozu, it is these tableaux that fix their films firmly in the memory. They understand in the manner of visual artists that a single image can powerfully convey a multitude of meanings. Think of the astronaut's floating wife in *Solaris*; the dream supper at the end of *Ugetsu Monogatari* and the kneeling on the floor perspective in all of Ozu's films, which invites the viewer to be part of the scene.

Throughout this chronicle of gay life focusing on three adult men who are outgrowing adventurous but fleeting sexual encounters and have already established an enviably solid friendship, Andrew Haigh weaves themes of ageism, sexism, promiscuity, hedonism, poverty, class, racism, and homophobia.

The series is also a riff on the Garden of Eden story. San Francisco became a Mecca for openly gay life, even in my student days, a paradise of freedom and opportunity. But there is always a serpent. For Maupin AIDS became that serpent. For Andrew Haigh it is human weakness, specifically in the character of the British interloper, cast to strength by the director in the seductive shape of Russell Tovey, whose performance, and not just his cute ass, almost steals the show. As always Russell Tovey is able to convey subtle shifts of emotion and thought in a purely visual way the other actors can't quite manage to the same degree. They are intelligent and self-aware to an extent, but speak their thoughts, whereas he looks them. He is both a manipulator but also an emotional adventurer, and perhaps the most interesting characters in the series. As an opportunistic go-getter, in business as well as affairs of the heart, he conveys the loneliness of his condition. When the moment of truth strikes

home, he makes us pity his pain. The scene at the metro station when he turns his back on the man he loves and has to let go is as poignant as the final tableau.

As is the way of the best television soaps there are plenty of sermons and much worldly wisdom being dispensed. That is their point. We want to learn from other people's mistakes, and know how to deal with our own. For instance there is the matter of money and relationships. The cross generational affair between one of the three friends and a much older man is scuppered by a financial and business transaction. I would have liked this story to have gone on longer, because as an old man I want to learn more about the mechanics of this sort of relationship: is it at all possible, being generally dependent on money or any form of help? Since Haigh is still a young director, it probably doesn't ring any bells for him. I regretted the suddenness of the ending of that relationship which for a while seemed to be about love and not just business. Then the old man is suddenly booted out of the narrative with not even an explanatory final conversation.

It is pleasantly ironic that the most feckless of the three, the artist who throughout the first series makes a mess of his love and work life, meets, falls in love and attaches himself limpet like to a warm kind-hearted bear and turns out to be the happiest and most sorted of the three friends. He made his emotional and sexual mistakes uninhibitedly while still a young man, and is now prepared for a committed relationship.

The third friend used to be bisexual, was successfully promiscuous and is now having to get used to being older and not so lucky with younger pick-ups. His story demands a film of its own, because of the three, he does not find a resolution to his search for love and relationships. Perhaps he will remain single, which would be an interesting theme to explore. He almost made a good partnership with the older man, and perhaps he will find another. *Gerontophilia* explored this theme at its extreme with exemplary depth and sensitivity,

taking into account the brute fact that aging only has one outcome, inevitable death which happens sooner than the much younger man would wish, or is prepared for. The implication in *Looking* is that all three will find happiness with a man of their own age.

There are several sequences that work like self-contained short films: the sister's wedding in the first series and the funeral in series two being particularly effective. The film that brings the narrative of *Looking* to a conclusion focuses on the least expected gay marriage, and does have the regretful feel of a venture that had more ground to cover. Commercial factors probably influenced this decision. Fortunately Andrew Haigh is able to leave enough questions in the air to warrant a return of the series – maybe ten years down the line.

MARIO

This Swiss version of the celebrated play and film *The Pass* deals head on with homosexuality and football. The British film is basically a filmed stage play and unashamedly theatrical with affecting performances, especially from Russell Tovey. *Mario* is less melodramatic and touching in its restraint. In both narratives football wins out over a relationship. This expresses the depressing truth that the thousands of baying fans in the stands still determine what kind of private lives their heroes should lead. There is bitterness in *The Pass* because the relationship is not even allowed to develop: a moment of sexual happiness becomes just a memory. In the Swiss film the footballer Mario is allowed to fall in love and there is a prospect of something deep and lasting. There is no preaching or tub thumping. Parents and managers are not judgemental. Even most of the team mates don't really care what is going on except for one who resorts to blackmail.

As the title suggests, the narrative focuses on a young man who has to choose between love or a career. He could have both, but the moment when he enters the stadium and hears the terrifying roar from the crowds his decision and fate is made clear without the actor having to do anything but remain impassive, like Garbo in the final moments of *Queen Christina*. The audience is left to read their own interpretation as to what the character is feeling.

There is no room for any contrived ending bringing a hopeful resolution. Like the man in the final act of *Moonlight*, Mario bravely searches out his ex-partner, hoping to rekindle and work out a relationship, but his lover who has moved on to another man rejects him saying he can't go through all that pain again. *Moonlight* has an ambiguous ending. Will the couple stay together, or will they go separate ways? With matching emotional power Mario has to come to terms with disappointment. Fame and success on the pitch are no substitute for love, but he must live with that.

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For me the interesting aspect of this theme is that in my cruising experience there are gay footballers, so many in fact that it seems as though this sport attracts gays more than any other. As an outsider I observe the father-son relationships between managers and players which have an intensity I don't for instance see in rugby or cricket. The sons are forever trying to please their daddies. The daddies are controlling and masterful. It is also the one sport where even the most homophobic crowds tolerate ecstatic male embraces every time a goal is scored.

Some of the best sexual encounters in my life were with footballers. They included a player in the Iraqi team who lived in the UK, because he had to escape the lethal intentions of one of Saddam Hussain's sons. Others turned out to be married and bi-sexual. Another was a team trainer. I only met one gay rugby player, another bi-sexual, but that sport doesn't appear to

have the same intensity of homophobia as football. Gareth Edwards came out and seems to have been accepted by the sport. He suffered one assault. Instead of having the man arrested Edwards opted to deal with his attacker using restorative justice, when a victim talks to the perpetrator about the harm they have caused: "... I thought they could learn more that way than any other way". Justin Fashanu, the only British gay footballer to have come out, committed suicide. Being a black player added racism to the homophobia. Rejection by his brother did not help. It is not surprising he could not survive such a mix of hatred and shame.

As Mario makes clear the oppression does not come so much from the management or colleagues but from the hordes of fans who when gathered in crowds of thousands vent homophobia and racism freely. This is a reason I have always avoided matches. The excessively loud chanting always reminds me of fascist rallies. People, who on their own are quite amicable, when part of a crowd become a threat.

MASKS AND SUBVERSION IN CINEMA

Since the turn of the millennium hidden or suppressed stories in a dam burst of gay films is being told of persecution, illness, blackmail, injustice and suffering, as well as the familiar human condition of unrequited love, passion, betrayal, loss and even the occasional welcome 'happy ending'. Gays have always gravitated to the arts as a way of dealing with oppression and discrimination. Art allows liberation of spirit while being part of a group sharing similar minds and desires. Now as an old man I remember the ancient days of harassment, self-hatred and concealment. I cannot thank those brave activists enough who changed social and political attitudes. At the same time I fondly remember the warmth and acceptance of close communal friendship with gay friends who shared the experience of living through times of

repression and lack of rights. Those who were the most fun-loving and least self-hating were alas also the most outgoing and promiscuous, so when AIDS struck, they found themselves in the frontline with death. This chapter examines the period before the liberation of inhibitions that followed the political decision to decriminalise homosexuality. The change in law did not immediately affect public attitudes, an example of government doing the right thing even when not following majority opinion which at the time would have not only kept the law but increased the punishment. This is a case against referendums. People vote for politicians they trust to be wise and to take decisions to improve society. If there were referendums even now on such matters as capital punishment we would be back to executions. At the time of the first decriminalization of homosexuality a referendum would have most definitely kept gays outlawed and made the punishments even more severe. Even though seismic in its purpose, the Wolfenden Report which changed the law took only tentative steps towards liberalizing attitudes. It took decades of campaigning by a minority of gays braving criticism and attacks, including from within their own community, to so radically change attitudes that now it is hopefully only a minority who would want criminalization restored. However, this minority remains powerful and the steady rise of far-right parties across Europe supported by intolerant religious groups encourages hate and discrimination, so total acceptance is still a long way into the future. A leading far-righter recently mooted that science could find an answer (ie a cure) for homosexuality: in other words believing it to be an aberration. Thankfully such opinions are now generally derided. It is both sobering and hopeful to think that such a massive change as acceptance of gay relationships including marriage can happen in so short a time as my own life span. I remember growing up at a time when my sexuality was a crime and needed to be hidden in constant fear and danger. Throughout centuries of discrimination the arts found ways of acknowledging nature. Masks and subterfuge became tools to express what could not be accepted in the open.

Film melodramas used to be a means of sharing narrative and experience in a style of artifice that could easily be deconstructed by those with sensitive antennae and who needed to hear their own stories, even at second remove. The suffering of women could readily be interpreted as the suffering of gay men, as could their strength, resilience, defiance and eventual triumph. It is no wonder that the leading ladies of the silver screen who embodied these prototypes became popular gay icons.

Now stories and dramas that resonate with gays can be shown without recourse to disguise, but it is instructive to look at how they were told in the past.

These early films made in Hollywood's golden age during the 1940's and 50s, are worth watching and still relevant because of a quality of direction, script and performance, that gives such substance, depth and subtlety that they became classics. The need for subterfuge intensified the emotion and sharpened the psychological insights. The subversive nature of such artifice, particularly in the hands of astute directors like Douglas Sirk, Billy Wilder and Robert Siodmark, with their cultured broadminded and even dissident and radical middle-European sensibilities, added significant social and political dimensions to what might superficially appear to be mere entertainment. The wit, fun and sentiment of these box office successes carry considerable weight and punch. They satisfy and please audiences while offering the chance to consider deeper, even challenging matters.

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HUMORESQUE

One such director is the Romanian artist Jean Negulesco, who specialised in expertly crafted film entertainments that were meant to appeal mostly to women, while coaxing memorable performances from a number of Hollywood's brightest star actresses, like Oscar-winning

Jane Wyman in *Johnny Belinda* and famously Marilyn Monroe alongside Lauren Bacall and Betty Grable in *How to Marry a Millionaire*. The women in his films generally upstaged the men, and this positive lack of subservience appealed to gay male audiences who could then identify with the emotion and drama.

Joan Crawford in Negulesco's *Humoresque* can be viewed as a gay man in disguise.

A privileged rich woman with an interest in supporting struggling artists would not necessarily mean that 'there is something wrong with her'. She may well be too emotionally possessive of her protégées but is no destructive Svengali. The character as a privileged rich gay man would have been too shocking in that homophobic era when Negulesco made the film.

Joan Crawford's face always had the appearance of a mask, the masochistically trembling lips indicating vulnerability while the piercing eyes flash defiance and the determination never to be defeated. Gender is less important than character and personality, so not just women could identify with her narrative. Alongside Bette Davis, with another powerfully expressive mask-like face, she became an icon for a gay community also having to contend with discrimination and oppression. In Davis' case the actor never allowed herself to be a victim. Memorably in one of my favourite films *Now Voyager* she fights her way through parental domination, heartbreak and mental breakdown to become a person capable of dealing with life in every way and seeing beyond intractable problems. Indeed it is a matter of moon and stars. In that sense gays like me found inspiration and solace in the Davis persona and totally identified with her.

However the suffering victimhood of Joan Crawford spoke to the darker side of our lives, our sense of failure. *Humoresque* is ostensibly about a gifted musician from a poor working class background who becomes a violinist of the calibre of Isaac Stern, whose hands are the

ones playing in the close-ups. The narrative gains in subtlety once the relationship is observed from the perspective of social attitudes. An artist takes advantage of a wealthy patron for support and advancement leading to global fame. The patron fulfils his/her function and at the end of the film obligingly dies, in suitably melodramatic fashion, dressed to kill and with Wagner's *Liebestod* flooding the soundtrack.

The scene that highlights the film's subversive message is of a concert during which the artist's mother watches his patron, Joan Crawford at her most intense, gazing in possessive adoration at his performance. Why should a mother be disturbed by a rich and influential woman wanting her son's success? Yet the mother finds the emotional attachment distasteful. Had it been a man gazing in the same manner at her son, her reaction would make more sense.

Class divisions, wealth and poverty as well as the technical struggle to be an artist play their part in a story, complicating as well as clarifying the theme of an implied illicit relationship. The situation is nothing new and persists today in a world with the same divisions and problems. Talented poor people still depend on wealthy patrons, frequently leading to the same emotional entanglements.

The casting of John Garfield, Hollywood's 'bit of rough', as the gifted violinist adds spice to what could have been a saccharine affair. The Crawford character is attracted to him for his down-to-earth manner and working class chip on the shoulder more even than his artistry. He is a challenge and prize. Their affair is a transgression, crossing boundaries and showing the finger, which came naturally to Garfield. Had he been just a sensitive musician, all poetry and delicate feelings, the story would lack the dimension that makes it such an interesting film.

Garfield injected similar spice in *The Postman Always Knocks Twice*, a rare example of a Hollywood adaptation that matches and to my mind even improves on the original. There is

however no obvious gay subtext to that film. Lana Turner could never be a mask for anything other than a desirable woman. However the contemporary Italian film of the same source book does have a strong gay subtext in the woman's obsession for the narcissistic drifter, a beautiful man with none of Garfield's working class sense of grime and sinewy muscle. Garfield is an unemployed man desperate for work and ensnared by a beautiful woman in an unhappy marriage. *Ossessione*, Visconti's take on the same story, is more interested in the woman's emotional turmoil, a theme that dominates *Senso* another of the Italian director's films, but in each case it is easy for a gay man to identify with her feelings. The mask half slips in Visconti's late film *Conversation Piece* in which a sensitive performance by Burt Lancaster opens the door to allow the truth to be revealed undisguised. A secret room becomes a place where the mask can be taken off. However it only half slips because the relationship between the old professor and the young gigolo rebel remains ambiguous to the end. The emotions are treated as between father and son, but the loving shots of the naked Helmut Berger and the way Burt Lancaster tenderly touches him indicate something more erotic. The relationship remains platonic, but given that the film came out in the 1970s, it was a daring step forward for a director belatedly 'coming out', and who for a while lived openly as a couple with Helmut Berger. The film can be interpreted as autobiography, delicately keeping the intimate moments private but saying enough for audiences to guess the truth. Helmut Berger is the *homme fatal*: a role he made his own, dangerous to know, unreliable and manipulative. The politics sit uncomfortably in this intimate chamber piece, but they are important in the light of Visconti's life work, especially the early films like *Rocco and His Brothers*, where social commentary is part of the drama. As an old man, wealthy and successful, the director openly admitted to being out of touch with the lives of the working people he once championed, and the revolutionary movements taking place in the late 1960s.

MICHAEL

Two films have this same title. Carl Dreyer's silent masterpiece *Michael* is about a celebrated artist's love for his male model, a platonic but nevertheless gay passion that eventually shames the young man who has exploited the relationship for his own ends. Markus Schleinzer's more recent film could not be more of a contrast. Whereas Dreyer's Michael is the object of the older man's love, Schleinzer's Michael is the predator, as repellent as Dreyer's artist is noble. His victim is a nameless boy who he keeps locked up in a cellar room. Dreyer explores the nature of love. Love is totally absent from Schleinzer's film which is about power and control.

Schleinzer's *Michael* should come with a warning. No horror film with its manipulated shocks is anywhere near as frightening as Schleinzer's icily restrained narrative. Made in the wake of notorious real life cases, and in all details scrupulously based on them the horror is all the greater for reminding us that this happens in real life. A film has to be exceptionally boring for me to turn off, but with Schleinzer's *Michael* I could barely watch the opening sequence and had to force myself to carry on. Thankfully I did, because this film could not be a more thorough investigation into this kind of behaviour, set against a subtly but accurately depicted psychological, social and family background. This is a portrait of a country, a Europe, that has so lost its heart and moral compass and where people no longer watch out for each other or care what others are doing that this kind of behaviour manages to carry on with no one noticing.

The rest of the film can hardly be more shocking than the opening sequence when the man descends to his cellar unlocking one door padded to muffle sound and then unlocking another intimidating squeaky heavy metal door sliding it open into a room without light. After a

sickening pause out of the darkness appears this small boy, and without needing to show more, the whole situation is made clear and we cannot fail to be aghast.

This is no film for paedophile voyeurs. Nothing could be less erotic and there is not even a hint of affection let alone love. This is about power. The man controls every moment of the boy's life, so that the boy even appears to accept his fate. The man controls the electricity supply so the boy lives in almost perpetual darkness. Regularly the man is seen descending to indulge sexual cravings.

The man turns out to be an office worker in a place where he has no power over any part of his job. An inadequate person with barely any social skills, he has limited relations with colleagues, and limited ones with his sister and mother both of whom he avoids visiting, despite their pleas. On a holiday he engages in half-hearted sex with a bar woman and barely associates with the friends who invited him along.

Back home with its metal shutters and heavily locked doors he exercises power and control absolutely. The boy writes letters to his family, unaware that the man never posts them. The boy assumes that his parents gave him away. The situation is unbearably disturbing but the ending for all its horror does deliver a kind of necessary justice.

As the boy gradually realizes the truth of his situation, that the man has lied to him and will never release him, the boy channels his rage and eventually makes a bid for freedom. There are warning outbursts. When the man says goodbye before going on a skiing holiday, the boy dreading the lonely days ahead locked up gives him a punch. There are occasional shouts of despair and pummelling. The man takes advantage of his size and strength to constantly subdue the boy.

The man has furnished the boy's room with small cooking facilities, so the boy can prepare himself pot noodles. The man is so arrogant and sure of his power it never occurs to him the boy might take advantage of this limited amenity.

When the boy boils a kettle and throws the water into the man's face it is a moment of relief. At last the boy has the power, but the man still manages to prevent the boy's escape and incarcerates him once more before driving to the doctor. The water has however scalded his face and half blinded him so there is an inevitable car accident and the man dies.

The final scenes are almost impossible to watch in the unbearably slow trajectory to the discovery, but masterfully done to match the unbearable horror of the opening scenes. After the funeral in which the priest's banal words sound hollow, the mother and brother-in-law go to clear the man's house. When will they discover the door? What has happened to the boy? Is he dead from starvation? Fortunately the film does not tell us, leaving the prospect of rescue open without the balm of relief for an audience. The final shot is of the mother managing to open the door. We see her peer inside the room. Then the screen goes black. It is the end of the film.

This is the kind of film that by eschewing voyeuristic thrills and focusing instead on the main characters and their everyday lives gets under the skin. This is not just about a dreadful man who fortunately gets his punishment but about us too. The director in an interview as restrained and powerful as the film makes the point that what shocked him most about the media reporting of these horrific stories was their prurience, the way readers couldn't read enough about them. His film received justified critical acclaim, but he tells of the embarrassment at festival showings when people from other countries came up to congratulate him. They were implying Austria's courage at examining its dark truths. But then they lowered their voices to say that the same things happen everywhere else.

About the performances which could not be bettered, the actor playing the man catches every flicker of emotion in a bland almost expressionless face. His inadequacy is frequently painful to watch, and if his behaviour weren't so shocking and unforgivable it would be funny, as when he falls over skiing. His impotent rage only serves to indicate his powerlessness, and therefore his need to exert control over a small boy. The film is scrupulous about detail, and there is not a scene, not a shot that is insignificant.

The boy is simply amazing. Of course the film makes sure that we do not see what he has to endure. Just the thought of it is horrifying enough. The director speaks about the boy actor's preparation, discussions with the parents, and how the boy talked with his friends about the role, and appears to have been surprisingly mature about taking part in the film. It is astounding the way the boy acts his sullen acceptance of his situation and the moments alone when he writes careful letters to his parents, his face pinched and sorrowful to a degree that is again painful to watch.

There is one scene which might be considered crossing the line. Clearly the boy and the parents agreed to it, but it is telling and grimly hilarious. The man having earlier watched a disgusting porn film of a man torturing a woman stands up at the dining table across from the boy who is picking apathetically at his food. The man undoes his flies so we see his small flaccid penis and lifting a knife delivers the most outrageous line from the film: 'Do you want to be stabbed by my cock or the knife?' The boy without batting an eyelid mutters: 'the knife', so at one stroke emasculating his jailor.

Does the boy survive? That question will remain forever unanswered, and is therefore thrown back at us. What are we going to do about it?

OUT IN THE DARK

The hopeless intractability of the Palestinian Israeli conflict is encapsulated in this film, a Romeo and Juliet tragedy with no communal reconciliation at the end.

The social setting of vendetta politics gives Shakespeare's play its resonance, and is memorably set out in the violently dramatic first scene. The brutishly spoken and violent opening describes an inhumane society in self-destruct mode. Far from being quaintly Renaissance and Tudor England, it remains true of the world today, in every part. As in the Shakespeare the film pays equal attention to both sides. The Israeli secret service takes advantage of vulnerable Palestinians to blackmail them into spying. These people whom they hate and despise are also disposable. Israel justifies this behaviour as necessary for the security of a country in which both sides are focused on destroying the other utterly. The Palestinians prepare for violent resistance. The Israelis use their military might to oppress and control. Short of wiping each other out completely in a total massacre, one side or the other, there is no end to this conflict. The continuation of the violence only exacerbates the conflict, making it less and less likely to reach any resolution. This film has the courage to look at the darkness at the heart of this situation, and what makes it particularly effective is that the more powerful side made it.

POSTCARDS FROM LONDON

The premise of this film excited me that I looked forward to watching it. The premise is still interesting: educated and sensitive sex workers who like to please clients with cultured post-coital conversations. It is a relief to have male sex workers given respect and depicted as more than either criminal on the one hand or disturbed failures on the other.

This film blows it on two counts. A film about sex workers without sex omits a crucial element. The narcissism of the undeniably beautiful straight actor playing the main part contradicts the warmth and vulnerability of the character he is supposed to be portraying. Haris Dickinson's role in his previous film, the excellent *Beach Rats* (see my review above) allowed more range

This is a nostalgic wet dream about Soho gay life in the past, a scene I knew at first hand. Although I recognize the fantasy, the film misses the messy and more interesting reality that went along with it. The film could have threaded the fantasy and reality together: beautiful sex workers with aspirations satisfying emotional sexual and intellectual needs. However the film is irritatingly pretentious, the sort of thing that would receive short shrift on the Soho gay scene I knew. Anyone describing themselves as being a 'muse' would have been laughed out of the pub. The notion of a man suffering from Stendhal syndrome, fainting in front of beautiful art then being hired to identify the authenticity of great paintings, is preposterous. The group of sex workers, arch and pretentious, educating him in the art of post-coital culture talk would also have been mercilessly mocked. The black street boy who sleeps in artfully arranged boxes has a more interesting story which the film avoids telling. The relationship between him and the main character would have given the film some heart. As it is Haris Dickinson makes an unlikely sex worker: his beauty says 'look, but don't touch'.

Along with a total absence of sex, a deliberate but to my mind perverse decision on the part of the director, there is little understanding of art. The famous painter for whom the beauty of Haris Dickinson resurrects creative juices produces work of middle of the road interest. Why couldn't he have been Francis Bacon, or any of his striking contemporaries, let alone Derek Jarman, who are all invoked throughout the film?

What a wasted opportunity. I wish the French had done this with their bracing lack of sentimentality. They understand the humanity of sex workers in all their roughness, as well as the arrogance of their rich clients in visceral films like *Sauvage* and *My Paradise*, classics on the subject that don't pull a single punch. What I needed to see in this timid Oh-so British film is the reality of handsome young sex workers satisfying their unattractive older clients and then engaging in supposedly cultured conversations. The contrast of animal lust and the dialogue afterwards would have given the film the kind of sharpness and bite Derek Jarman managed in his films, provocative but also lyrical, truth and fantasy interwoven.

As far as I remember Soho life for the gay community side-lined sex workers, who were generally shunned. Skint rent boys hung around looking for cash or somewhere to spend the night, most of them petty thieves and not even gay. Mingling in the pub crowd their look of disinterest showed they were out of place on this gay scene. Most gays then did not have need of them. Even older men managed to pick up handsome boys without money changing hands. The stimulating conversations generally happened in the pubs and clubs long before sex. In fact such chat provided tantalising foreplay and in my case laid the foundations for not just sex but even love and friendships, some of them lasting. The AIDS crisis changed the community's sex habits, inhibiting casual pick-ups, and sex workers became more important in gay life. Even then friendship and love were not incompatible with sex work; in fact they frequently enhanced the transaction.

The best films which take sex workers seriously with lives worth knowing about come from France. Latin American films take a similar attitude, accepting that boys who sell their bodies consider this an acceptable work choice. The US and the UK generally take a more moralizing approach. However, there are many sex workers here. These lives and experiences are worth telling, but in a more truthful way than *Postcards from London*.

PRIDE

Until recently in most English films, not just gay ones, men never seemed to take their underpants off so I was always wondering how they fucked. After discreetly achieving orgasm out of sight, did they then quickly pull their pants up again? The French aren't afraid to show their male actors stark naked, cocks swinging. UK films have been geared to entertain and give a moral message. I'm content to be entertained but to be preached at is tiresome. On the other hand the British were in the vanguard of films that explored gay issues boldly in a way that did eventually change the law, and attitudes. *Victim* with Dirk Bogarde is the first to tackle love between men, blackmail and social hypocrisy head on. It does not shy away from what the act of gay sex involves. It helped that a leading film star and fine actor was prepared to take on the role, at risk to him personally and his career. Fortunately he went on to make other films with challenging gay themes such as *Death in Venice* about the obsessive desire of an old man for a teenage boy. Since *Victim* there is an interesting history of gay themes in British films, and several particularly daring dramas on television. I will write about them eventually. They were challenging not only in raw depiction of sex and emotion, but also in their breaking of conventions. In general these films were too difficult for the wider public, and were made by and for those who were trying to change attitudes and liberalise the law. Then in the 1990s came a spate of 'coming out' films like the now classic *Beautiful Thing*, which focused on working class gay lads facing homophobia and surviving. Positive endings made a change from gloom and suffering. In the past such stories, like *Victim* and *The Motorbike Boys* had downbeat if not tragic endings, because that represented the truth of the times. This new brand of gay themed cinema had the same kind of narrative but defiantly insisted on offering hopeful and, dare one say, happy solutions without being overly sentimental. Now films can be both entertaining to a wide audience and at the same time examine gay relations without shirking difficulties or avoiding full on sex, like the

Andrew Haigh's *Weekend*, in which a relationship is allowed to shift through emotional fluctuations and suggests that maybe there are no easy solutions. Some films dare to be quite political, like *Shank* and *Cal*, also about working class gay lads having to deal with prejudice at danger to their lives. Again this new generation of directors remains hopeful about the resilience of their protagonists, despite the overwhelming odds of social and political pressures. (I'll write more about these films another time).

Then out of this tradition of niche gay film-making the big critical and commercial success *Pride* arrives, which deals with politics and gay issues head on while being entertaining, funny and touching at the same time. The basic story is so hard to believe even Hollywood couldn't have invented it, and would most certainly have rejected such a premise. But it's based on fact, and the documentary that accompanies the film shows that the film tells nothing but the truth.

Two quite different communities were particularly vilified in the years of Margaret Thatcher's government, the early 1980s: the striking coal miners fighting for the survival of their communities, and the Lesbian and Gay community fighting for rights and an end to discrimination and physical attacks. In those days beating up gays was socially acceptable. If the police were called, especially in cases of extreme violence and murder, the culprit could claim 'homosexual panic' and be set free, the blame placed squarely on the dead victim who 'had asked for it'. Being gay was sufficient proof of guilt. Unexpectedly these two communities found common cause. Chance, serendipity and the presence on both sides of people open to challenge played even more of a part than politics and a shared hatred of Margaret Thatcher. Her government basically bullied and starved the miners into submission; it also passed a law (Clause 28) which in effect made it a crime for anyone to defend or support Gay causes and encouraged homophobia. The macho mining community had long been seen as an enemy to gay people, also beating them up and vilifying them, but miners

from this particular community in South Wales found a common humanity with a group of people they didn't know but who were prepared to help and support them. Both sides even resisted disapproval and aggression from within their own communities, as well as the majority of the rest of the country. The majority of gays wanted the front-line activists to stop shouting, drawing attention to themselves and being provocative. The deep-rooted homophobia in the whole of society thrived with particular virulence in working class communities, including miners. As in life, farce and poignancy go hand in hand. Fate began with a misheard phone call, so the representative sent by the miners to thank this as yet unidentified group of people for raising more money than anyone else for the miners' cause was surprised to find out who they were. Without that misunderstood phone call this encounter might never have taken place. But what made this chance mistake so serendipitous came from the humanity and openness of the representative, Dai Donovan. He expressed the gratitude of the mining community, touched by the gays' faithful, regular and generous financial support. This gratitude culminated with representatives of many chapters of the mining union, leading the Gay March in 1984 with union banners prominently unfurled. I have particular memories of this march, which passed through Piccadilly where I happened to be in the rectory of St James's Church. Several of us stretched our own banner across the main window of the rectory welcoming the gay marchers. Those who noticed cheered and waved. In those days gay marches were accompanied by furious boos and nasty objects being thrown by bystanders, so any welcoming words made a change. We had earlier done the same for the striking miners. The miners' subsequent support for Gay Rights eventually changed the laws in favour of these rights, and triggered the progress made politically and socially in the years and decades that followed.

The film is a necklace of scenes, meetings and character studies, all shining like jewels, sometimes taking artistic licence but always keeping close to the facts which needed no glossing.

I happened to know some of the people involved. Jimmy Somerville who led Bronski Beat's support for the alliance between miners and gays, performing at fund-raising benefits, had worked with me before the group became famous. He honoured an invitation I made to the group before they hit the big time, and they brought the Piccadilly Festival, which I had that year been organizing, to a rousing climax.

What present day viewers who did not live through that decade may not gather from the film, with its over-all feel-good factor, is the extremity of the vilification endured by both the striking coal miners and the out and proud lesbian and gay activists in the vanguard of change. These people may be idolised now and rightly are considered heroes, but at the time they were hated, feared and despised by the majority, not just by a few extreme bigots. Even liberals in those days were afraid of noisy political activists rocking the boat, although secretly admiring their courage and determination.

While the government continued to persecute both communities, destroying the miners' unions and laying waste to their communities and future, the sudden spread of AIDS added to the problems suffered by the gays

Critics and audiences have praised *Pride*, with the exception of the Financial Times reviewer who hated it. Their view of it as a heart-warming story with great performances fails to acknowledge the politics behind what both the despised miners and gays achieved. This is what prompts me to write my own response.

British understatement works well in a story that is hard to believe anyway. So the references to AIDS, the interaction of personalities, relationships and historical events, including documentary footage of police violence against the striking miners, are all the more affecting for being hinted at rather than hammered home in heavily orchestrated Hollywood manner. A case in point is when an elderly miner admits to being gay to the community matriarch, who responds by saying she knew all along. Nothing is spoken for several seconds as they continue to butter sandwiches, and that brief silence speaks volumes about their relationship, her humanity, and his surprise at being accepted. It is also only hinted that Mark Ashton, the lead gay activist, might be HIV positive as he looks sadly at an AIDS poster, and then in one of the climactic scenes in the film, tells Bromley Joe, the young gay who is on the verge of tentatively 'coming out' that: 'life is short'... a brief pause, and he repeats it a few tones lower and quieter: 'life is short'. Such moments, over in a flash and easily missed, also speak volumes, and are the material for whole films and books. But in fact every scene from beginning to end is equally telling, always understated, and also choosing to show up the farce as well as the danger in any given situation. This film is laugh-out-loud as well as a tear-jerker.

Personally I would like to follow up some of the stories. What happened to the bigoted woman on the striking miners' committee in Dulais who played every dirty trick in the book to scupper the alliance? The presence of the mining unions on the gay march showed that she had failed. How did she feel about that now after all these years? I also want to know what happened between Bromley Joe and his mother who out of the kindest but most repressive reasons tried to keep him away from the gay community. Did she come to accept her son? The film does not treat her unkindly. She is seen as a prisoner of convention and a 'suburban' way of life where people still worry about what neighbours are thinking. There is the sense of another touching story to be told there, about her in particular. With the exception of the

Welsh bigot, the cruelly mocking police and the unrepentantly homophobic miners, all the characters are sympathetic, although none are white-washed. Mark Ashton could be annoyingly difficult, challenging and bossy. Yet without him and his aggressive behaviour there would have been no alliance. The information at the end that he died from AIDS at the age of 26 delivers the biggest punch of the whole film. That a man of his gifts, passion and intelligence should no longer be here, to see the results of his courageous support for the miners that lead to changing the laws and the lives of generations of gay people after him, is nothing less than tragic. Another striking fact printed over the end credits is that one of the lead Welsh miners' wives, who before meeting the gay activists had expected to be nothing more than a wife and mother, found inspiration in her relationship with them to finish her education and ended up an MP: another example of the triumph of the human spirit against the odds. Where are the community matriarchs now? The world always needs them: Hefina most of all. Imelda Staunton, who plays her, has the knack of pulling the right face, delivering lines with precise timing and yet seeming utterly natural: the half-smile, the glint in the eye, the raucousness as well as delicacy of feeling. It is impossible not to love all the characters involved in this alliance, but for me Andrew Scott's Gethin in particular. Again less is more. He goes to visit his mother after sixteen years of no communication and his quietly suppressed greeting to her delivers another emotional punch. Andrew Scott, like Imelda Staunton and Bill Nighy in his role as the elderly miner, is the master of understatement, the facial expression alone making all the impact. Watch the skill in the short telling scenes between Staunton's Hefina and Scott's Gethin.

The film is about friendship and dialogue between communities which it would appear had nothing in common, and could be enemies, each having little or no interest in the other. As the miners' representative Dai Donovan puts it: the significance of 'meeting a friend you didn't know you had'. They learn from each other. It is also an example of cross-generation

activism. The older community leaders with their long history of hard labour and fighting for justice, fairness, rights and survival become personal counsellors to the young gays who bring money and help, then enter into the spirit of the community of miners and their wives. In one of the most heart-stopping moments in the film, the young activists' nervous bravado is momentarily choked by their emotions as one member after another from the mining community rise to their feet and sing with full throats about their own pride.

RAGTIME

Ragtime is one of my all time favourites, but one that mysteriously too rapidly went under the radar. Milos Forman's other Oscar winning successes *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Amadeus* overshadowed it. I admire both those films but *Ragtime* touches me more than either. A generally favourable critical reception paid little attention to its main theme. Ostensibly about the pre First World War years in the US, specifically the early development of cinema and flourishing of jazz, critics didn't give enough attention to the main story which sneaks up subversively in such a shocking manner that even when I prepared a friend watching with me he still almost jumped out of his chair with surprise. The turn of events in the narrative, which in fact could have been foreseen by anyone knowing the situation of blacks in the US, and which every black viewer would have been waiting for, puts the other narratives into perspective, which is exactly as Forman intended. It chucks a hand grenade into the narrative, exactly as it should. *Ragtime* bowled me over when I first saw it, and I still consider it a masterpiece. The film is difficult to get hold of now, amazingly, and the only copy Amazon found for me is one with Spanish subtitles!

Made in the late 70s and shown in 1981 it is still relevant in Trump's Charlottesville America, frighteningly so. Though the film is looking back to the past, the theme remains tragically

and infuriatingly timeless. That's why I had to get hold of it by any means possible and watch it again. Having just done so, on second viewing after thirty and more years, I can emphatically repeat that this is still a great must-see film.

After setting the social scene the film launches several narratives. One is about the birth of the movies with Mandy Patinkin memorably and poignantly celebrating the wonder of moving images, a story obviously close to Milos Forman's heart. Patinkin is just one of a cast of fine actors, including James Cagney at his energetic focused best in his last ever role. He apparently wanted to bow out with it. He nails the humanity of a police commissioner negotiating with a rebel with whom he has a sneaking respect and sympathy. This figures when I remember that Cagney made his name in rebel roles, some of them brutally violent. A handsome and dignified Howard E Rollins Jnr as James Cagney's quarry gives a heartbreaking performance which steals the film, as it should. Knowing of the actor's troubled life, brushing with the law, adds extra resonance to a role which pits him against society, and especially poignant that this attractive actor died of an AIDS related illness. The film also casts a jaundiced eye on the hedonism of privileged people in the years leading up to war. This theme provides the framework for a shocking story of racial injustice. Luckily I had read the 19th century German novella which lies behind it, and immediately recognized the parallels. I don't know Doctorow's novel on which the film is based, and maybe he too was inspired by the Kleist story. Heinrich von Kleist was a strange disturbed figure, a rightwing military and yet liberal and forward thinking on matters of justice and freedom, themes that are the substance of all his writings and drama. Unable to reconcile these two opposing sides of his character and being a romantic he committed suicide while still a young man. *Michel Kohlhaas* tells the story of a 16th century farmer who suffers a minor injustice that then escalates into tragedy which impels him to initiate armed rebellion. The personal becomes political. The insurrection lays waste to the countryside and brings down the wrath

of an invincible aristocracy. Religion also plays an important part of the story when Martin Luther who had just launched the Reformation and on whom the farmer hoped and depended for support in his search for justice eventually sides with aristocratic law and order, betrays and turns against him. The broad political, social and personal dimensions of Kleist's novella made a potent impression on me when I read it as a teenager. All these are in the film. *Michel Kohlhaas* has never been mentioned as a possible inspiration for the film but bells rang when I saw the name of the man at the centre of *Ragtime*: he is called Coalhouse Porter. No critic or commentator that I know of ever made the connection, but it is important, and gives the film even wider historical resonance. I can't recommend this extraordinary and unjustly neglected masterpiece highly enough.

Mads Mikkelsen acted Michel Kohlhaas in a recent fine and bruising epic that keeps faithfully close to the Kleist story, but for me this update to the 20th century by Milos Forman is much more resonant and powerful.

RETAKE

What a jewel of an independent film this is! Made with so much love and commitment that it could not fail to move and entrance audiences everywhere as the film did on its release. Nevertheless a film like this, basically a two-hander on a difficult emotional subject, however well done as it is here, has a tendency to disappear under the radar eventually, which is a pity. *Retaken* has the power of a poem and a painting. In fact the look of the film contributes to its beauty. A special old camera helps the cinematographer to give an authentic depiction of place in time, which is part of the film's theme: how to relive, 'retake' the past in the present.

Maybe it's because I travelled that same journey in the 1980s, just a decade before the film's back story setting. I recognize the landscape, the Mohave Desert, the motels and of course the Grand Canyon. The camera catches the quality of light and colour as I remember it. Even the emotional resonances chime with me, although I never went through quite the same traumas.

The film rewards several viewings because the narrative reveals its telling secrets in between the lines as it were. There is a mystery about the central characters, the truth emerging quietly as the story proceeds. Questions remain even at the end. How can we ever know another person? How can we know ourselves even? It is at first difficult to have sympathy with the older man who is annoyingly reticent. It is only on repeat viewings that he becomes easier to understand. It helps to understand his back story. A thriller element dominates a first viewing. This fortunately doesn't disfigure an intimate story, but once you know how it all works out, multiple viewings then allow enjoyment of the relationship as it develops without the fear of some horror trope which would be an unnecessary intrusion.

Yes there is disappointment at the end that the two men part just as they were creating a special bond. The young man is sad. The older man is not ready for a new commitment, especially with a person who needs to sort out his life and priorities. Nevertheless I feel they could help each other, and in fact need each other to do that. At the end of the first viewing I told myself that the door for future possibilities has been left open. It would make an interesting sequel, how that might come about. The feeling of melancholy is crucial to the ending, and gives the film a special poignancy, particularly at a time in cinema and the arts where there is pressure and demand for resolutions and happy endings. This film does provide a happy ending, but just not the one an audience might choose. Each man is changed and both decide to make positive steps for their futures. The young man goes back home to deal with the family that rejected him. The older man finally does reach the Grand Canyon.

I notice and pay tribute to the considerable psychological subtlety at play. The theme of the film is love, and how to deal with an affair that ended with a death, and how to move on from that experience. The film observes with delicacy how the current relationship, for all its pretence and material basis, between a rent boy and an older man unable to deal with a tragic past, develops into something more real than the one which ended so badly. The insight is that in the first relationship a flaky young man dependent on hard drugs cannot enter fully into a relationship with a partner who then suffers guilt as well as inconsolable grief at what he considers a failure. It is this inability to 'fix' him that haunts the older man who then tries to recreate that relationship to correct mistakes. It is a venture doomed to failure time after time because he is asking the impossible. Luckily he finds a young man who does understand, and who opens up to him. This makes the film so moving. Both men in some way do find what they want in each other. They end in harmony, sexually and emotionally. Then when the final dawn comes the older man goes his way alone but not rudely. He leaves the young man a gift. Both were lucky to find each other.

RIDE THE STORM

The Church doesn't come out of the Danish priest drama series *Ride the Storm* well, but that's the point... the Church is seen to reflect society as a whole, including politics and the personal. The series is a reproof to the world's faith in war and its eagerness to engage in destruction, regardless of morality let alone any humanity. This resonates with me because it is the fundamental theme of what I paint especially the two series of paintings *Winter Journey* and *The Sleeping Soldier*, both on the website. The developed democracies now controlled by global corporate interests are regularly prepared to wage economically driven conflicts in other parts of the world. These cause perpetual havoc because of course wars

solve nothing, and only regenerate endlessly. Money is readily spent to wage war under the guise of being about defence. This is good for military businesses. Hardly if any money is given, let alone time and effort, to any other form of resolution to disputes. This tells me that governments have no interest in peace. That insight is not new: Rosa Luxembourg gave the first irrefutable political and economic analysis of the war machine, well over a hundred years ago. The immorality and the inhumanity of war is however another matter. *Ride the Storm* tackles it by focusing on a single event and family.

The central story is nasty but clear. A young priest who only has good intentions in his heart and wants to make the world a better place takes on the post of an army chaplain. He aims to bring God's comfort to soldiers when they need it. They are pawns in political games over which they have no control and are consequently put in harm's way. He arrogantly resists what he considers a superstitious request to bless with prayer a personnel carrier, as protection from IEDs. The unblessed vehicle is then blown up and he needs to rebuild his relationship with the surviving soldiers who now shun him. To help this process he agrees to become one of the 'men', and during an attack is given a gun and encouraged to join in the fight. The first person he shoots thinking her to be a terrorist carrying a bomb under her burqa turns out to be a civilian, a young mother who is crossing the road to escape the firing and protect her son.

At one stroke the drama pinpoints the immorality of what is known as 'stuff happens' and 'collateral damage'. Returning home a broken man, his wife can't cope with his mood swings. He resists psychiatric treatment thinking that religion will heal him. His priest father forces him to keep quiet about the killing, and to let God do the forgiving. The son then goes steadily madder, becomes ever more disruptive (the performance gets right under the skin of the character). In a particularly poignant episode he tries to atone for the killing by protecting an illegal immigrant. The ending of the story is inevitable, and hauntingly done. The series

bears out Rosa Luxembourg's point about the war machine. We brush aside the slaughter of innocents and destruction of cities let alone the planet for a just cause, because we the so-called liberal democracies are always right. It is a necessary sacrifice (so long as the sacrifice is born by others).

The drama makes the point about the value of all lives in a personal visceral manner.

Immediately after the killing a soldier tells the priest, traumatised by what he has done, that he shouldn't be upset or take it too seriously. It had been an understandable mistake. Stuff happens after all in war. The priest father is too rigid in his religious belief to understand the extent of the trauma suffered by his son, who as a decent human being can't come to terms with what he has done. From the invaders' point of view the tens of thousands who were killed in the Iraq War mattered so much less than the hundreds of the defenders of liberal democracy shot or blown up. We don't even have a precise record of the numbers of enemy casualties. In another Middle East conflict one Israeli life is considered worth more than a thousand Palestinian lives.

Ride the Storm covers other interesting matters, specifically relationships which are mostly dysfunctional in a way that is normal today – communication bad at home let alone everywhere else in the world. The main relationship of the drama is between two brothers and their father – the women are shunted to the sidelines, a familiar scenario in this still fundamentally patriarchal world order. There is the one bonus that two of the women at least are allowed a loving relationship; and one that has a future! The black sheep son, considered a failure, cheat and serial womaniser, is as conflicted and messed up as most of us. He turns out to be more sorted than his brother, the ostensible successful good priest who then goes spectacularly off the rails.

There is no doubt that the series had this in mind. Personalising the narrative universalises it.

SAPPHIRE

Some films are ahead of their time, which is the case with this relatively formulaic police procedural about a murdered woman. Made in the late 50s within the decade after the Windrush immigration *Sapphire* focuses a penetrating gaze at virulent racism in the UK. Like *Victim*, another influential film about bigotry made around the same time, the film is determined to understand and to change attitudes. *Victim* helped change the law.

Both are truthful and depict people as they are and speak without taking note of political correctness. In those days endemic racism was a toxic and brutal fact of everyday life, violent and oppressive. It made life impossibly hard for black people, but it also destroyed racist families, which is a major theme of *Sapphire*.

What the film shows through its wide variety of black characters, from the sweet-natured nurses through those just trying to survive daily life, to the criminals taking advantage of their situation in a black economy, is the way that prejudice creates the stereotypes. They are made real as in a disturbing racist scene, one of many, when the group of black criminals laugh like demented savages at the stupidity of the cops. The direction and acting together make this point in a way that cannot be misconstrued. Racism forces victims to reflect the stereotypes. The hypocritical racism that pretends not to be is equally disturbing. Yvonne Mitchell gives an electrifying performance as the main character in this vicious story, showing how racism is a poison that destroys both perpetrator and victim. Most of the time she is a sweet-natured mother, seeming to be in control of events, but gradually the quiescent volcano of her anger, disappointment with life and hatred builds to destructive eruption. This is what makes the film so disturbing. It shows racism disguised as normality. Not only black people are

oppressed and discriminated against, taking the blame for everything, but the oppressors who lead seemingly decent lives nurture a bigotry that grows even more resentful when denied

The tone and language of the film would never be allowed now, which is a pity, because racism is still flourishing, in the police force just as it was back then in the 1950s. Political correctness has its purpose in educating people not to be bigoted, to think before they speak. Unfortunately it pushes the incorrectness under the surface. It has not been dealt with. It does not go away. In fact it seethes beneath the polite cold exterior, waiting to erupt as during the Brexit Referendum, and explosively in the US, and now legitimized as subject for discussion and personal choice rather than as a crime. Homophobia and anti-Semitism are now generally considered to be intolerable attitudes, but xenophobia persists thinly disguised as: 'I don't hate foreigners: I just don't want them living here, they should go home to where they came from.' *Sapphire* is a breath of fresh air because people in the 1950s were not afraid to say exactly what they felt and thought. The film shows that honesty allows racism to be challenged head on, which *Sapphire* does with considerable success. The fact that the victim is no saint gives the story extra pungency. She was a black woman realizing she could pass for white, and this makes her behave like the housemaid's daughter in Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life*, a masterpiece on a similar theme which eschews a crime narrative but examines subversively the effects of racism on all sides. However *Sapphire* stands on its own as a script which deals with every aspect of the subject.

Sapphire ends with the brother of the victim, a black doctor who shames all the others with his nobility, sensitivity and understanding. It is of course a patronising stereotype, rather like Sidney Poitier in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, but a necessary one at the time, to show that the people we hate and fear most are frequently better than we are. In Poitier's case to ridiculous effect, because what woman in her right mind wouldn't want to marry such masculine perfection?

SEAT IN SHADOW SNAILS IN THE RAIN

Seat in Shadow is another example of an excellent independent art-house film that disappears under the radar. The mixture of desire, Jungian psychology and art is heady stuff, but the story is simple, and poignant. The direction is sharp, focusing on a therapy session and ending brusquely once the aim has been achieved. All the performances are excellent. However it is the old therapist who carries the film. The actor David Sillars wrote the screenplay and is also an artist as well as a Jungian analyst, so he brings many aspects of his creative life into the film. He is the main reason to see what is basically the story of a therapy session that breaks boundaries to healing effect.

Some films like *Pride* work on every level, as entertainment, as eye-opener, as political and social commentary. Other films are undermined by an underlying moralising which closes doors. *Pride* celebrates a coming together of two communities that could not be more different, and because the story is true, the unlikely ending represents a triumph that would be deemed unbelievable in a piece of fiction. That film proves the point that truth can be stranger than fiction.

Snails in the Rain resonates. Many closeted gay men would recognize the dilemma of the young man about to marry his beautiful fiancée and have a family but who is disturbed by memories of desire for a man.

This is basically the story of a man who makes the effort demanded by his upbringing to suppress his desire, get married and have a family. This reflects the Freudian teaching that to be gay is a phase that many men go through, and must grow out of in order to be mature. To be gay in this teaching is not considered to be a sickness or evil but certainly an immaturity that becomes a sickness if it persists. Liberals consider experimenting with homosexuality to

be a passing stage in sexual development. Those who do not grow out of it are considered defective and weak.

This film reminds me of my upbringing at a time when to be gay was illegal and therefore I did all I could to change my nature. *Snails in the Rain* is a tale about someone who manages that transition from immature gay emotion to grown up marriage, family and responsibility.

While being easy on the eye and pandering to traditional conservative morality, it does subversively suggest ambiguity. The man is disturbed by unresolved sexual feelings and shuts the door firmly on his desires, sometimes with unpleasant consequences. Raping his fiancée in a fit of frustration at being unable to decide his sexual orientation prompts a gentle rebuke from the poor woman who only asks him not to do it again because 'it hurt'. Hm. The final scene of the film creates a lyrical image of the man with his children and pregnant wife looking at the eponymous snails in the rain, but at the last moment he lifts his face to the camera with an expression of sadness that hints at the price he is paying for suppressing his desire. It suggests future problems. There should be a film exploring that future.

There are two unacknowledged victims in this story. Not the main man, acted by a professional model whose cool touch-me-not beauty disengages him from the world. Attitude creates distance and the sense of being unattainable. You can look, but on no account come close. Models know their beauty attracts and learn the skill to deal with any invasion of their space.

In *Snails in the Rain* the fiancée is the victim who suffers most. Apart from being raped by the man she loves, she also has to deal with his sexual confusion. She summons the courage to challenge her rival and tell him to lay off her man. She wins the battle but as to the war, there is an uncertain future. She is the one to be pitied. The rape should have alerted her to the danger, but her love for him blinds her to the possibility that it could happen again. This

makes her a weak protagonist in the film. This is a shame. The story could have been told from her perspective to better effect.

The other victim is the teacher creepily obsessed with the handsome unattainable pupil, stalking him and writing self-pitying letters. It is hard to believe that the beautiful man, surely used to being endlessly admired, would not have thrown them away immediately. If he had truly loved his fiancée he might also have shown them to her, laughed and then shredded them. The letters are however central to the film's narrative. They raise ghosts from the young man's past when he felt desire for a fellow soldier, a desire of which he is ashamed. He resisted it then and this gives him courage to resist again.

The teacher is an unsympathetic man despite the tragedy of his obsession. If a film were to focus on the teacher, his story would need to be expanded so we understand more the particularly self-destructive nature of obsession.

Snails in the Rain manipulates the narrative so it ultimately arrives at the moral that a real man should leave behind adolescent desires, ignore temptation, get married and have a family. Gay men, like the obsessing teacher, who have not 'grown up', are expected to suffer. The way the film is structured, implies that such people deserve no sympathy.

Incidentally the film is based on a story by a Serb writer, which calls to mind the quite different and bracingly honest account of what it was like to be gay in the Balkans before and during the Bosnia War. *Serbian Diaries* by another quite different Serb writer Boris L Davidovich is an entertaining and no-holds-barred account of the sexual adventures of another gay teacher, but one who is openly gay. It describes with sometimes shocking candour the shame of dangerous encounters with men not sure of their sexuality, like the model in *Snails in the Rain*. Boris Davidovich's book includes a political perspective that has no part in the film. The book reflects on war and specifically atrocities, making connections

with homophobic culture. To be fair, the film's intention is to focus on the paranoia of the main character, so everything else, including his fiancée, friends and likely stalkers, are only incidental to his story. The book by Boris Davidovic is a self-critical diary, with frequent exhortations to himself to stop wasting time cruising men in dangerous places. The political and social dimensions help him reach some kind of understanding of his life situation.

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Ben Gielowski offers a different interpretation of the film, which may well be closer to the aim of the director, though unfortunately for me the moralistic conclusion cancels out any sense of the main character's tragic predicament: someone fighting his desires, and who by succumbing to demands of marriage and family has to pay a high price emotionally. Despite the actor's striking beauty it is hard to sympathise with his dilemma.

SODOM THE YEAR I LOST MY MIND

These chamber pieces are the kind of films deserving of serious consideration that disappear too quickly. They are the reason I write these pieces.

They are related in a number of ways. Both focus on the relationship between a confused younger man coming to terms with his sexuality and an older man, who turns out to be carrying baggage coming from similar experiences of coming to terms with being gay.

Both films deliberately flirt with genre, in this case horror, in order to subvert expectation and make their point. In the days of persecution and fear stories like this generally ended bloodily. Both hint at what used to be called 'homosexual panic' which describes a situation where a man engages in sex and then kills his partner in an uncontrollable fit of homophobic rage and shame. This condition gave courts the excuse to exonerate murderers, claiming these

were innocent victims wickedly seduced into unwanted sex. Violence was a justified response. The young men in both these films are experiencing the same feelings of shame while allowing them to be seduced into sex they both want.

In *Sodom* the young man has a number of opportunities to push his seducer off a balcony, and is filmed a number of times when we might expect him to do this. He doesn't, and his feelings of desire and shame are allowed to develop. The ending is sad but not violent, and there is at least the hope that he might one day accept himself. Both are victims. Neither are victims. It is a truthful depiction of what it means to be gay today, and how despite new freedoms and possibilities, it is still hard to come to terms with our sexuality.

In *The Year I Lost My Mind*, the young man hides his shame and fear behind frightening masks, some of them animal. This suggests a horror film trope in which someone will be hurt. The narrative takes this theme to a seemingly violent conclusion only to subvert it to significant effect. I guessed the surprise resolution only half a second before it came, and will not give a spoiler, because this moment is one of the main purposes of the film. Again, despite a downbeat ending, there is hope. The young man conquers his fears and dispenses with masks. The journey towards self acceptance is a long slow one, and neither film offers a manipulated sentimental happy ending. This might be a reason for their undeserved disappearance under the radar, because audiences want and demand neat resolution.

Both films have an older protagonist who is handsome and sexy, fit and seemingly clever and assured, but turns out to be unsure, lonely with a background of disappointment in relationships. The young men are similar in their gaucheness although Pip Brignall is more beautiful than his less fit counterpart in *The Year I Lost My Head*.

Both films deal with addiction to promiscuity. The older men are aware of the dangers, not just physically and sexually, but also emotionally, which is why they respond positively to

the confused younger men, recognizing themselves and understanding their feelings, prepared to reach out, not just out of sympathy, but out of a desire for a relationship they also want and need. The films are honest and truthful enough to show these matters are complicated and prone to failure, but necessary for going forward and keeping hope for resolution alive.

There are so many fine points of acting, direction and narrative in both films. Pip Brignall manages to express every nuance of emotion from desire to shame and fear. He cannot accept himself. There is a lovely moment when he slides down onto the bathroom floor and begins to cry, muttering to himself: 'what is wrong with me?!' There are some acute observations in both films about gay manners in the cruising areas and saunas, the brutal way men reject each other, and then the intensity of sexual encounters between strangers who silently agree on the rule of no emotional commitment. The young man in *The Year I Lost My Mind* is constantly rejected in these places because he does not know and follow this rule. This used to be like this. We are seen as needy and therefore unsexy. So, after bad encounters, chases and fights, much fear and loathing, when the older and younger men at last kiss, they comment on how well they do it, because this is what they miss and really want. At that moment the young man has no more need of his masks and the older man realizes that his gym-toned body, commitment-phobia, immaculate grooming and aloofness are also masks.

Sodom has no weaknesses at all, the long stretches of slow conversation and silences broken by mysterious snatches of memory, which require patience and second viewings to understand, are held together by insightful and poignant performances by the two actors, who have the necessary chemistry to bring credibility to this ambiguous encounter. We understand why the young man returns. The older man certainly has appeal, physically and mentally.

With the other film I had initial doubts about the narrative's credibility, especially those nerve-wracking scenes when the young man, a burglar's assistant, breaks into the older man's

house and almost touches him as he lies sleeping, his naked body vulnerable to anything. This stalker element is disturbing and threatens to unbalance the film. But by the end of the film such doubts evaporate. This is after all a fairytale which stretches credulity to help us understand human nature. The point is made well in the scene where even though he has been sexually rejected, the masked young man protects his idol from a homophobic attack, and then leaves, unwilling to reveal himself. This narrative is a kind of daydream, one which I used to have in my own young years, trying to find a way to express my love and desire for someone who has no knowledge or interest in my existence: how do I set about attracting him? I made the same silly mistakes and behaved badly, even descending to being a stalker. I didn't resort to masks, but behaved unnaturally, thinking this might make me acceptable. The masks are not there to terrify, but to hide who I really am. Because the film is seen entirely from the point of view of the stalker, we are forced to understand him. There is a touching scene where a friend comes to take him on another burglary expedition, and sees the young man crouching half hidden in a cupboard. His sweet young face looks up silently with appeal for sympathy. The burglary theme is another aspect of hiding behind a mask: the ability to sneak into someone else's space without showing the real self.

Both films are a wonderful example of the growing maturity of gay culture, understanding the complexities of human relationships without judgement or sentimentality.

Two points: when I say 'older' man, he is of course not old at all, not like me. He is just a few years older than the younger man, at most ten or fifteen years. The films poke gentle fun at ageism, which is unfortunately still a negative aspect of gay culture.

I learnt an interesting fact about gay marriage from *The Year I Lost My Mind*. The first marriage contracts between men happened centuries ago in the Late Middle Ages among pirates. I have always imagined that pirates might have formed gay communities, young

outlaws spending long months at sea away from the company of women and who therefore must have engaged in sexual relationships with each other. Gays may have gone to sea with this purpose in mind, away from the prying noses of the law and public opinion. It turns out I am right about this, but had no idea that such relationships were actually sanctioned and legitimized in signed sealed documents on board pirate ships, in order to honour and protect partnerships between men.

More of these films please. They raise matters I hope future directors will explore further, about the nature of gay relationships, and how to get rid of stigmas which discourage and impede personal development. Gay relationships are thankfully celebrated now, but that doesn't mean danger of discrimination and attack is over. Gays are still persecuted, and new right wing movements threaten human rights that took years of pain and struggle to achieve. Problems persist even in the most advanced liberal societies, and as the older men in both films admit: gays still feel pressured to behave in ways acceptable to society as a whole, putting on masks. Removing them remains a painful process.

SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL

Structured like a classical French drama, taking place in a single night in the same city but within that space moving between several locations from the streets to a pub to a cramped bedsit to a sculptor's messy studio to a rich man's palatial home, this wonderful film is a fearlessly honest exploration of love and sex. A first viewing knocks out with its frank depiction of the rawness of passionate encounters and conflicts. A second viewing reveals the film's substance. The tightness and formality of its structure, as in a Racine tragedy, both lends distance from the drama and enhances it. A journey is made in that single night from confusion and despair to resolution and hope.

I congratulate the director and also the actors all of whom display a stunning range with an infinite variety of small gestures and glances. The poet is an especially fine characterization. It's rare to find an actor prepared to be so vulnerable on screen. The director saw that quality in the actor during a performance he gave of *Hamlet* and invited him to do the film. That figures.

There is intensity of emotion and without resorting to pornography the unflinching depiction of intense physical desire.

The story hinges on the chance encounter between a poet and an aspiring actor. Each is in emotional crisis. The poet is reeling from the breakup of a relationship with a straight man and suffers writer's block. The actor frets about a relationship in which he feels used and neglected. His lover happens to be a famous sculptor. The actor is jealous of the sculptor's devotion to his work and is afraid that once the current piece is finished he will be thrown out. The deus ex machina is a lonely elderly talent scout who obsessively cruises the night streets in a limousine, looking for young men who remind him of his partner killed in the Vietnam War.

The poet cruises the streets and pubs picking up and engaging in intensely passionate sex with any man attracted to him, but is then hurt when immediately after climax these lovers reject and leave him. The actor attempts to distance himself from what he feels is an abusive relationship by also allowing himself to be picked up, which considering his looks happens only too easily. For these pick-ups the sex was an urge that needed satisfying and nothing more. The poet sinks into despair and frustration, blaming himself. After a row with his final pick up of the film who turns out to be the actor, he is forced to deal with the reason for his neediness. The moment he comes to terms with himself, inspiration for his next poem strikes. Meanwhile the actor allows himself to be seduced by the old man but instead of sex the old

man talks of his experience of life and then falls asleep exhausted. The younger man returns to his sculptor lover and accepts the compromises required in every love relationship.

The poet not only finds resolution in composing a poem that powerfully describes his experience of that crazy night but is now open to a new relationship with a young Latino who has been following him around, and was the one pick-up he didn't take home for sex. The poet gently discourages anything sexual, but when the Latino insists on at least holding him in his arms, the poet sighs with relief: it was all he ever wanted.

What makes this film special is its fearlessness about emotion. At last gays are liberated into expressing feelings openly, uninhibitedly and embarrassingly without looking out of the corner of their eyes for fear of disapproval.

The extras on the DVD, a major reason why I prefer watching films at home rather than in a cinema, include a delightful conversation between the two main actors, their spirited comments on making the film and the evident affection between them,. The intelligent attractive actor who plays the poet grasps the film's meaning and purpose. It is no surprise his character has no difficulty picking up handsome young men. It is also credible that his straight former lover should have once been passionate about him. His co-star the actor is irresistible with warm expressive eyes and a gleaming smile that covers his whole face. The eyes glow with affection but also blaze with anger. When the sculptor talks about the young man's beauty while touching and stroking his face we can only agree.

The story is set in the 1980s, a time before internet and grindr, so people mostly met in pubs or in passing on the streets, exchanging brief glances and telling movements of the head. The film therefore has nostalgia value for me and those of my generation. In fact there was nothing more encouraging and affirming than those moments when eyes met with an electric charge; all the more so when faces turned back after passing to acknowledge connection.

Such split-second encounters rarely led to anything, but boosted self worth and confidence, especially when the glances were accompanied by an appreciative exclamation.

Art is another thread running through this film. The three main characters are artists, and each of them is in crisis because of the conflict in life between love and the need to create. The way emotions, imagination and creativity interact adds considerable substance to a theme that could otherwise be focused only on relationships and desire. As the poet's story shows, all these are catalysts for the imagination to find expression.

SOMETHING MUST BREAK

Sebastian wants to be Elie. The desired boyfriend is not gay and can't handle the sexual confusion, although he falls in love with him/her.

This is the basic plot of a film that is about relationships and empowerment of those who are different, who don't fit into social constructs and who bravely live their truth, regardless of the pain and problems.

The acting by a transgender woman in the main part and the directing by a woman gives this film authenticity, not interpreted by a representative of 'normal' society looking with curiosity at some kind of anomaly of nature. This could be autobiography in its understanding of the messy basics of life, the awkward sex, self-harm, willingness to be abused by men, courage, drugs, thieving, shocking behaviour and overriding need for love and affection with a perfect partner for life. The man is credible too, confused, his discomfort growing the deeper he falls in love with the beautiful Sebastian/Elie. The worse the man behaves the stronger Sebastian/Elie becomes. She knows who she is, and is not going to disfigure her body to satisfy his wish that she removes her penis to create a pussy for him to fuck. As we see,

Sebastian Elie has a beautiful body, the one she was born with. Other transgender people have changed their bodies, but Sebastian/Elie is happy with hers... and by the end of the film so are we.

The film is a welcome change from the prurient and National Geographic perspective that mars most films dealing with the subject, rather like those dramas in the not so distant past depicting gays as at best tragic figures, most of the time despicable and even evil (Bond films like to portray villains as gay). Sebastian/Elie is a whole person, coming to terms not just with herself, but with social attitudes around who she wants to be, specifically from her lover who can't accept her for that.

STONEWALL

This splendid film received less than enthusiastic judgement from critics who questioned the imposition of a fictional character on real events. They pointed to an existing documentary which gives an excellent analysis of this seminal moment in the fight for gay acceptance. However it is through a fictionalised personal narrative that an event can be understood emotionally as well as politically in its social context. The documentary focuses on the exceptionally brave men who helped change attitudes to gays, from shadowy despised victims to people deserving of rights. The same film-critics were grudging in their appreciation of *Pride*, a now classic film covering another seminal event of UK gay history that changed attitudes. It could be that these critics consider films on gay subjects too niche for consideration, which is why I am putting together this book. These films which are made with commitment, technical skill, artistry, and containing first-rate performances deserve recognition and must not be allowed to disappear under the radar.

I would have appreciated subtitles in *Stonewall*. The banter between the street kids is so garbled that most of it could be Mandarin.

What comes across is a stark reminder of how hard life used to be for gay people, how much they were mistreated and abused, by family, by society, particularly the police, and by friends. It beggars belief that this used to be the bitterly unjust and literally bloody state of affairs, and as the film points out in the final credits, still exists in many countries round the world. This is the point of the central fictional narrative about a small town boy from the mid-West who runs away from hatred and violent rejection to make a new home in the growing gay community around Christopher Street in New York. He is the one given that defining moment of the film which enraged the critics because it took honour away from the street kids who in fact started the riot and changed history. In the film he is the person who throws the first brick: a symbolic gesture which marks the moment when a person we can all identify with realizes that this is the only way to express his frustration, anger and sense of worth as an individual who has every right to exist and be valued. Like the other street kids he has had enough of being pushed around, beaten up and hated for who he is. He refuses to take any more violence from those who despise him. His rage and defiance expresses that of the whole gay community, not only the street kids, but all those who try to fit in with society, who disguise their true selves or make inhibiting and destructive adjustments to their lives. The street kids who were at the centre of the riot had nothing to lose. This character spoke also for those who had everything to lose. When his family reject him he also has to fight them for the right to study and create a career and life for himself.

His return home to deal with unfinished business marks the character as having unusual courage. But as the facts show, these people were indeed unusually brave. Having lived through those times I can vouch for that.

STRAPPED

This is a curious film: a serious, often touching and beautiful dream-like sentimental education. The weakness is the main character, an actor who is made to carry too much on his not-quite-capable, though enthusiastic shoulders. In the interview the actor makes much of the fact that he is straight, but that he enjoyed the challenge of playing the part. Well, it is a meaty role for any aspiring actor, gay or straight. But he is not entirely convincing. In my experience good escorts, not the amateur financially needy rent-boys who resent their work but professionals who take pride in their work, look after themselves better than this young man. Professional escorts take more care of their physique. So when all the men he meets go weak at the knees, it is not quite believable. When they tell him how beautiful he is, it is not meant ironically.

However once I accepted this weakness, the film has a lot to say, beautifully and poetically too. The central conceit of a young man mysteriously unable to get out of an apartment block, despite a flickering EXIT sign, is effective. He is trapped in a way of life, giving pleasure, being an 'agent of desire' as he puts it, to men ready to pay him. The film opens touchingly with a shy middle-aged Russian client. However after a satisfying encounter, in which the boy fucks the man, on the way out the boy as well as taking the money steals an ornament, a pretty silver griffin. The theft may explain why he is punished by being unable to leave the apartment block, and this becomes clear at the end. After a face off with a flamboyant camp friend from a hedonist past, the escort is beaten up by a straight man indulging in a moment of homosexual panic. The film then delves deeper with a touching sequence: a much older man, cultured and kindly washes his wounds and gives him lessons in life and relationships. The old man fucks the boy who appreciates a man with experience, who knows what he

wants and how to do it. Even though the man falls asleep afterwards the boy does not commit a theft, and moves a vase of flowers within the old man's sight line when he wakes, a gesture of appreciation, and maybe even affection. The boy is then ready for love which he finds in his final meeting with a man who only wants to be kissed and held. This releases the escort's own needs and desires which had so far only been manipulated to please clients. At last he is able to open himself to share love. He gives the silver griffin to the man who makes no demands on him and offers his home and heart. Suddenly the long dark night of the soul in the labyrinthine maze of the hotel is flooded with daylight and the escort is able to leave. However he decides to stay and move in with his last client, a happy ending which is not quite credible. It is however a good example of a film which is a labour of love on the part of all involved, and which disappears too quickly under the critical radar.

THE BARBER OF SIBERIA

The title gives no indication either of this film's epic scope or the painfully messy relationship at its heart. It can be seen as a response to David Lean's *Dr Zhivago*, a British take on a Russian novel. Though the events take place at a different historical period, politics and abusive relationships also trigger the narrative with the added spice of an international culture clash.

The film is bound tightly together by the director Mikhailkov, who made *Unfinished Piece for a Player Piano*, a marvellous adaptation of Chekhov's early play that I would like to write about separately. With the authority of a tyrannical tsar the director, who once did indeed challenge Putin for the Presidency of Russia, exerts iron control over the epic so it doesn't sprawl and draws performances of exceptional intensity from all the actors, even the minor ones. I can imagine him driving them like cattle through take after take, and yelling at them:

‘More! More!’ The American Julia Ormond as Jane, the anti-heroine, is the lynchpin of the story. I must chase up her other films, but my feeling is that this one presented her with an opportunity that rarely comes any actor’s way, and she seized it with all the enthusiasm of someone ravenous and grateful for a meaty role.

A single minded and ambitious inventor/entrepreneur performed by Richard Harris roars like an angry bear, excessive over-acting that may have been encouraged by the director. He brings a logging machine to Russia which he has christened the Barber of Siberia. However he needs help in the shape of diplomacy by seduction from a beautiful relative to ensure a patent for its use. She may be his niece, though their relationships is not clear. The arrival of this unscrupulous charming woman triggers the narrative. With echoes of Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* and dollops of Gogol at his most comically grotesque, the ensuing culture clash reveals the nature of pre-Revolution Russian society and culture, its folk traditions and social codes of conduct, especially in the military. Against a magnificent backdrop of landscape, churches, monasteries, cities and towns, the emotional heart of the story lies in the relationship between Jane the American woman and Andrei, a young impressionable cadet she encounters on her journey to Moscow (*Anna Karenina* with a massive shot of *War and Peace*). Business is her ethical compass, trumping emotion. Honour is the moral compass of the young man. Andrei’s candour challenges Jane. Falling in love however jeopardizes her mission. Jane’s character does not radically change, despite the life-changing consequence of the few moments of unrestrained passion between the two of them: a baby which he never gets to know about. While protecting her honour he pleads guilty to an attempt on the tsar’s life, when in fact he was meaning to attack a rival, and is sent to Siberia. She manipulates her return to Russia many years later, even marrying the entrepreneur/inventor, to find the father of her son, the man she loves and lost.

In a matching skilled performance (Andrei has to sing, dance and sword fight) by Oleg Menshikov (must chase up his other films) the character of the cadet develops in a major way. The final shot of his wounded face, etched with suffering, desperate survival and grit indicates the extent of his journey from spirited and impulsive youth to a tragic figure destined never to be free.

This film has several significant as well as incidental dimensions. The son is also acted by Menshikov, but now an American cadet who is similarly bound by rules of honour. He is also stubborn and prepared for self-sacrifice like his father Andrei. *The Mozart of Figaro* is a connection between both men. Watch the film and you will see why. There is the melancholy realization, sharpened by recent memories of the Cold War (the film made in the years immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union) that these two related soldiers could one day be fighting and killing each other.

The 'barber' title turns out to have several other connotations, in that the Russian cadet is also a singer specializing in the role of Figaro, the barber in both Rossini's and Mozart's opera. The final shot of his injured eye peering out of a wildly hirsute face, like some kind of Robinson Crusoe, is a far cry from his shaved and clear-complexioned younger self: the 'barber' a distant memory.

The log cutting machine is a reference to a seminal Russian drama, *The Cherry Orchard*, which ends with the invasion of the new, the inevitable and necessary destruction of both the orchard and an old way of life, traditional, nostalgia and class-ridden.

For all the ferocity of the director's dictatorial grip on narrative and performance, and the film's epic tragic sweep there is enough humour for it to be advertised as a 'comedy'.

Mikhailkov appears as the tsar in a slightly satirical manner. After all, Chekhov described his plays as comedies by the playwright himself, despite the tragedies that motivate them. The

comedy in the film is of the droll grotesque kind favoured by Gogol, who used blistering satire to attack injustices in Russian society. The laughter is real but masks a sense of dread. This extreme juxtaposition of comedy and tragedy is typically Russian, although it can be found in Shakespeare, an influence many writers from Pushkin onward readily acknowledged. In the manner of Dostoevsky the film pushes at boundaries, especially in the love scene which starts as a manipulative seduction and ends on the floor in an ungainly tangle of clothes and limbs. There is then a startling confession of childhood abuse, a trauma that explains Jane's character. The name Jane may also have connotations: 'Me Tarzan, you Jane', implying that she comes from a colonising, invading and venal Western background, pairing with a man of nature.

That last sentence didn't need to be in parentheses as I originally wrote it, because the final shot in the film of the epic sweep of the pristine Russian forest states clearly that this is a natural and global treasure that should not be invaded and cut down by a Barber of Siberia, a grotesque and wastefully destructive machine.

There are so many details that are not insignificant but best left to be enjoyed without any comment from me. Just to say, look out for Dunyasha, the family maid who is hopelessly in love with Andrei, and follows him to Siberia where she is prepared to protect him with violence, a character also straight out of a Dostoevsky novel. Also note how the scene at the station where Andrei's military academy friends watch him being taken away in a chain gang is given overwhelming emotional heft as they express their grief uncontrollably, clinging to each other, sobbing and screaming. One too easily forgets the seriousness of such a punishment which was then a protracted death sentence.

The film is as relevant now as ever, because it describes the Russian character not only with precision but specifically for a Western audience.

THE GOLDEN DREAM

People have criticised as boring this remarkable film about child migrants fleeing Central American poverty to the US. That's the trouble of expecting cinema to be just entertainment and is judged on technical grounds following rules of snappy narrative.

This film deliberately refuses to follow those rules. It examines quite simply what it is like from the underdog's point of view to be treated as vermin, and ultimately dispensable. Long moments of waiting and travelling are punctuated by moments of extreme brutality.

The main characters are children which makes their story even more intolerably painful and sobering. Only the most ruthless one survives, having enough rage and ambition to fuel his impossible dangerous journey. One turns back before the going gets tougher. The girl is of course discovered despite her disguise, and her fate being only hinted at makes it even more horrific: rape for sure, and probably murder. The ostensibly most skilful one, at the end of this dangerous journey, just as we thought he would be safe, is shot stone dead by a sniper border vigilante.

The film provides no commentary or even a point of view. The journey and its perils are shown with no appeal to the audience.

The film voices the outrage of Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, also about poor economic migrants fleeing to a better life that is also a golden dream, but turns out to be a nightmare of exploitation and barbarism.

Just as that book filled my teenage self with fury at the human condition in which the haves brutally oppress the have-nots, so this film makes me desperate about a world which is still mired in corruption, injustice and plain cruelty. However the fact that the book and the film exist, and more than that are highly prized, gives hope. In the long run there has to be change.

THE HAPPY PRINCE

Like *God's Own Country* this is a film that will be well received for a short while, and be even recommended for awards but then disappear under the radar when both deserve better. Critics while rightly praising Rupert Everett's performance have unjustly denigrated his work as director. I consider the direction to be as exceptionally fine as his performance.

Not only are they powerful superbly made films with significant subjects, but both took years to make: effort and commitment that demand more respect than brief positive attention and dismissive remarks.

The Happy Prince, a major project for the actor Rupert Everett, focuses on the last years of Oscar Wilde, after he is released from jail. He leaves England and leads an increasingly poverty-stricken life mainly there and finally in Italy. Previous films about Wilde have skated over this period. Rupert Everett in a work of devotion has decided to concentrate on this painful time of physical, spiritual, emotional breakdown, sickness and death. He directs and gives a performance of the disgraced writer which supersedes all others, including the excellent Stephen Fry, because he is prepared to create a portrait, warts and all, that depicts the larger-than-life character in all his diversity, brilliance, humanity, wisdom, generosity and contrariness. Fry and others before him miss the contrariness. Oscar Wilde saw through the moral bankruptcy of an intolerant, unjust and unequal world, His social and political insights injected potent venom into his humour. Even as a teenager he startled a friend he had invited to one of his mother's soirees by announcing they had founded a Society for the Suppression of Virtue. Everything he wrote, even and especially at his wittiest, eviscerated society and its 'norms'.

I've been a fan of Rupert Everett from the moment I saw his charismatic debut performance in *Another Country*. I fell in love with him because of his energy, beauty and effortless

sexiness. Apparently he worked for a while as a rent boy and I'd certainly have booked him. He resembles Wilde in character, brilliant, ebullient, witty and charming, but not in looks. Stephen Fry is closer. Rupert Everett is too handsome, even in middle-age. He has to make himself ugly for the film. With not a trace of narcissism he succeeds, and suggests in the burning intensity of his gaze why younger men might be drawn to a man with a far from attractive physique. Rupert Everett brings that off to moving effect: a class performance which deserves every award going.

The story is told with skill and by any measure the film is an excellent one. What makes it great is the inclusion of two probably fictional characters, les garçons, boys Oscar Wilde picks up in Paris. Especially the younger boy, wonderfully acted, opens the narrative to heights and depths that illuminate Wilde's character most poignantly. Of course there is a link between these two and Wilde's sons, which explains his devotion. He narrates to the garçons his own Hans Christian Andersen type story about a gilded statue and a swallow, *The Happy Prince*, in the same way as he used to at his sons' bedtime before the scandal that catastrophically broke off the family relationship. After the trial Wilde was forbidden to see his children ever again. Rupert Everett avoids sentimentality. The older garçon he pays for sex, 'purple moments', but in a way that does not exclude love or a relationship as indicated in the brief but telling moment when the boy kisses him tenderly on the lips. These boys desperately need money, and Wilde becomes their surrogate father, but one that they care for and love in return, cooking for him and keeping him company. One of the many sharp insights into this relationship is the way the younger boy is regularly demanding money at the same time as expressing affection. The day when they arrive to find Wilde on his deathbed the boy shouts: 'You owe us 10 francs!' then immediately jumps on the bed and in an excess of emotion hugs his 'daddy' That moment is for me one of the most heartbreaking in the film. Money and the lack of it are a perpetual thread of barbed wire winding its destructive way

through the narrative. Money can sustain but more often poisons all relationships, because it is used as a tool to control, possess and blackmail. However the relationship between Wilde and the garçons, despite the financial transaction, has purity and beauty in its honesty.

For all my admiration I had no idea Rupert Everett could create such a film, so perceptive and precisely constructed. I am not the only admirer. An impressive number of leading actors give striking performances in minor roles. Colin Firth is supportive and touching. Emily Watson makes an unforgettable impression with her powerfully expressive face in her brief appearances, especially as a ghost in a final confrontation with a devastated Wilde. In the role of a priest giving the last rites Tom Wilkinson injects pungent humour into a grotesquely awful situation. He is taken aback by Wilde's response to his whispered question as to when the writer lost his faith: 'at Clapham Junction.' 'Clapham Junction!?' the priest exclaims stepping back. It could be one of Wilde's witty lines, but we know, and the film reminds us, that Wilde is being deadly serious. On Clapham Junction, being spat at and mocked by a crowd catching sight of him as, manacled to police officers, he is being taken in full public view to Reading jail. This scene is also a subtle reference to Christ on his way to crucifixion when he also is being spat and jeered at by a crowd.

Rupert Everett's achievement in this film is to reveal so many layers of Oscar Wilde's personality, difficult as well as charming: a rounded human being with whom we can identify, whom we understand better, while depicting a society made toxic by venality, hypocrisy and corruption in which homophobia could thrive. The spectre of that society still haunts us with a threat of resurrection.

Rupert Everett displays so many skills like a Renaissance man, as an actor, a writer, a director, a pianist and also a singer. His performance of *The Boy in the Gallery* is a knock

out, and another major actor Beatrice Dalle, famed for taking on daringly provocative roles shines briefly in that scene as owner of the bar trying and managing to keep order.

In short, this film is a magnificent celebration of both Oscar Wilde and Rupert Everett, and like all great works of art, leaves indelible impressions.

Thank you Rupert.

By the way, to follow the last rendition of the music hall song with the whole of the last movement of Tchaikovsky's *Pathetique Symphony* as the credits roll is inspired and not in the least mawkish. Similarly the snatch of Wagner's *Parsifal* in the death scene touched on the spirituality which had always formed another part of his character: a counter-balance to his deceptively flippant wit.

THE LEATHER BOYS

This film made a searing impression on me when I first saw it in the 60s, because the character played by Dudley Sutton spoke directly to my experience growing up in that background as teenager trying to come to terms with my sexuality. The film still delivers a punch to the diaphragm, a brutally honest and above all sympathetic snapshot of working class life back then. For all the raucous behaviour not a single character is mocked or patronised. In fact seeing it again after half a century the film stands up better than ever and I can't recommend a viewing high enough. People need to know the truth about the recent past, attitudes to family, marriage and life expectations for people born and raised with limited horizons. The film goes well with Eribon's book *Return to Rheims*.

The film is made with a honed script and directed with as much vigour and pace as the lives and stories told. The nuances give depth and poignancy as in a Chekhov short story. The performances are outstanding across the board, pitch perfect down to the smallest roles. The observations of the minutiae enrich the film, as for instance the little girls at the wedding imitating the grown-ups doing

the twist, just one moment among many. Having been raised in a similar working class community I can vouch for the authenticity of the film, and admire its perspective on the most important aspects of such a life: attitudes to work (interestingly plenty of it... the people had that security at least, even if the ambition of the young wife is not to work), expectations of married life, and dealing with difference and disappointment. The atmosphere, the cramped houses, the Butlin's holiday camp and the rain sodden streets are exactly as I remember them; also the landscapes beyond when the 'boys' take their motorbikes on rides cross country, the roar and speed enjoying freedom and life beyond the prison of work and marriage.

The main theme running through the film is sexuality, and the lynchpin is Dudley Sutton as the gay who befriends the young married Colin Campbell. Dudley Sutton is simply fantastic. At a time when gay characters were traditionally portrayed as sinister, tormented or degenerate, he gives a rare rounded truthful portrait of a gay man who is sympathetic, attractive and a human being with flaws like everyone else, and all the more credible and lovable for them. This may well have been a first in British cinema. Carl Dreyer had already dealt positively with such a character in his silent film *Michael*, about a famous wealthy artist in a more liberal society which tolerated such 'bohemian' behaviour. *The Leather Boys* is specifically about working class attitudes, and to be gay, or 'queer' as the Rita Tushingham's spirited irrepressible wife spits contemptuously, is a perversion so awful that sensitive Colin Campbell's conflicted young husband cannot cope, and would rather sacrifice a precious friendship and live on his own than suffer such shame. For a young gay like me growing up at such a time of repression and fear Dudley Sutton's ebullient and also poignant performance gave hope and encouragement. The actor worked with Joe Orton, being the first to play the bisexual young man in *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, and although married with a family, he campaigned for gay rights at a time when to be gay was still a crime in the UK. He used to go swimming alongside me at the YMCA off Tottenham Court Road. I looked at him but couldn't summon the courage to introduce myself and tell him how much I loved his performance in *The Leather Boys*, how much it meant to me. Another actor friend later told me I should have done so, because actors appreciate hearing praise. Dudley Sutton became popular in TV drama series.

The final frames of the film paint a bleak landscape, a soul bleached of hope. Dudley Sutton's face is unforgettable, silently aware of what is a sad inevitability, as is the kindly half smile of Colin Campbell when he looks back briefly and not unkindly at the man he is leaving. The smile acknowledges love, the one word they haven't dared use throughout their relationship although it is as clear as day even though they never laid a hand on each other. The point is made at the end when two predatory gays in the pub prowl around the handsome young man, who suddenly understands with alarm the world he is entering, and Dudley Sutton looks on with fear and the dawning realization that this is now the end of a beautiful friendship. The parting is not about rejection. It is about the inability to cope with a situation foisted on these unfortunate young men by a judgmental homophobic society. As a friend observed after watching the film with me, 'thank God we don't live in those times anymore now!'

For me there is a faint hope at the end of the film. Nothing violent took place. As we watch Colin Campbell walk into the distance we hope for a better future for both men. That future did come, in no small part thanks to their performances and to Dudley Sutton's selfless activism.

TIGER ORANGE WERE THE WORLD MINE MEXICAN MEN

Tiger Orange, an intimate gem of a film, is another typical US sermon, but in this case no bad thing. A good sermon is a work of art too. The only trouble for me is that DVDs of these under the radar films from the US can't afford to include subtitles. Since the actors not only speak in Actors Studio voices, mumbling or ranting so rapidly as to be incomprehensible, but also in American dialect, most of the dialogue rushes by me like a torrent of Mandarin. This is a pity, because *Tiger Orange* is an exceptionally touching study not only of sibling relationships, but also of the conflict between proudly out urban and repressive redneck rural America. Fortunately this kind of film made with immense care, painterly and with a well

structured narrative obeys what is for me the most important rule of cinema that the film should be able to make its impression without words.

The committed and finely honed performances make the points as clearly as dancers in a ballet. The proudly out younger brother returns jobless and homeless after personal, emotional and professional failure in the city to his family, a brother who suppressed his gayness, looked after his father until he died, and then took over the family business, a hardware shop in a backwoods town. The clash of cultures normally leads to tragic resolution in this kind of story, something the desperate younger brother provokes in one aggressive confrontation after the other, as though he were tempting a violent fate. The film does not caricature the bigotry, but rather tries to understand it. The women in this provincial community are seen to be more tolerant and prepared to understand because everyone is part of a communal family, and they love even the difficult son. The redneck men, including the police officers who are forever incarcerating the wayward younger brother for public misdemeanours, are more fearful of something they can't and don't want to deal with. They respect the older brother for not challenging their bigotry. On the other hand the provocative but candid behaviour of the younger brother helps release the repressed emotion in the older. What could be a destructively combative relationship, domestically as well as publicly, becomes healing, creative and life-changing. The film dares to suggest even maybe for the community.

There are moments that subvert the cliché about the redneck mid-West. The father, who has been abandoned long ago by his wife for reasons I can't quite make out, perhaps deliberately unclear, raises his boys with a firm hand, especially when it comes to discouraging their gay tendencies. In flashbacks he inadvertently pits the brothers against each other, punishing the annoying bolder younger and favouring the obedient shyer older one. But in a final flashback of a touching Christmas burnt-turkey dinner, the father tells his boys to put brotherly

affection above all else, and to look after each other. Recalling this moment helps them bond in a lyrical encounter at the end of the film when together they finally scatter their father's ashes.

The film pays scrupulous attention to detail about community and relationships. The whole narrative and penetrating observation is set against a ravishing landscape of rural farmland, wild woods and hills. This is a place even the most rebellious outsider wants to reclaim as home, if only the people who make up the community could behave with humanity, tolerance for diversity and celebrate love.

Immediately after *Tiger Orange* I happened to watch *Were the World Mine*, a witty and tender riff on Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Nights Dream* set in a small mid American town. A bullied gay boy fantasises about putting Oberon's magic potion into everyone's eyes, so the whole town turns gay for a crazy day and night. The point is being delicately made about the need to humanize attitudes towards those who do not conform. For a short while all the bigots are forced to experience the intensity and pain of gay love. This changes them. The film contains many deliciously funny visuals, as for instance when the macho rugby players fall passionately in love with each other and express their feminine side in camp dance routines.

As with so many of these independent films that disappear under the radar *Tiger Orange* and *Were the World Mine* are made with the intensity of personal stories that matter and need to be told.

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The sexually liberated younger brother in *Tiger Orange* steals the film from everyone, not just because he attracts and annoys in equal measure, someone to love and at the same time

run away from, but for the all-stops out performance. The actor had experience in porn films which explains his refreshing lack of inhibition. But even this character subverts the cliché of an outrageous extrovert. Though apparently undomesticated and carelessly messy, he is nevertheless a good cook, an excellent salesman when he isn't offending customers by fearlessly attacking their bigotry, and ultimately thoughtful and caring. He is thoroughly politicized, understands the nature of bigotry and small town repression and is fearless in challenging it. The older brother is torn between love for his brother and a sense of duty to the community he serves and whose custom he doesn't want to lose. It is a subtle performance, a telling contrast with the extrovert brother. The elder brother's first schoolboy crush arrives on the scene, also returning from life in the city, a man so sweet and handsome that the older brother doesn't believe he has a chance. The younger brother in trying to help them get together almost wrecks the possibility, but there is thankfully a happy ending. The film refuses to give this familiar story a negative tragic twist. *Were the World Mine* uses magic and fantasy to bring about a positive resolution in which everyone finds love, tolerance and understanding. *Tiger Orange* leaves an open ending, but hinting that healing is possible: it is up to us to make it happen.

Then I watched *Mexican Men*, a series of shorts which celebrate male beauty, tenderness and love in various situations. Though the relationships are uninhibited there is a constant awareness of a hostile world outside. Love challenges and overcomes the threat, even when violence and death threaten. In *Atmosfera*, the most sophisticated and haunting of the series, the threat is of a plague, but the two beautiful men and the one woman throw caution to the winds and embrace fate while expressing their love for each other. Love is stronger than death. Each film is poignant and hopeful. The beautiful divers refuse to be bullied. A young soldier falls in love with a barber shop assistant and in a series of chaste encounters they learn to trust and love each other, even though they must part, with the awareness that they may

never meet again. It is filmed in close up of the faces, so every flicker of emotion is registered. They do not make love, but they dance together, and their movements are more erotic than any naked embrace. In another short film a dancer who funds his career as a rent boy speaks to camera about his life and pride in what he does. He is passionate about dance and sex, and by doing both, even though he cannot make a success of his career, he lives his life exactly as he chooses. This film celebrates life, as do all the other films in *Mexican Men*.

TOMCAT KATER

In the Austrian film *Kater* the title is also slang for a promiscuous gay man.

Although winning the Teddy prize at the Berlin Film Festival this film is not much liked by the critics, and therefore will disappear under the radar. All the more reason to write about a good looking but also disturbing film, which while making obvious cultural references deliberately refuses psychological explanations, and leaves the window wide open for interpretation.

Like the film *Four Days in France*, the main narrative is about a relationship going through an emotional crisis. As in the French film classical music allusions may give the impression of pretentiousness, but not to me. In the Austrian film the stable affluent life style of a handsome gay couple is deliberately interrupted by a shocking split-second inexplicable act of brutality. Both films avoid explaining the dark undercurrents, keeping the core of the relationship a mystery.

For me what makes this film particularly interesting is its part in a significant tradition of Austrian post-war books and films trying to come to terms with the country's past and its present malaise. These films and books deal on the whole obliquely with the enthusiastic complicity of Austria with war crimes never discussing the facts but engaging with the

psychological damage of historical guilt and shame, especially the unwillingness or inability of people to deal with the darkness of barbarism lurking beneath the veneer of sophisticated culture. This national failure over subsequent decades of denial manifests itself in inexplicable random acts of horrific violence, rape and extreme psychological cruelty, the behaviour of a 'master race' entitled to live beyond morality.

For instance the Austrian Michael Haneke's take on Austrian Elfriede Jelinek's novel, *The Piano Teacher*, tackles the psychology of damaged people within the political and social context of Austrian life, focusing on sexual and emotional dysfunction. *Tomcat* covers similar ground although the protagonists are not as overtly neurotic as the piano teacher and are at ease with their bodies and desires. I appreciate the depiction of a gay relationship that is not disturbed or angst-ridden. This is the point of the film. The director originally intended the couple to be straight, but his decision to make the couple gay removes any sexist interpretation of the Adam and Eve myth which is a major theme of the film. The offhand depiction of the disruptive violent act is disturbing, because lack of explanation throws that task back at the audience who from the negative responses to the film resent this responsibility.

The men make a life that is not dissimilar to my own and the aspiration of most people. The film's riff on the first chapter of Genesis includes a snake and a fruit tree that causes permanent physical damage. This ancient story of the human race's relationship with God and nature is open to endless speculation and interpretation.

Blink and you will miss the cat's neck being snapped. In fact I assumed the cat had been bitten by the snake. Loud screaming at night indicated that some kind of confrontation had taken place. The poison could have caused the cat's death in the arms of the man stroking him. In fact I waited for that explanation, but it never came because the director did not

consider this important or relevant. We have to assume that the young man killed the cat, because he believed he had. The purpose of this deliberately vague approach to a brutal act is to focus rather on the relationship and life after in which fear about loss and lack of trust threatens a good relationship.

The passionate love that brought these two men together is finally strong enough for the relationship to survive fear and doubt. Yet forgiveness is only possible because this cannot happen without admission of guilt alongside acceptance for healing and even an accident that serves as a self inflicted act of atonement. The film's deliberate symbolism is humanized by the committed performances and sympathetic cinematography. The camera caresses the people, their faces and bodies. Like a curious visitor/voyeur it observes the home, the erotic paintings and music rooms littered with sheet music and instruments, the tools of their trade, and a garden overgrown in parts but productive and used. The camera lovingly follows the two cats whose existence, both resilient and yet also precarious, depends on the love, care and also mood of their human hosts. Apart from the skill of its making, the film touches me personally. This is to some extent my life. The sexual relationship reminds me of my own. There is the devotion to art and friendship. The cats, the housekeeping, gardening and the hospitality are also familiar.

The film catches the variety of moods, the grief, the anger, the neuroses and screaming, the messiness and awkward moments as well as those of mutual enjoyment. There are a number of telling scenes including one in which the man overcome with guilt and rejected by his partner has to masturbate alone in the garden shed. The garden is not pristine, the house a bit untidy and the relationship, even before the catastrophe, not always in harmony. This is life. Critics say it is difficult to like the main characters. I rooted for them. Critics mock the intimate dancing to popular music, but then such personal moments can indeed be toe-curling for outsiders. Not for me. This film gets under the skin, hence the unfair critical sniping, and

deserves consideration and not be allowed to disappear in the archives. Even the loose ends intrigue while avoiding special focus: such as the other gay relationship happening on the edge of the main narrative, that between the shy Russian and his older German lover. It is up to the viewer to complete and flesh out that narrative, just as we need not know precisely how and why the young man killed his beloved cat.

For me what gets under the skin most are the political implications. After the war Germany had to deal not only with defeat but with facing the appalling horrors done in the nation's name, and in which so many enthusiastically took part. The world would not allow the country to forget. Shame at this national humiliation is now transforming itself into nationalist resurgence, and a demand to take pride in history including, shockingly, the crimes. Austria did not endure the same degree of shame. As those Germans I grew up with and came to know in the decades immediately following the war used to remind me with bitterness that the Austrians who had once been enthusiastic Nazis, proud of Hitler being a fellow citizen, were now only too keen to announce to the world : 'Wir sahn kehn Deutscher! Wir sahn Oestreicher!' 'We aren't German! We're Austrian'. This compounded the lie that they had been compelled to take part in the crimes against their will, implying that Austria never felt the need to share German shame and guilt. This lie internalized the guilt while removing the shame. The brutality that was as much part of the national psyche as it had been in Germany, remained embedded, emerging in eruptions of inexplicable violence and psychological disturbance. Michael Haneke's films provide challenging explorations of disturbed souls, and not only in Austria. He reveals the same syndrome in other countries, France for instance, with a history of oppressive colonialism and wars against subjugated people. *Tomcat* puts the violent eruption at the heart of a seemingly calm, prosperous, creative and happy relationship. It then focuses on the aftermath by observing how a well-tuned life can harbour a dysfunction so lethal that it challenges the foundations of the

relationship. Does the violence come from psychological disturbance? Is it at all explicable? The film avoids answering those specific questions, leaving the viewers to make their own minds up, but focuses on the important question: how is recovery possible? Forgiveness through an attempt at understanding and healing along with the necessity of atonement are steps towards that recovery. The film ends on a note of hope and possibility, but without resolution.

Music is the life's work of these lovers, and in another telling scene the perplexed partner watches the man he thought he knew intimately rehearsing with the orchestra. The look indicates his struggle to understand how such ability for harmony and beauty is capable of atrocity. The sorrowful gaze lasts for a few seconds before he shuts the door. It takes the rest of the film before he can bring himself to touch let alone make love to his partner again. Meanwhile the partner follows his act of violence with an emotional breakdown, screaming, devastated at what he is capable of, and falls to pieces, much to the consternation of his friends. This fundamentally kindly, sensitive and lovable man, a fine musician and teacher, is prepared to face his demons, deal with them at whatever cost and pain. When he finally begs for forgiveness his partner can grant it without hesitation. There is hope.

TWISTED ROMANCE

This powerful and disturbing film, in the manner of an Indie which is not afraid to tell its story directly and without frills, deserves a more accurate title. There is no romance, twisted or otherwise in this study of the lower depths in the suburb of an Argentinian city, which could be any city in the world. This is about people surviving and holding on to whatever humanity they have, while also doing their best to enjoy themselves. A young man meets an older rascal who takes the boy home and promptly rapes him. The boy interprets this

encounter as a promise of a deep loving relationship, despite the older man's rough behaviour. It turns out the rapist is also a small-time crook, selling dope and guns, and cheating on customers. However the besotted boy sees something good in him, which no one else can, and the man responds by allowing him to live in the house, and then becomes controlling, jealous of the boy's other encounters. The boy's sister and mother become involved and turn out to be pivotal to the story. The man is able to manipulate his clients and also the boy, but not the women, who turn into avenging angels when the man hurts their beloved son and brother. The man achieves his come-uppance that has echoes of ancient Greek tragedy: hubris of a man who thinks he can control and get away with bad behaviour and crime. It is fitting that the women whom he despises and humiliates cause his violent demise. The ending is bad for the man. The boy is released, but the final images are ambiguous. The boy moves into the man's house and looks forward to an uncertain future.

URBANIA AND STAND

Referencing: *Floating Skyscraper*, *Land of Storms*, *Snails in the Rain* and *Eyes Wide Shut*

Two films shot with the flair and uncompromising personal vision of the boldest independent cinema directors give strikingly different but equally disturbing perspectives on loss, specifically violent loss when a homophobic hate murder has been committed.

The American *Urbania* tells a confusing hallucinatory story which only makes sense as the various threads come together, and we realize that they are not the imaginings of a disturbed young man wandering the streets of a city at night, but a portrayal of extreme grief. This film deserves a second viewing, as in some of Hitchcock's psychological thrillers, *Vertigo* for instance. Familiarity with the story gives depth and meaning to what is initially baffling.

The Russian *Stand* though shot understandably outside the country, given the current violent bigotry towards gay people, is equally difficult to watch, but for different reasons. The film examines the effect of guilt on a young man who cannot forgive himself for failing to come to the aid of another man being kicked to death by a gang of youths. He decides to atone by offering himself as a sacrifice to the same thugs who then beat him with relish, leaving him as a cripple. The story challenges social attitudes aided and abetted by a viciously homophobic government which to all extents and purposes sanctions the killing of gays. Such a film cannot be made in Putin's Russia. The Hungarian Adam Csaszai's *Land of Storms* managed it in Hungary. The story pits liberal and liberated German values against violently repressive attitudes which climax with a sexually conflicted man brutally murdering his male lover. Such acts of violence have come to be defined by psychiatrists and the judicial system as 'homosexual panic', a diagnosis which puts the blame on the victim rather than the aggressor. Tomasz Wasilewski's *Floating Skyscrapers*, a film made and set in Poland, also ends with a homophobic killing, but in an almost offhand manner as much as to indicate that this is an everyday occurrence and not considered a crime. Gays are seen as dispensable: a minority to be persecuted and as with Jews under Nazis, legitimately exterminated. This has nothing to do with homosexual panic. State and religion sanction this violence. Gays provide a sanctioned target for disaffected youngsters, deflecting their anger and frustration with repressive government and society on to victims that have no recourse to justice.

The American film *Urbania* deals with violence that has taken place before the story starts. Only towards the end do we discover that the protagonist is tormented by the brutal murder of his partner. The film's depiction of urban life as sinister and threatening is a reflection of the protagonist's fear, grief and anger. In a kind of resolution favoured by American films, the climax involves a confrontation between the protagonist and murderer, in which the protagonist appears to be a sacrificial victim, as in the Russian film, but then turns into an

avenger. Realizing the murderer is an epileptic, he decides not to exact the ultimate revenge of a life for a life. A touching conversation with the ghost of his murdered partner gives him momentary peace, but the film indicates how the trauma will always haunt.

Given the huge strides in acceptance of gays and their rights in America, the film can explore homophobic acts in ways that are still not possible in Eastern European countries, especially Russia, where gays are not considered human and therefore deserve to be exterminated. Films on this subject from the East are truthfully pessimistic but only by facing the brutal reality of life for gays can there be any hope for change. These stories are intended to shame society which remains impervious to basic liberal notions of humanity. Persecution in the form of blackmail, ostracism and at worst imprisonment and corrective therapies, though these far too frequently led to suicide, has been bravely and trenchantly depicted in British films like *Victim*, made during the period just before the decriminalization of homosexuality. Cinema and TV plays dealing with similar subjects were effective in changing the law. The legitimized thuggish violence in Eastern Europe and Russia is on a scale of brutality which despite Western European contempt for gays would not have been tolerated to the same extent in what was after all considered 'civilized' society. However even liberals, like my parents, made judgements about gay behaviour, 'against nature', which oppressed people like me, made us ashamed, guilty of being who we were, and destructively forced us into 'straight' life-styles. Getting married became a way of deflecting criticism, as well as being an attempt at 'self-cure', with predictably destructive consequences, particularly for the unfortunate spouses. Relatives would lecture me on how I 'should grow up', that being gay is just a phase of adolescence, and in order to be a mature person, fit to belong and take part in society, the phase needed to be grown out of. This particular form of practical morality based on a community's need to survive is particular to the Jewish tradition during the centuries of persecution. It still persists in the ultra conservative religious communities in Israel. The

country's reputation for being a 'gay friendly' country has turned it into a magnet for Arab gays across the Middle East, young men escaping violent discrimination in their own communities. (A number of Israeli films explore the fraught relations between gays across faith divides, included divisions within Jewish society itself, such as the critically admired *Eyes Wide Shut* in which a married Orthodox Rabbi falls in love with a young man – I will write separately about them). The Israeli *Snails in the Rain* throws a spotlight on these patronising traditional Jewish attitudes. The protagonist, performed by a handsome model, needs to overcome an infatuation for a soldier in his regiment, and also repel the advances of a teacher who then commits suicide, leaving him 'liberated' from these adolescent temptations. He can then marry his long-suffering girlfriend, have children and lead a 'normal' life. The film approaches these social oppressions with sympathy for the protagonist and not for those he hurts. The protagonist's violence against his girlfriend is shown as pardonable. His conflicted sexuality is seen as a sickness that requires a cure. The teacher is shown as tormented and psychologically unstable. The beautiful young man avoids a similar tragic fate. This morality allows bigoted attitudes to thrive. How much worse therefore for Eastern European gays who have to contend with violence and being murdered, knowing that the law cares nothing for them. A separate consideration needs to be given to the reasons for this virulent strain of homophobia in Eastern Europe and Russia, as bad if not worse than at any time in its long history. The government's hatred is not only pathological, it is atavistically brutal. I can only admire the courage of gays there who try to live their lives without recourse to pretence and hiding.

A more hopeful breakthrough conclusion can be found in the Polish Malgoska Szimowska's *In the Name of*. The film shows the passionate relationship between a Catholic priest and one of his male parishioners being resolved by the lover training at the priest's seminary. The affair cannot be in the open, but at least it does not need to end in violent death. A woman

directs the film, so perhaps for that reason the narrative refuses to demand a macho brutal catharsis. Nevertheless it is a brave film in a country where the Church encourages homophobia.

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All these films are superbly crafted and acted with commitment. They are works of art, like novels or paintings, not polemics, although a white heat burns: despair at the world's inhumanity. What a long journey we still have to make before all people can feel equally at home in the world. The American *Urbania* tries to understand the mindset of a homophobic murderer. When he lies in an epileptic fit at the feet of the avenger he does attract our sympathy. The thugs in the Russian *Stand* are without history, which figures because they are the faceless tools of state authority and the Church: vessels of anger and violence. Our sympathy is entirely for the young protagonist who over the excruciating long final minutes crawls beaten and crippled into a winter wood, perhaps to die. For what? His guilt obsession has lost him home, work, partner and possibly his life.

XENIA

(Greek for hospitality)

Brexit has changed everything. Had it been only about the EU bureaucracy, I might myself have voted leave, but it had far more to do with a nation state's insecurity, Nationalism is a backward step to a mythical past and nostalgia. Brexit adds anger with government to this toxic delusion. Insecurity and mistrust contribute to dislike of foreigners. No one admits to xenophobia. People I meet say: we don't mind foreigners, but they should stay in their own countries. As a result many people who for one reason or another moved to live in this

country feel they don't belong anymore, They are no longer welcome and fear for their future. Where do they actually belong? They are told by the Prime Minister that citizens of the world are citizens of nowhere. In other words people whose roots don't go down generations in the country are not British citizens. Citizens are at home in the countries where they live. Where is home if the world is not home? Why is the world a nowhere?

Xenia addresses these matters. The film tells the story of what it means to be foreigners in a strange land. The perspective of a young generation makes it particularly interesting. The film maker is young too. The young understand home as not a nation but a place where friendship, love and family are, even if that family is fractured. The main characters are two half Albanian half Greek brothers, the younger an extrovert gay boy, the older straight. The older sibling tries to look after his younger sibling, who is volatile, living in part fantasy to survive, but also creative, passionate about life and determined to survive whatever the dangers. They set off on a journey to find a father who abandoned them. The film gives me hope and inspiration at this time of political and social change, because this new generation lives by new morals and traditions. The film is also subtly political. These young people live in Greece under the shadow of a Far Right threat, quite literally at one point when they are attacked and beaten by racist xenophobes. The country is crippled by division of rich and poor, and yet the young people know how to navigate through this chaos. Music is their home, and it is particularly touching to have schmaltzy Eurovision escapism become a central theme of young people expressing their feelings and longings and needs. The brothers find their father. It is not entirely clear if he really is the father, because that certainty is an irrelevance to the film's basic theme of 'home' and 'family'. He is a Far Right demagogue who abandoned his first wife, their mother, an Albanian singer, and wants to excise the past from his life. The way the brothers deal with him is priceless. The film is funny, at the same time entertaining and moving. It quotes from past classic films, most strikingly Charles

Laughton's miraculous *Night of the Hunter*, one of the greatest films ever made, and these quotes give *Xenia* added dimensions. It isn't a 'gay' film, even though the main character happens to be boldly 'out'. His outrageous appearance challenges and shocks the audience into seeing the world from his perspective. His brother is however the mature sensible one trying to keep control of a tricky situation, which is always changing alarmingly because of the younger brother's volatility. It seems irrational but is in fact totally focused and brave. The two make a strong team and although there is no resolution to the film, but then how can there be in a Europe that is presently in such crisis? The final shot of them walking down the road echoes the iconic ending of Chaplin's *Modern Times*.

YOU CANT ESCAPE LITHUANIA

This bleak, acerbic and finely crafted film skewers the post-Communist market driven politics of Eastern Europe. Everything including relationships is for sale. People are commodities. What is true of contemporary Lithuania goes for everywhere else in the market driven world.

A young woman kills her mother in order to get her inheritance. A young man uses his inherited wealth to make avant-garde films which few people like but garner him critical respect. On the run from justice they drive across country planning to hide the woman in Portugal, taking not only a bag of the stolen money but the young man's Latin American boyfriend picked up at a film festival.

The boyfriend turns out to be an escort being paid generously by the month to be a companion to the rich young director.

It is difficult to like any of the characters, but the pitilessly truthful acting and direction make for scathing satire: this is how people behave in a world where material and specifically financial concerns are paramount.

The young director who appears to have private means can only relate to people if he is filming or paying them. He accepts sponsorship for films that don't make a profit, so there are no returns. He chronicles the escape plan for a new film. The woman is selfish, but at least comes to accept that she needs to face justice. She also rebels against being used as a storyline in the director's film. The escort is a blank-faced hunk who is focused on money and his own interests, but at one moment takes pity on the woman and makes love to her, the only tender scene. This however ends up in the director's new film and so takes the shine off the one moment of love which did not involve cash.

There is another telling scene of kindness. When the escape car breaks down with a broken tyre, a passing policeman, rather than investigating the situation having noticed the woman and the escort fleeing into the woods, takes off his jacket and replaces the tyre. To add poignancy to the scene the handsome policemen recognizes the gay filmmaker and appears to come onto him. He expresses his admiration and adds that his sister is a Lesbian. They briefly touch hands as the director hands the policeman back his jacket. The director and policeman draw closer, then the moment passes. The director flunks it, possibly afraid that this relationship could be genuine and not bought. At the same time the escort and the woman are making love yards away unseen.

The actors are uniformly excellent. The actor playing the director catches the callowness of a man who hides from real life and experience behind the camera. The woman is a bravura performance expressing the gamut from guilt and grief to cunning and charm. The face of the actor with a superb body playing the escort expresses no emotion or interest: his role as a sex

partner is work and has nothing to do with passion, which makes his fleeting tenderness towards the woman especially poignant. This man is capable of affection.

The title of the film is telling. We can't escape wherever we are or whatever situation we find ourselves in, Lithuania or anywhere else. This goes not only for the woman in flight from murder, but also the director who has to face his own emotional inadequacy and the escort who needs to make a decision about what he does with his life.

SAUVAGE and TEENAGE KICKS

Two different films from quite different cultures, *Sauvage* French and *Teenage Kicks* Australian, that touch on a similar theme of how young gays can relate to friends they love but who are straight.

Both are typical of the kind of independent film making, budgeted on a shoe-string but which outperform glossier mainstream material because of their dedication, thought, commitment and refreshing honesty. Both look unflinchingly at the raw brutish dirty underside of life, but also show lyrical moments that transcend the pain and mess.

By the way, and this is a reason I invest in DVDs rather than streaming, *Teenage Kicks* comes with two extras, shorts by the same director, one of which is even more powerful in its concentrated brevity than the main feature. *Last Night in Ostia* imagines how the murder of the film director Pasolini might have taken place, including a rent boy and fascist thugs who use him as a Judas. This short film also touches on the inter-generational relationships that are a significant subject of the French film: how lost young men coming to terms with their sexuality in disapproving societies are drawn to the protection of older more economically stable gay men. There is a heart-stopping moment when the rent boy who is about to betray

the Italian film director realizes he might be missing out on a relationship that could help him, and tries to turn back from the fateful drive to Ostia. Pasolini is not unaware of the danger, but insists on carrying on and allowing events to follow with sickening inevitability. The succinct telling of this terrible story adds to its power. The main feature also contains a death, shown briefly near the start of the film, and its horror expressed in the reaction of the young teenager who is then wracked with guilt for the rest of the film. There is a similarity in looks between him and the rent boy, slim, tall and long black tousled hair framing an angelic face: two confused young adolescents who live with the consequences of a tragedy they initiated and regretted.

The Australian film is more about adolescent stress and navigating relationships with family and friends. The actor has the perfect baffled expression of someone trying to catch up with life as it happens to him, not yet able to make sense of it. In the French film, typically in your face and not just prepared but even eager to examine life at its grimmest, the young protagonist has already seen it all and struggles constantly against disappointment with impotent rage. The hardest advice he hears comes from an older rent boy, the man he wants to share a life with but who for all his love rejects him with the advice to go find an older man who will provide security, because 'it is the best people like us can hope for'. Those words sum up the cruelty of their existence, trying in vain to create a life in a world that rejects and doesn't care what happens to them.

Damage goes so deep that even when the young protagonist really does find such a kind, generous and loving older man who offers a brighter future, he takes fright at the end of the film and runs back to his life on the streets. It is both heartbreaking and honest. That is where this sympathetic but messed-up young man feels at home. He lies down in the grass and falls asleep with birdsong in his ears. Maybe he is dying. There are echoes of the young man in Schubert's song cycle *Die Schöne Mullerin* in which the disappointed lover finally accepts

the mortal embrace of the stream which has from the start of the cycle been his faithful companion. In sleep or death he turns his face up at the skies.

Both films have key scenes of emotional intensity. In *Teenage Kicks* it is the mother's confession to her son which helps him understand the complexity of his adolescent life. There are several such scenes in the French film. For me the most moving is the sick young man's conversation with a female doctor who with utmost sensitivity gently interrogates him to establish the cause of his illness and psychological state. When she asks about his parents he refuses to answer. We can only guess at that trauma. As she calmly examines his body he embraces her. For a moment she becomes his mother and sympathetically responds. This tender moment in the film is gut-wrenching. With few exceptions his physical encounters with clients are uncaring, brutal and casually violent. He is no angel and can also be rough, rude and even abusive. This is the only behaviour he knows. So another particularly touching scene is with a much older client who takes him to bed and just asks to be held. 'Do you find me repulsive', asks the old man. 'Not at all,' says the young man quite genuinely. He is perfectly happy to embrace, hold and be held through the night, because it is what he wants and needs more than anything else and what rarely ever happens.

The one relationship that should work, with the older Canadian who wants to take him back home and take care of him, is of course impossible. For all his efforts the young man cannot love him. Their significant encounters take place on a bridge. The symbolism is resonant. In Hitchcock's *Vertigo* a relationship develops in the shadow of the San Francisco Golden Gate Bridge, a place of romance and death. The young man, like the woman in Hitchcock's film, contemplates suicide there, and does eventually end up in the Canadian's arms after being badly beaten in a violent encounter with a dangerous client. It is a scene with powerful biblical references, especially the parable of the Good Samaritan, and an image I have worked in many pictures, especially the illustrations I drew for Jim Cotter's *Prayer for*

Today. We long for the young man in *Sauvage* to be given and accept a new start, but life is not so simple. The Australian film ends on a note of hope. The French one is stark in acceptance of reality and life as it is. As the French title implies the young man is basically feral. Not for him a life of comfort and security.

By the way, what an actor! It is a fearless performance totally unafraid of being seen in a mess and even repellent, while making us constantly aware that he is a human being. We understand his situation and his needs absolutely.

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