

Saturday, March 24, 2007

### District B13 and the French riots of 2005

I've just watched District B13 (the original French title is, apparently, "Banlieue 13", "banlieue" being a word of many meanings; Wikipedia informs me that a dictionary would say it means "outskirts," but it's commonly used in France today to refer specifically to those poor outskirts of the cities that Americans might, if our cities were structured the same way, call ghettos), and it's a little scary how prescient it was.

(Note: I'm going to talk freely about plot, so stop reading if you plan to see the movie and haven't yet.)

The titular district is troublesome to the government. It drains money and simply refuses to be "solved." The initial solution is to wall it off (clearly reminiscent of the Nazi creation of Jewish ghettos). The later solution is to set off a bomb in the heart of the district, which will, ideally, wipe out all two million people who live there (final solution). The Nazi parallels are far from subtexts. One character refuses to believe that the government could actually undertake to wipe out two million people just like that; the other reminds him that "they" did it to six million because they didn't have blond hair and blue eyes. The use of "they" is interesting, as, in the context, it would indicate French authorities. This is consistent with what might be described as a national French guilt over the Holocaust. The use of "six million" instead of a higher figure is striking in this respect, because that number represents only the number of Jews killed, leaving out the three to five million others.

Perhaps more interesting is the way the movie foreshadowed the riots of the fall of 2005. The character not from Banlieue 13 asks the one that is whether burning cars is really an effective way of accomplishing anything. The other responds by asking whether he's got any better ideas for the moment. Burning cars were, I think, the major image reaching the U.S. during the 2005 riots, so that line struck a particular chord. Further, the expression of the frustration with not being able to get out, with having no recourse, is consistent with the feelings that bubbled forth in the riots.

The point is driven home by the ethnic makeup of the inhabitants of the two zones - the gangsters, inhabitants of B13, who occupy the screen for most of the movie, are a mixed lot, but generally dark-skinned. The head gangster is a man named Taha. The name is ambiguous to my ears, but when I Google "Taha," the third result is the wikipedia entry for Rachid Taha, a French-Algerian musician. Who knows if he's famous, but I'd imagine that a French audience might immediately associate the name with Algerians. (There's not much on the actor's IMDB page; his brother, also an actor, was born in Paris, but played "Yassir" in the recent film about French Algerians fighting in World War II.) Furthermore, at least to my eyes, the governmental actors were played by some particularly pasty white men, emphasizing their difference from the residents of the banlieue.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Movies at 23:48

Saturday, February 24, 2007

### **The Cincinnati Kid**

Having just finished watching *The Cincinnati Kid* on DVD, I have to ask why nobody told me that Ben Affleck looks just like the young Rip Torn (who plays a local rich kid, Slade).

The movie itself isn't great. Steve McQueen is the man, and Ann-Margret's certainly the wo, but it was too bad that you could kind of predict the entire course of the movie by watching the first ten minutes.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Movies at 23:10

Sunday, January 7, 2007

### **Today's playoff picks / Why I'm not going to be an agent**

I have no documentation of this, but I had both the Colts and Seahawks in yesterday's games (the Colts because they're a vastly better team than the Chiefs and the Seahawks because they were playing at home). I figured the Seahawks game would be close, but obviously you can't anticipate the craziness that ensued.

I'll try to go 4-0 today as I pick Philadelphia and New England to win. Those aren't exactly controversial picks, although some people will get seduced by the Giants' offensive talent.

The Patriots-Jets game is tough because while I'm not a Patriot-hater, they're not my favorite team to root for, and I really like Chad Pennington and Eric Mangini, so I'd like to root for the Jets, but I just don't think they're ready to beat Bill Belichick in the playoffs.

Also, check out this story in Variety and/or Jerry Crasnick's book License to Deal to see why I've completely abandoned the idea of becoming an agent. It's a ridiculously cutthroat business, and I'm not the type of person that would succeed there, I think.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Books, Football, Law, Magazines, Movies, Non-Fiction, Reading at 12:39

Sunday, January 1, 2006

### **King Kong**

I saw King Kong last night with a group of friends in Seattle. It was entertaining, though it was really too long. Jack Black couldn't really do anything with what he had to work with, Jamie Bell was absolutely wasted, and even the special effects weren't, to my eyes, that great. There were a lot of moments where it really seemed to jump out, "Hey, those actors are just running in front of a green screen!"

It would have to be better than Mad Hot Ballroom to crack my top ten, and it certainly wasn't. I've still got hopes for Munich, Brokeback Mountain, and, if I see it in time, Match Point.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Movies at 22:40

Tuesday, November 29, 2005

### Some pop culture news

The pop culture news from the current (December 5) issue of New York magazine must be commented on.

First, Demetri Martin is now a correspondent on The Daily Show? That's sort of stunning, actually. I saw him live once and I've come across him on TV once or twice. His humor just doesn't seem to fit the spastic Daily Show correspondent style. I mean, Rob Corddry? Ed Helms? Can you really see Martin's heroin-inflected style (to steal a line from Patrice O'Neal) while reporting on ... what exactly? I'm looking forward to it, certainly, but I'm also apprehensive.

Second, Tony Leung has earned himself a retrospective at BAM (Brooklyn Academy of Music). They'll screen twelve of his movies over 18 days in December. The show is titled "Hard Boiled & In the Mood: Tony Leung." Considering that there's significant overlap with exam season at the law school in those dates, I won't be heading out to Brooklyn to actually see anything, but it's awesome that he's being so widely recognized.

(Yes, dear, I'm still straight.)

Third, Trio has been cancelled (click now: it probably won't be there long). I never watched Trio much, but it always seemed like a solid choice when bored: the snarky yet loving nostalgia fits a lot of people in my generation really well, I think, so I'm sort of surprised it didn't get the ratings to make its corporate parents happy.

Fourth and finally, apparently Don Cheadle and Adam Sandler have signed on for Reign O'er Me a post-9/11 movie about finding friendship or some such crap. According to IMDB, there's no writer or director (but according to this site, Mike Binder (The Upside of Anger) is developing it). I'm curious about what the tone of the movie will be. Will Sandler continue his Punch-Drunk Love (not that I saw it) / Spanglish descent (in a good way) into droopiness? Or will it be more manic, in his old style? Either way, I'm not convinced he'll play well with Cheadle.

After a 2004 in which Cheadle appeared in five movies, including his star turn in Hotel Rwanda, it looks like he took a year off, because he's not appeared in a single movie in 2005. Tishomingo Blues, which is supposed to be his directorial debut, is still supposedly showing up in 2005, but considering it's still labeled "pre-production" on IMDB and that it's the end of November, I guess we shouldn't count on it.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Movies at 10:15

Monday, November 28, 2005

### **Pride and Prejudice**

It was Thanksgiving weekend, so I had a little more time than I often do. I used this time to see Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire and Pride and Prejudice in the theater.

The former felt rushed and crammed with stuff. I haven't read the books, so I can't speak to the things they dropped out and rushed past. Despite that, it was quite clear how crunched the filmmakers felt. Nary a scene was left to just play out in a normal fashion. Rather, everything was in the manner of, "Here's what you need to get from this scene! Next! Here's what you need from this scene! Next!" I shouldn't say "nary," though, because the graveyard scene, the climax, was quite good. It was the one time where the movie just s l o w e d down for a while. The writers and director are really sort of stuck, though, because the books are only getting longer. Austen tells me there's (finally) a new screenwriter for the fifth movie, which could help things get better. In the end, I liked it, but it doesn't crack the list.

What does crack the list is Pride and Prejudice. Talk about taking your time, not hurrying, just letting things unfold ...

Perhaps the best feature of the movie was that it just moved in a straightforward way, letting the story and the characters carry the day. There was no need for fancy cinematography, quirky editing tricks, or bizarre structural innovations here. Austen tells me that Jane Austen has translated quite well to the screen (I haven't seen the other movies that have come from her books).

I'm reminded of Matt and Ben, a little play that Austen's mom sent us to about the writing of Good Will Hunting. The point of the play, which is quite funny and features women playing the titular characters, is that the duo never wrote the script: it fell from the sky. The scene I remember, though, involves the attempt by the pair to adapt Catcher in the Rye for the screen. It basically involved Ben at the computer, typing the dialogue that Matt reads straight from the novel.

My point? Maybe this works if you're adapting Jane Austen.

So, on to the amended Top Ten, with the newly added Pride and Prejudice.

The Constant Gardener  
Proof  
Kung Fu Hustle  
War of the Worlds  
Pride and Prejudice  
Grizzly Man  
Capote  
Rize  
Bee Season  
Mad Hot Ballroom

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Movies at 13:45

Sunday, November 20, 2005

**Mommy's one of the chosen people, and daddy thinks ...**

I saw Sarah Silverman: Jesus is Magic last night with a teacher friend and her boyfriend. A lot of people didn't find it as funny as I did: a number of different groups walked out at various points. I'm not sure what they were thinking. It is, after all, a Sarah Silverman concert film. You've got to know what you're getting yourself into, right? She's rude, she's crude, she's edgy, she's regularly accused of racism; what did you expect?

Probably the best joke, certainly one of those that makes you a little nervous, goes something like this: "My niece goes to Hebrew school. She called me the other day and was talking to me and said, 'Aunt Sarah, did you know that Adolf Hitler killed 60 million Jews?' And I told her, 'Honey, I think it's actually six million.' And she said, 'Yeah, you're right. But really, what's the difference?' What's the difference? There's a huge difference! I mean, really! Sixty million would be unforgiveable!"

It doesn't make my Top Ten for the year. It's funny, but I think in order for an uninventive (not in terms of the comedy, but in terms of the filmmaking) concert movie to make the Top Ten, it's got to be better than, say, The Original Kings of Comedy or Richard Pryor Live on the Sunset Strip, and this wasn't.

Better than the Blue Collar Comedy Tour, though? I'll be charitable and not answer that.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Movies at 20:15

Tuesday, November 15, 2005

### **Top Ten movies of 2005, revised**

Having seen Bee Season this weekend, and being completely disappointed with the reviews it's getting, here's my newest edition of my Top Ten. The bottom of the list contains the only change. It's not consistent from last time because Austen ridiculed me for my #9 choice.

The Constant Gardener  
Proof  
Kung Fu Hustle  
War of the Worlds  
Grizzly Man  
Capote  
Rize  
Bee Season  
Mad Hot Ballroom  
Good Night, and Good Luck

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Movies at 21:52

Monday, October 24, 2005

### **The Squid and the Whale**

We saw *The Squid and the Whale* this weekend, and were mightily disappointed. I'll just quote Austen for you: What an overrated movie. It was just straightout bad. It hit one note over and over, lacked focus, making it's "resolution" seem too easy and lacking. I don't know what all the fuss about it was. They had good actors and the performances were good and Jesse Eisenberg proved he could act yet again, and Kevin Kline's son is a better actor than his father, but other than that I was thoroughly disappointed. I'll take credit for first usage of the word "focus" in our post-film discussion, so I've actually contributed something here.

This has been a bad year for movies, but not so bad that this gets to crack my Top Ten. There's simply no way a case could be made for Baumbach's bomb over *Good Night, and Good Luck*.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Movies at 20:30

Sunday, October 9, 2005

### Green Street Hooligans

With the power outage over, I can write about Green Street Hooligans, which we saw last night. I'd wanted to see the movie for a number of weeks. Frod ... er, Elijah Wood joins a soccer (oops, football) mob and gets into vicious fights? What could be better?

Well, lots of things as it turns out. It's too bad, because Wood and Charlie Hunnam, particularly the latter here, are very watchable, but the movie was just too confused about what it wanted to do. Was it a moralistic story about the circle of violence? Was it just an "it's all fun and games until someone loses an eye" tale? Or maybe it just didn't care about the losing the eye, it's just fun to romp about and beat up some fans of a rival squad?

The problem is, each of these possibilities is undermined by some element of the film. There's too much actual hurt, actual pain, actual loss of more than just limb for this to have been another Fight Club-type story. Conversely, there's too much fun to be had and too much change-for-the-better in Wood's character for this to be a pure morality play. As for the "... loses and eye" theory, without giving away too much, it turns out that eyes were lost long before we were dropped into the story, but the fun and games were still being had by plenty of folks.

So the movie's not really about anything in particular. That's ok, maybe it could still be fun, or stylish, or at least have funny British dialogue. But, uh, nope, sorry.

It was occasionally funny, though as with George Clooney directing Good Night, and Good Luck, I don't think Lexi Alexander displayed much of a directorial sense of comedic timing. In addition, funny doesn't really define fun, and there was way too much downer-ness for the movie to be much fun. (Do note that I'm saying movies shouldn't be downers; in fact, too many movies try to hard to come "up" at the end because they're afraid of the marketing disasters that could result. I am saying, however, that a movie that's a "downer" has to be good, because it's not going to be fun.)

Stylish? I thought the second fight scene, if I'm remembering correctly (I'm no reviewer, so taking notes at the movie isn't really for me), was quite stylish, but the rest of the movie, the other fight scenes included, weren't all that visually interesting.

Now, it's a stretch for me to say that I was hoping for funny British dialogue, but mentioning it is just an excuse to complain about Alexander's (and co-writers Dougie Brimson and Josh Shelov's) tin ear for dialogue, as displayed by many of the terribly movie-cliche lines that you'd never hear a real person actually utter. There was far too much unintentional comedy for any self-respecting indie film. Also, voice-over? Please, stop with the VO. I can probably count on one hand the number of movie I've seen that made good use of voice-over, and this film wasn't ever in danger of being added to the list.

Finally, it's time for a little lesson on plant-and-payoff. You know those good movies and TV shows where you learn something, often in a somewhat indirect way, early in the movie and it "pays off" later on? That's a great way to write, and it produces results when used well, particularly when used over the course of multiple episodes on TV. Where it doesn't work is when you learn something five minutes before it's used! If you saw the movie, you probably know the lame-ass moment I'm talking about. If you haven't seen it, and you decide to disregard my opinions and see it anyway, look for the moment. It'll be your little challenge.

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I think I've seen enough movies now to make a list. Best movies of the year so far?

The Constant Gardener  
Proof  
Kung Fu Hustle  
War of the Worlds  
Grizzly Man  
Rize  
Mad Hot Ballroom

## Blog Export: Beaneball, <http://beaneball.org/>

Capote  
Lords of Dogtown  
Good Night, and Good Luck

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Movies at 21:50

Sunday, June 5, 2005

### Six Short Films

A co-worker loaned me a DVD from Film Movement with six shorts on it, and I liked them so much, I thought I'd proselytize a little bit. Plus, it's a slow Sunday and it's hard to get excited about a last-place baseball team, so here it is.

Listed first on the cover was Mt. Head (Atama-yama in Japanese), an animated Japanese movie about a "stingy man" who ends up having a cherry tree growing from the top of his head. It's as bizarre as it sounds, but the narration, by Takeharu Kunimoto, is fantastically weird. As the aforementioned co-worker pointed out, the nose of the "stingy man" bears too close a resemblance to a stereotypical Jewish nose for comfort, but if you can ignore that, it's a pretty trippy little film.

Das Rad ("Rocks," in German) is also illustrated, though in a vastly different style. The idea is that rocks are watching us, having conversations, playing around and generally enjoying life, but on a vastly different time scale. The idea is fantastic, but nine minutes was a little too long for something that's essentially just a really neat idea. In the end, it ended up being cute, but not much more.

Inja (which means "dog" in, I assume, Afrikaans) is about a black boy and a puppy in South Africa who are split up rather cruelly by a landowner. The landowner's methods come back to haunt him in the end, though. This was probably the best of the six films: it was quite beautiful and obviously poignant, but did not try to reach farther than a 17-minute film should. Also notable was Thandie Newton showing up in the "thanks" section of the credits.

Sangam, the name of a spot of pilgrimage in India, is about a recent immigrant to New York who encounters a countryman on the subway. They reminisce, talk, sing, and then things get weird. Overall, I thought it was just okay, with two highlights: the editing and the performance of Sanjay Chandani as Vivek, the man the immigrant encounters on the subway. Chandani has had a minor TV and movie career, according to his IMDB credits, but I think he could be capable of more were he to be given the chance.

I also caught Mira Nair's name in the "thanks" section of the credits.

The First Three Lives of Stuart Hornsley is a time travel story starring Tunde Adebimpe, who is more famous as a member of the band TV on the Radio but who is also a graduate of NYU's film school. If this was a thesis film at NYU (it was produced under the auspices of Tisch, according to the credits), it appears to be one of those that benefits from a larger budget (and a longer runtime: at thirty minutes, it was easily the longest film in this collection) than its peers. That said, it's not a bad movie, but in the end, it was just sort of sweet. Adebimpe was pretty good as the title character, and I liked Isaac Bloch as his young protege Vitaliy, but if you've seen the Simpsons time travel episode, you've sort of seen this movie.

Spike Lee earned a "thank you" in this film.

Finally, the most superficially pleasing of the six was Deathdealer, a mockumentary starring Henry Rollins as a kind of door-to-door businessman dealing with a bit of a midlife crisis. I'm hesitant to say more about the story, though the title gives something away, but suffice it to say that I was greatly amused and thought the film quite clever. It wasn't trying for anything more than amusement, so we oughtn't fault it for not achieving more.

Posted by jason in Movies at 23:04

Monday, May 30, 2005

### A few non-baseball things

On Saturday, we went and saw Mad Hot Ballroom, a documentary about public schools in New York City that have ballroom dancing programs. It was a pretty straightforward film, but I couldn't help but be impressed with the footage of the actual dancing competitions the kids entered. The crowd got very into it, awwww-ing at all the appropriate moments. I don't know whether it's playing widely outside of New York, but the opportunity to see 10 year-olds doing an impressive merengue and rumba should not be passed up.

Last night, as I mentioned, we saw Crash, the Paul Haggis (the writer of Million Dollar Baby) film that grew out of his experience being carjacked in L.A. It was as bad as all the reviews said, unfortunately. A lot of good talent, including Don Cheadle, Brendan Fraser, Ryan Phillippe, Sandra Bullock, Terrence Howard, and Larenz Tate, went wasted. The theme of the movie, racism, would have been better approached in a much more subtle way. Modern incarnations of racism, after all, are more under-the-surface, more quietly insidious, than the view presented in the film, where everything, while mixed up and "not quite what it seems" (if the movie is going to traffic in so much cliché, then so will I), is quite overt: Matt Dillon is a blatantly racist cop; Sandra Bullock insists that her locks be changed again because a Latino man who she believes to be a gang-banger changed them the first time; a gun-shop owner calls an Iranian customer "Osama."

We did get two great trailers, though: Hustle & Flow, also starring Terrence Howard as a pimp trying to make it as a rapper, which was all the rage at Sundance this year; and Rize, David LaChapelle's documentary about "krumping," a new dance form coming out of inner-city Los Angeles. The cinematography looks as fantastic as you'd expect out a renowned photographer and I expect that the dance moves will be as impressive as watching any extreme sports or And 1 video.

Finally, I read the article in Sports Illustrated about online poker last night. As Wilson points out in this comment, it's really just an article saying, "College kids play poker online." It talks about people who made money, mentions a kid who's lost over \$50k, and briefly says that colleges don't have gambling addiction programs, but that's really it. There's no real exploration of the issues of legality (that's relegated to a sidebar), no exploration of the addiction, no discussion of social and familial problems that are allowed to arise when money starts being lost hand over fist. Any or all of these themes would have made excellent articles on college kids playing online poker. Instead, we got something akin to Moneyball: a piece that was supposed to be about a larger point but devolved into a series of profiles of "interesting" people (the players were made much more intriguing in Moneyball).

Posted by jason in Magazines, Movies, Reading, The Blog at 18:09

Monday, March 21, 2005

### Benicio on Method

Thank goodness! Someone finally said it! Benicio Del Toro says in the current issue of Esquire (April 2005), "Researching a role isn't Method acting; it's common sense."

Ever since I learned what Method acting really is (which is not so long ago, I'll admit; maybe a little over a year), I've noticed the complete lack of understanding in the press and even, perhaps, among actors, of what Method acting actually entails.

When Viggo Mortensen wandered around New Zealand with a sword strapped on his hip, that wasn't Method; that was getting himself into a physical mode where he could convincingly play the character of Aragorn. When Nicole Kidman interviewed abused women for her role in *The Human Stain*, that wasn't Method; it was, as Del Toro alludes to, research that she would have been stupid not to conduct.

Russell Crowe was quoted telling a story in the March 2005 issue of GQ: Also, until I was 25, I had one tooth missing. When George Ogilvie cast me, he asked me about it, and I told him the story and that I thought it was very false of me to go and get a tooth cap. He was very nice about it, listened to it all, and said, "All right, well, let me put it this way, Russell. You're playing the lead character in my film, right? The character of Johnny has two front teeth ..." Chris Heath, the interviewer, responds, "He Methoded you into it!" No, he didn't! Method acting isn't looking the part, and that's all Ogilvie said: I want you to get your tooth capped so that you can look like the character I wrote. That's got nothing whatsoever to do with Method.

From the website of the Stella Adler Studio of Acting comes this excerpt from the mini-bio of Konstantin Stanislavski, the creator of Method acting: To reach this "believable truth," after years of research with actors of the Moscow Art Theatre, Stanislavski began employing new and original methods, such as "emotional memory." He felt at that time that to work on a particular emotion in a role that involved fear, the actor might remember something that frightened him from his own life.

Stanislavski believed that an actor needed to take his or her own personality onto the stage when he or she began to play a character. This innovation was a clear break from previous modes of acting that held that the actor's job was to become the character and leave his or her own emotions behind. Later, Stanislavski concerned himself with the creation of physical entries into these emotional states, believing that the repetition of certain acts and exercises could bridge the gap between life on and off the stage.

Certainly, the people who've taken Stanislavski's Method and taught it, including Adler and those who followed her, have added their own twists, changed things, and otherwise put their own stamp on the original idea. Indeed, Lee Siegel wrote in *Slate* in March, 2004, that there were two antagonistic versions of the Method: Strasberg's emphasis on how actors should draw from their own experience to inhabit a character; and Stella Adler's insistence that actors must pay closer attention to the play's circumstances than to their own memories and emotions.

I recently had a discussion with a "mainstream media" journalist (editor) whose main criticism of the blogosphere (with emphasis on political blogs) is that far too many bloggers are lazy and uninterested in doing the groundwork necessary to have a relevant and believable opinion. He's right, of course, but I might haul out this seeming industry-wide lack of understanding of an easily-researched issue as evidence that mainstream journalists aren't much better these days (or were they ever?).

Posted by jason in Movies, Reading at 17:46

Wednesday, February 18, 2004

### City of God

City of God provides a nice contrast to 21 Grams. The Brazilian film, the second movie about street kids in that country I've seen in the past six months, is as flashy with its cinematography and editing as 21 Grams tries to be, but it actually has a purpose.

The story is told by Rocket, an inhabitant of Rio's "City of God," a huge slum where the government likes to send homeless people but not much else. Police presence is minimal, so street gangs rule the environment. Rocket is not a member of one of the gangs himself; he tried to go to school to get himself out of the City, and has always harbored an ambition to be a photographer. We see Rocket grow from about eight, in the sixties, to some indeterminate age some indeterminate number of years in the future. Rocket's story crosses paths with such illustrious gang-land characters as Li'l Dice (later, Li'l Ze, the most vicious and respected hood in the city), Knockout Ned (forced to become Li'l Ze's chief rival), Benny (Ze's right-hand man, "the grooviest hood in the city"), and Carrot (the leader of the rival gang, who helps Ned become a hood to be reckoned with).

City of God doesn't shy away from violence, because, to shamelessly borrow a cliché, it is the way of the streets. Ze forces a new member of his gang, perhaps 12 years old, to choose between killing a six-year old and a ten-year old as his initiation to the upper reaches of the group. The filmmakers strike a balance, though: the gore and blood is not glorified, not hammed up in any way; rather, it is presented matter-of-factly. Children bleed when they're shot, but we don't leer at them as they lay dying.

The film also doesn't shy away from the grainy-style cinematography that has become popular for shooting "street" movies in the last few years, but it is put to good use. We don't just see dirt and filth; we also see joy and pleasure at dance parties and the gorgeous Brazilian beach. Of course, when the guns come out at the parties and the seven-year old hoods gather around at the beach, we're reminded that any escape from the horrors of every-day life is only temporary.

The story is told non-linearly, with much back- and side-tracking performed by Rocket, as any story-teller working without preparation would. We encounter characters we haven't met before, so Rocket gives us their back-story; he occasionally hints at future happenings in the way of someone trying to keep their audience captive. These back- and side-trackings are reinforced by the editing and special-effects, which, for once, as I alluded to above, don't seem gratuitous, but rather serve the greater purpose of emphasizing Rocket's narration by creating an enthralling visual narration.

Many of the tricks are sort-of low-budget Matrix effects, which is entirely appropriate: both movies rely on violence to tell their stories, though the Matrix' violence is highly stylized, very clean and neat, and, in many ways, glorifies kicking the crap out of The Man when he's holding you down. The special effects reflect the time, money, and sophistication required to create them and mirror the kind of violence created using them. In contrast, City of God's effects are choppy, grainy, and rough, mirroring the hoods' inability to fight and shoot with any sort of accuracy or panache. Nobody fires a gun with a flair when they're too busy worrying about saving their own skin. Unlike the ever-present, ever-stylish Agents of the Matrix, in the City of God, if you get shot, you're not coming back for the sequel.

Posted by jason in Movies at 00:34

Monday, February 16, 2004

### Seabiscuit

We watched Seabiscuit last night. It was essentially what I expected: a standard heroic Hollywood movie about some down-on-their-luck people who make it big in spite of the odds against them.

That said, despite its complete lack of interest in doing anything different from what's traditionally made money at the theaters, it wasn't all that bad. I can't really complain about the acting, as Tobey Maguire, Chris Cooper, and Jeff Bridges all handled their parts admirably, generally showing restraint, not over-acting, even in scenes where men less professional may have been tempted to do so. William H. Macy had the flashy, fun role as the track announcer, but he, like the others, managed to stay within the part, not apparently trying to steal the scenes or upstage the larger movie.

As everyone said, the horse-racing scenes were really neat. I was again happy with the restraint shown by Gary Ross: I'm sure there was temptation to really show off with those scenes, to go over the top with fancy camera work and editing, to really try to make the audience go "Wow!" Ross seemed to resist this temptation, though, resulting in exciting scenes shot in a fairly straight-forward way, giving the audience the feeling of being on a horse in the race, right next to the jockey, without (and I repeat myself here from my Bill Macy comment) upstaging the overall story.

I recall there being a bit of buzz about Gary Stevens, a real-life jockey (and an excellent one, among the best of all time) who plays George Woolf, a highly regarded jockey of that time. Stevens blends traditional leading-man good looks with a natural screen charisma and a dollop of the professional restraint that, in my mind, is this film's calling card, to produce a very strong debut. Stevens is short, as would be expected of a jockey, but he's actually only an inch shorter than Michael J. Fox and (officially) three inches shorter than Tom Cruise (which means that in real life, it's really closer to one and a half or two, I'd bet). If Stevens wishes to continue on the screen, I think he'll be a compelling and successful actor.

Posted by jason in Movies at 00:40

Friday, February 13, 2004

## **21 Grams**

We saw 21 Grams on Sunday, using my new discount UFT tickets, so it cost a little more than half as much as it usually does. That makes me happy.

The movie itself wasn't bad, I guess. I don't know. I didn't ever really get into it, I think. Everyone's raving about the acting. That's supposed to be the big reason to go see it. Benicio Del Toro and Naomi Watts were both nominated for their performances. I guess they were fine. I'm a big Benicio fan, and his Jesus-freak ex-con was certainly really scary, so I guess he did what he set out to do, but ...

It was just kind of blah. I'm not really sure what the point of the movie was. The three actors were good, great if that's the kind of acting that you like, the cinematography was interesting, the structure of the film (not shown straight through - you catch glimpses of the past and the present and future and there's no real sense of time; everything just happens and you sort of figure it out as it goes) at least makes you think a little bit, and I thought the music, the score, was really good, but in the end, when you have to ask, "Why bother?" I can't really rate the movie all that highly.

At least I saw it cheap in a nice theater.

Posted by jason in Movies at 00:35

Wednesday, February 11, 2004

### **Win a Date with Tad Hamilton**

So we saw Win a Date with Tad Hamilton last night down at the Loews Kips Bay. \$10.25 for a movie. Ugh. Well, soon I'll have my UFT discount tickets and those prices will be a thing of the past.

Quick, name a better 25-or-under comedic actor than Topher Grace. None really coming off the top of your head, eh? I'm not sure that there are any. He even managed to do well in a small part in Steven Soderbergh's Traffic, showing at least some skill with dramatic acting. Not bad for a guy with essentially no acting experience before That '70's Show.

Look for him in the next Weitz brothers' comedy, Synergy, also with Scarlett Johansson. That should be awesome.

Back to the movie, though. Austen compared it to the John Hughes / Molly Ringwald classics, but I liked this far better, believe it or not. It had its lame feel-good moments, but they weren't terrible or too ridiculous. The humor, to me, far outweighs those moments, anyway, from the wood-chopping scene that's in all the trailers to Tad Hamilton speaking awful Spanish to his Albanian maid. The LA joke sight gags (everyone talking on their cell phones) were a bit dated and cliché (doesn't everyone have a cell phone now regardless of what city we're in?), but Gary Cole, as Kate Bosworth's dad, wearing a Project Greenlight shirt to try to impress Tad Hamilton was hilarious.

Nathan Lane was hilarious as Richard Levy, Tad's manager, and Sean Hayes was surprisingly funny as Richard Levy (no kidding. One exchange: "You're both Richard Levy?" Lane: "Who isn't?"), Tad's agent. Even Stephen Tobolowsky, recently featured in Los Angeles Magazine's actors' issue, had a small part (one scene) as Topher Grace's boss.

No one's going to mistake this movie for a great romantic comedy, but it had enough redeeming factors that I'm going to refuse to be embarrassed for having seen it. At this point, it's on my Top Ten for the year.

Posted by jason in Movies at 00:31

## Blog Export: Beaneball, <http://beaneball.org/>

Saturday, August 23, 2003

### Fall movies to see

What am I excited for in the theatres for the coming months? First, Return of the King, of course. I'll still have to rent Two Towers, but I'll get around to it. The internet buzz for a LotR movie to actually win Best Picture has to start now.

More imminent is Once Upon a Time in Mexico, Robert Rodriguez' conclusion of his Mariachi trilogy. I should also rent El Mariachi, by the way, and maybe go ahead and re-watch Desperado to prepare for the final chapter. I absolutely cannot wait to see Johnny Depp in this movie. Anytime you cast Depp, you've made an inspired choice. Besides which, there's something about Rodriguez. Maybe it's the fact that he did everything on his Spy Kids movies, from writing to directing to producing to editing to the music to the special effects ... everything. It's amazing, especially considering how fun and just generally good the first two movies turned out. This'll be September 12.

Woody Allen's new movie, Anything Else, comes out the next weekend. People might be rightfully a little wary, after his last couple of mistakes, but the cast looks good, at least: Christina Ricci, Danny DeVito, Jimmy Fallon. Jason Biggs plays the lead, a writer mentored by Allen's character, and that makes me a little wary. When your entire resume is essentially the American Pie movies and Loser, I'm going to reserve predictions about your wild future successes for a little while. That said, if I'm going to live in Manhattan, isn't it sort of a requirement that I watch Woody Allen's movies?

Austen has decided to await Secondhand Lions, also out September 19. Haley Joel Osment plays the nephew of Robert Duvall and Michael Caine, so the cast is obviously superb, and the setup sounds good: Duvall and Caine are weird, and Osment's mother has sent him to live with them. The thing that makes me a teeny bit wary is the writer/director's possessiveness. Tim McCanlies wrote the script ten years ago, but has been searching for a studio that would let him direct it ever since. Having a vision is nice, but sometimes it takes more than one person to see other angles to texts that the author might not have consciously seen. Despite that, though, what caps my desire to see this is Nicky Katt's appearance in the cast rolls.

Lost in Translation is Sofia Coppola's latest effort, starring Bill Murray and Scarlett Johansson. We saw a preview for this when we saw The Secret Lives of Dentists this weekend, and it looked pretty good. Tokyo has its own beauty, as usual, and that will add to things, but more importantly, I have faith in Murray to pull off his role magnificently. Who knows, maybe some Adam-Sandler-in-Punch-Drunk-Love-type buzz might be generated. Need another reason to see it? Giovanni Ribisi.

Party Monster, of course, starring Seth Green and Macaulay Culkin, making his return to the big screen. Does anyone realize exactly how long it's been since Culkin's last movie came out? Here's a hint: it was Richie Rich. That was 1994. It's a little hard to believe that Culkin is only 22 (he'll turn 23 later this month) and could still have a good career ahead. He actually has two more movies coming out this year, one called Saved alongside Jena Malone and Mandy Moore, and the other called Jerusalem, which IMDB has basically no information about.

Back to Party Monster: I saw the documentary of the same name while I was at Hampshire, and was semi-intrigued. This time around, the same guys who made that documentary are behind the camera again, so at least we'll have consistency. Physically, Culkin is probably perfect for the part. Pale, somewhat tall, skinny ... he looks like a drug abusing party promoter in the '80's, so that's a good thing. Talent-wise, he's a big-time wait-and-see.

Intolerable Cruelty is George Clooney's newest, and it's also a Coen brothers production. He'll play a sleazy lawyer trying to cheat Catherine Zeta-Jones out of her alimony. Despite that description, many people's first reactions to the posters and publicity for this movie are going to be the same as Austen's: "He's really trying to be Cary Grant." From the suit to the hair to the facial expressions in the two pictures I've seen from the film, I agree with that impression. If nothing else, this will be interesting for watching Clooney's unique career progression. As Entertainment Weekly notes, though, the big question is, "Will the Coens' style-over-substance approach finally conquer the mainstream?" First, that's a great sentence. They totally dissed the Coens while phrasing their question in this "industry trends" sort of way. But I agree with the sentiment. The Man Who Wasn't There, for example, had lots of style, might even be called pretty, but ... it wasn't really about anything.

My final two for October: Speaking of style over substance, The School of Rock, Richard Linklater's new movie, written by Mike White (of Chuck & Buck fame). It looks much more promising than Waking Life or Slacker, both of which I hated. Lastly, Shattered Glass, about Stephen Glass, the disgraced New Republic writer caught fabricating stories.

## Blog Export: Beaneball, <http://beaneball.org/>

Posted by jason in Movies at 00:42

### Fall movies to see, pt. 2

On to movies coming out in November and December, though I've already mentioned *The Return of the King*.

Tim Burton's new movie, *Big Fish*, which looks downright odd. I really don't know what to say about it, except that it's directed by Burton. Does it need more introduction than that?

*21 Grams* casts Sean Penn as a mathematician (albeit a terminally ill one), and also stars Benicio Del Toro. Again, what more can you ask for? Well, you could ask that the writer and director of *Amores Perros* also be on the project, and they are. It'll be interesting to see if the "Mexican look" that's been established by a couple of films in the last three years translates well to American film.

Ok, ok, I know it's almost certainly going to bomb terribly, but I really want to see Tom Cruise in *The Last Samurai*. The premise is that he's a Civil War veteran brought to Japan to work with the Japanese military, but he falls in love with the old samurai way, which the emperor wants to eradicate. I don't know what's gotten into me with this film, but I keep seeing previews where everyone else in the audience is sort of chortling at the idea and I'm going, "Must see!"

Posted by jason in Movies at 00:32

## Blog Export: Beaneball, <http://beaneball.org/>

Monday, August 11, 2003

### **Liberia some more**

Somini Sengupta writes in the New York Times about current Liberian Vice President Moses Blah, who is on track to take power in the country on Monday.

Does it seem like a good idea to anyone else that to create peace in this country, Charles Taylor is going to leave and a man who's served in his regime and is a former army leader himself is going to take his place? We can't really make any assumptions about Blah (except that he has a great name), but it does seem that the peace process might be accelerated if someone entirely new were to take the reins. Then again, the Liberian constitution calls for the VP to take over if the President can no longer serve, and I don't know if it's really in anyone's best interests to be going around undermining Constitutions.

Posted by jason in Movies at 00:59

Tuesday, March 25, 2003

### **The Oscars, 2003**

I liked Steve Martin. He was pretty funny. He took some low shots (especially at J. Lo, though Ben Affleck seemed amused by them), and he didn't get out a comment on Adrien Brody's kiss delivered to Halle Berry, but I think he did a good job.

Brody as Best Actor ... who saw that coming? The hype was for Daniel Day-Lewis, of course, with mutterings about how Hollywood loves Jack Nicholson (and with the number of times he was mentioned last night by Martin and others, I agree), but, while what I read said that Brody did a great job in *The Pianist*, I don't know if anyone (except Austen, who predicted a split vote between Day-Lewis and Nicholson) thought Brody had a serious shot.

The shock on Harrison Ford's face when he opened the envelope to find Roman Polanski's name sitting there for Best Director was amazing. I give him a lot of credit for not stuttering, getting his line about "The Academy accepts this on his behalf" out and walking off-stage looking only mildly dazed.

The response from the audience when the writer of *The Pianist*, Ronald Harwood, said (in essence) in his acceptance of the Best Adapted Screenplay award, "I wish I could say I say I deserve this award, but I don't. Roman Polanski deserves it," was also amusing.

By far the best moment, though, was when the presenter of Best Song opened the envelope and whispered, "Oh my," before announcing that Eminem had won. Em didn't even perform at the show, though I'm unable to find any story today online explaining why he wasn't there. The room of people I was watching with pretty much exploded when Em won. We had the usual Oscar prediction contest, and I voted my heart instead of my head on Em, but it paid off.

Posted by jason in Movies at 00:38

Thursday, March 20, 2003

### **The Limey**

I watched The Limey tonight, and really liked it. It's interesting the bits of craft that Steven Soderbergh falls back on over and over again, across his movies (example: dialogue "out of sync" with visuals (not like bad dubbing, but like the dialogue starts while we're still faded out, or as we're fading out from the last scene, or the dialogue is over a montage, etc.)).

I have to wonder whether the Don Cheadle character in Ocean's Eleven (he's uncredited! His fabulous appearance in Rush Hour 2, the best part of the movie, was also uncredited. Let's get this guy some love!) was inspired by Terence Stamp's Wilson here. Cheadle's classic line, "So unless we intend to do this job in Reno, we're in Barney. Barney Rubble. Trouble!" is used, in essence, three different times in The Limey.

I liked Luis Guzman a lot, as I did in Boogie Nights and Out of Sight, and as I'm sure I did in Magnolia and Traffic, but I don't remember him in either of those.

Nicky Katt is still the man. His role in The Way of the Gun was almost a slicker reprisal of his (smaller) part in this movie. I liked him in both of those movies as well as Insomnia and Boiler Room, though his resume is sullied by an appearance (voice only) in Waking Life. I thank Austen for pointing him out to me.

Terence Stamp did a credible Michael Caine from Get Carter, I think.

The writer, Lem Dobbs, had worked with Soderbergh before, having written Kafka. He also co-wrote my favorite movie that everyone else hated, Dark City. Now, I would have sworn to you that Rip Torn was in that movie. Apparently, he was not. I don't know what I could have been thinking.

Posted by jason in Movies at 00:36

Wednesday, March 19, 2003

### **Peter Travers on the Oscars**

So Peter Travers in Rolling Stone Issue 919 claims that Gangs of New York "dares more than any other film in the lineup" for the Best Picture Oscar. I haven't seen The Two Towers yet, but I think I can argue this point without having seen the movies: is attempting a historical epic really more daring than doing a fantasy epic?

I guess I'm biased toward the latter, but it seems that making a film with general appeal that stays true to a book that is both beloved and rightly regarded as a masterpiece is a pretty tough task. Especially when that book involves elves and orc (is that the plural of orc? I think it is: wasn't one of the last lines of The Fellowship of the Ring "Let's hunt some orc," or something like that?) and talking trees, and Gandalf and ... you get the point.

And moreover, when that book is the middle book in a trilogy. That the middle of the Star Wars trilogy is often regarded as the best movie is usually cited as evidence that George Lucas doesn't know what he's doing (he wrote and directed the first movie, and co-wrote the last, while only receiving a "story" credit on the second), rather than a note that the middle movie should be the highlight.

Oh, look, Mark Hamill has my birthday. And he was born in Oakland. And, most amazing, he's in his early 50's now. He should still be like 25.

I think this entry has trailed off. The point was only to question Travers, anyway, not make any real assertions.

Posted by jason in Movies at 00:30