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"STATE OF THE CINEMA" ADDRESS

--B RUBY RICH

SAN FRANCISCO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

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Thanks to Roxanne Messina Captor, Linda Blackaby, and Hilary Hart, for inviting me to deliver this State Of The Cinema address today, and for convincing me that it was worth doing, and that I was the person for the task.

Let me confess: I have too much to tell you today. Customarily, for this sort of speech, one is expected to identify new cinematic trends or discuss technological innovations, pinpoint countries with the next hot national cinema, analyze industry developments, or proclaim new auteurist talents. But I have too many things to talk about, and I am not so sure I can talk about all of them.

For instance, I want to talk about Uma Thurman. To start, I should tell you that, in my opinion, Quentin Tarantino's Kill Bill 2 turns Uma Thurman into a far more credible Christ figure than that poor Aramaic-spouting actor in Mel Gibson's Passion of Christ. Uma aka The Bride aka Beatrix Kiddo returns from the dead, rises from her grave, just as she arose from her coma-death-bed in Part 1, and goes about doing that most Christian of things really, punishing the heathens, just like the religious warriors who carried out the Crusades or the Inquisition – you might well find it listed under Smite thine enemies, in the index of an updated Gibsonized Bible, which I fear may not be too far off in our future. But actually, this isn't that kind of speech, so forget it.

I also want to talk to you about my passion for the new Argentine cinema, but I won't go into detail. There isn't time, and anyway, you can find the subject in the current issue of New Left Review in an article by the Argentine émigré director, who's really a Parisian in our minds by now, much like Raul Ruiz, namely one Edgardo Cozarinsky. I should mention my Argentine favorites, like Diego Lerman, Lucrecia Martel, and Pablo Trapero but actually my predecessor on this lectern Michel Ciment made the Argentine-cinema pitch last year, though certainly it all bears repeating as Martel gears up to release her second feature, La Niña Sancta, at Cannes. My perspective, though, importantly includes the influence on these younger filmmakers of their producer who also happens to have been the great Argentine director Maria Luisa Bemberg's producer, one Lita Stantic, whom I call the madrina of the New Wave, la nueva onda, of Argentine film. But never mind.

I want to share with you my excitement over recent Palestinian cinema -- with Elia Suleiman's Divine Intervention, for example, or lesser known films that I find equally inspiring. Though less cinephilic, they provide horrifyingly current views, on the ground: work by filmmakers still living under occupation, like the

refugee-camp filmmaker (self described as the first generation of Palestinians raised on UN rations) Rashid Masharawi's whose *Ticket to Jerusalem* made me understand the settlers in a way I never had before, or the NYU -educated Palestinian filmmaker Sobhi al-Zobaidi, whose *Obor Kalandia* brings us an up-close camcorder look at domestic life during the siege of Ramallah in 2002. I could talk about how thrilled I am, on this day in which we received news of the latest horrific Israeli political assassination, by the radical edges of oppositional Israeli documentary, as seen in Udi Aloni's *Local Angel* (shown last week at UC Berkeley) or the new films I'm looking forward to seeing here in the festival, *Checkpoint* and *Route 181*. But I don't have time, really, to get into that here.

I want to talk about the new Cuban documentary drama *Suite Havana* that you'll be seeing here after this lecture, but I will have the chance to do that later, before the lights go down. And I feel a special responsibility to do it right, since its modest, cultivated creator, filmmaker Fernando Perez, the gentlest of all men (as those of you who saw for instance *Life Is To Whistle*, *La Vida Es Silbar*, may have inferred), evidently poses too great a danger to Homeland Security for the U.S. to allow him into the country to attend the U.S. premiere of his film. And since Ivan Giroud, the director of *Havana's International Festival of New Latin American Cinema*, where *Suite Havana* won prizes for best film and best director, among others, and who was with us here in SF last year, is also absent. But that will come later.

Right now, it's tempting to step back a bit, survey the field, and provide you with a re-assessment of the Dogme manifesto and claims. I'd like to point out that it has functioned largely and successfully as a PR campaign and self-promotion device which would be of merely passing interest if it didn't continue to show up in columns by journalists who have little sense of film history and apparently never heard of Italian Neo-realism, the movement that really did what Dogme claims to, or the New Latin American Cinema movement, which did it Plus. Dogme's big contribution was taking the politics out of the aesthetic movements it borrowed.

And I'd better not get started on Larsy's newest opus, *Dogville* where I'd just weigh in with my portentous critical apparatus, tracing the film's ties to theatre, or to Von Trier's misanthropism and misogyny and his soapbox (I mean, cereal box) view of America. And did he mean to expose the sadism that he's kept barely under wraps in his earlier films, where it's been expressed mostly toward his actresses and imagined audience? Now, with *The Five Obstructions* and its case studies in how to dodge a disciple's sadism, we learn that sadism actually seems to permeate all of Von Trier's professional relationships.

Actually, I'd love to take the time to predict new genre mutations for you, prophesying some future proliferation of visual effects that will render human actors redundant. And I'd love to go all industrial on you, maybe discuss the implications of the Pixar-Disney split or the swallowing up of independent distribution companies and the rise of the mini-majors, the transmutation for instance of *Good Machine* into *Focus* or , at the directorial level, the transformation of Ang Lee from *The Wedding Banquet* to *The Hulk*. But that's

not quite my brief here today.

I really should comment on the ever-impending digital arrival in the sphere of exhibition and all the new options that portends -- like the DCS Cinema System, which is about to be used to connect Landmark's art-house theaters through a virtual private network via master copies of films (notice the persistent use of the quaint noun, film, that we cling to) which will be encoded as Microsoft Windows Media 9 files and sent to each movie theater over the VPN.

Once again, there's a hoped-for democratization of the multiplex, with new storefront digital cinemas on the drawing board, like the one that filmmaker Charles Burnett and entrepreneur Ben Caldwell are starting in Leimert Park in the Baldwin Hills area of Los Angeles to create new possibilities for film. It includes a component devoted to African American Cinema, and they hope to use it as a pilot to launch a national circuit based on their technology and programming.

And I'm intrigued by the new model being pioneered by Ira Deutchman and his Emerging Cinemas company, which is creating its own network of digital theaters inside existing arts and science institutions to tap into those spaces and audiences and to multiply the sites for exhibition in the US. But perhaps it's a little early for that discussion.

There are ongoing advances in digital production that are going to revolutionize, finally, filmmaking itself, and in fact already are, and certainly are making life harder for all the gatekeepers -- my hat is off here to the festival programmers -- who have to sort through stacks of them to find those worthy of your attention.

And if you want any further proof of the arrival of no-budget digital filmmaking, then consider one of the buzz films at Sundance this winter, Tarnation, a wildly inventive and bold autobiographical documentary, shot with small-format cameras over two decades, and then edited-up on a Mac with iMovie for a total hard cost of about \$200 -- and now en route to the Directors Fortnight section at Cannes. So, there, the moment we've been waiting for: when making a movie begins to rival the ease of writing a book, or dis-ease, as the case can be. It's a Garage Bands Go To The Movies kind of moment, and it could very well be that in the near future movie moguls will get the kind of shock that home-made rap music and hip-hop delivered to record execs not that many decades ago. But hey, I don't really know, maybe not.

Every year, less of the students in my class need access to editing equipment or cameras; they or their dorm-mates or their friends have them, which led last year to my favorite the-dog-ate-my-homework excuse -- by a student who complained that she'd lost access to her ex-boyfriend's mother's computer. Of course, this access has its downside, too. As the Bay Area film editor Lisa Fruchtmann told the class, which no doubt was stocked with kids stoked on the idea that Final Cut Pro leads to three picture deals -- and I quote her here from memory, so pleased was I with her message that day -- she admonished them: owning a keyboard doesn't make you a novelist.

And I quote her for two reasons – first, because the new technologies are indeed exciting and potentially (but not necessarily) democratizing in terms of access to the means of production, but second and just as importantly, because this world of film and video and digital production gets much too obsessed with technology, with its own tools of the trade, and much too under-obsessed, not obsessed at all in fact, un-interested, and indeed callously dismissive of the meanings of its work and its possible responsibilities.

Hmm, that reminds me. There was something else I want to talk about with you today. Not just about technology or genres, not just about talent or taste, not just about trends or even gravitas. No. Come to think of it, I want to talk about our current situation as audiences, about the status of foreign-language films that are the very heart of a festival like this one, about the birthright of film festivals, their political meanings and options, and about the response of mainstream cinema to our difficult historical moment. So, in the time that I have left, then:

Why do film festivals exist, why did they start, why should they continue? Today, I see film festivals as a powerful alternative to the home entertainment center, the new frontier of movie-dom that allows each individual to subsist on private pleasures in private space; they are one of the few spaces left in this country, besides farmers markets maybe, where people from vastly different communities can meet. Better, they are the place where we can learn how other people think and act and live, how the world is functioning outside our village, how other people speak, what other cultures treasure. It's where we get to see the world and feel its beating heart before our increasingly imperial government invades or bombs or silences its people.

In the beginning, film festivals were not the market-driven platforms that too many of them (not San Francisco, I hasten to add) are today. Rather, most of them were forums for prestige or status, legitimacy or sophistication, populism or snobbery, inspiration or aspiration, sexual titillation or aesthetic stimulation. Over the years, festivals have been the place where the interests of nationalism and internationalism converge. Film festivals bring the world to town, and they also bring your town to the world. There are local festivals and global festivals, festivals that show certain genres or festivals for certain self-identified communities, festivals that celebrate the status quo and festivals that jibe at it. In SF, we have one of each and then some. But never forget that the major international film festivals have equally, over the years, been political sites. Expressions of the political and battlegrounds of ideology both.

First sentiment, then: No film festivals are truly nonpolitical. That's why the Cocteau quotation held up as an epigram by the Cannes Film Festival last year was so absurd. Understandably rattled by the political tensions between Chirac and the U.S. government occasioned by France's bold opposition to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the festival appended the following statement from Jean Cocteau to its program: "The festival is an apolitical no-man's land, a microcosm of what the world would be like if people could contact each other directly and speak the same language." As if!

Consider that the first film festival, Venice, was founded in Italy during the days

of Mussolini, opening on the evening of August 6 1932, on the terrace of the Hotel Excelsior on the Lido accompanied by a message from Lumière, in a supportive telegram, hailing it as "the second invention of cinema". The Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte Cinematografica was presided over by Count Giuseppe Volpi di Misurata, a complex character who maintained some independence from the Mussolini regime. His Festival was part of his project to re-launch Venice as a resort destination, and he succeeded in obtaining an independent manifesto from the government, meaning it was free from all pressure. The regulations speak clearly of the organisers' desire to "exclude all interference of a political nature" -- winners would be chosen by the audiences and thanks to a "special concession by the Head of Government" the films would not be censored. However, in less than five years, things changed decisively.

The construction of the Palazzo del Cinema in 1937 marked the start of a new period when the fascist regime took over the Festival subjecting it to their propaganda ends, and when the Count lost control over his event. Beware of the power of buildings! Perhaps we should be grateful that this festival does not (yet?) have its own. It was in 1937 that the prize, by then known as the Coppa Mussolini, went to a hackneyed film *Scipione l'africano* with ties to Mussolini's family and honors went to a German film produced in conjunction with Goebbels' propagandea office. And it was in 1937 that the French delegation stormed out, furious that fascist disapproval had intervened to deny the prize to their entry, Renoir's *Grand Illusion* which was then banned in Germany and Italy for the crime of pacifism. The French vowed to create their own film festival where masterpieces would be recognized as such. Two years later, they founded the Cannes Film Festival. In a stroke of bad timing, its opening night was September 1, 1939 – and so the first Cannes Film Festival was cancelled after opening night because of the start of WW2: September 1 was Hitler's invasion of Poland and Neville Chamberlain's famous speech to the nation on radio.

The Soviet Union, which had placed a priority on cinema as a symbol of a new society, was not to be left behind. The first Moscow Film Festival was held in 1935 (but for one year only; it was renewed as a virtually new event in 1959, much as Cannes was, in the 50s as well; not incidentally, San Francisco's event also dates to the 50s). The president of the jury in 1935 was director Sergei Eisenstein. The grand prize went to *Chapayev* by Georgi and Sergei Vasilyev, a production of Studio Lenfilm. But the prizes to non-Soviet films are perhaps more surprising: one to French director Rene Clair's *The Last Billionaire* and one to a program of animated films by Walt Disney. In later years, one jury caused a scandal by awarding the prize to Fellini's *8-1/2*.

Then there's Berlin, where the politics at inception were at least as obvious. In 1951, six years after the end of the war, West Berlin was being touted as a "window on the free world," meaning of course the world that was not trapped behind "the Iron Curtain." The Berlin International Film Festival was founded as an initiative of the three Western Allies in post-war Berlin, an attempt to recapture the city's former cultural grandeur. It was an American film officer with the military, Oscar Martay, who put together a committee of political and movie figures to brainstorm a film festival. And it was Dr. Alfred Bauer, the well-

known film historian who was then an advisor to the British military force in postwar Berlin, who ended up as the festival's director.

Meanwhile, neither the Berlinale nor the festivals in Cannes nor Venice were unaffected by the sociopolitical protests and counterculture energies of the late 1960's. Cannes, famously, was shut down first. The Paris protests of May '68 bubbled over into the south of France and the revolution came to the Croisette. On opening night of the 1968 Cannes Film Festival, outraged filmmakers jumped onstage and held onto the theatre curtains to prevent them from opening. Truffaut, Godard, supposedly Milos Forman, a number of directors were there to denounce the festival and the government – specifically over the firing of Henri Langlois from the directorship of the Cinematheque, which recent articles have unearthed as one of the prime causes of the uproar that turned into a cultural and political watershed in France.

When they objected to the bourgeois enshrinement of the festival and demanded a parallel, independent section, The Directors Fortnight (the Quinzaine) was the result, a deliberately noncompetitive event to show films regardless of their budget or national clout. "All films are born free and equal. We must help them to remain so" said Pierre Kast. This was a sentiment directed not merely at aesthetics and formats but at the film industry, Hollywood dominance, diplomatic pressures, commercial considerations, etc. The fact that the Quinzaine today is nothing like that takes nothing away from that long-ago victory.

Film festivals were often about establishing legitimacy for dubious regimes, as though cinema was some sort of frosting to be layered upon an otherwise unappetizing layer cake of political power. There was the Tehran film festival, hosted by Empress Farah, wife of the Shah of Iran, that brought producers and celebrities there to Tehran. There was the Phillipine Film Festival under the sponsorship of Imelda Marcos, in Manila, where films could be shown in the festival that were otherwise banned in the country. I talked to one film producer who remembered attending the festival in Manila and recalled an opening gala at which Imelda Marcos actually sang to the audience. So, there's the model of festivals as playthings for the dictators' wives.

But there are so many other festivals that have come about not to foster tourism or economic development at all, but rather to foster the development of identity. In the U.S., the proliferation of Jewish film festivals, Asian-American film festivals, African American film festivals, and so on has created a range of forums where issues of identity politics can be thrashed out, in which audiences can hone their sensibilities, in which filmmakers can test their credentials against public response. I remember living in Chicago, decades ago, when the film festival there thrived because of its Eastern European audience's Cold War hunger for images and languages of the lands they'd left behind. Pre video, pre DVD, pre perestroika, those festival screenings were the only way to go home.

The late great African-American writer Toni Cade Bambara once advocated the necessity for artists to engage with what she called the "authenticating audience," the audience that can really call you out if you've got it wrong or applaud you because they know you're right. At the annual Asian-American film festivals, for example, over the years the history of the Japanese-American internment camps

has played out on screen with ever-increasing complexity, a fight for inclusion has been waged by Pacific Island peoples, truces were brokered in the early days between Taiwanese and mainland Chinese cinemas, Korean-American communities have witnessed the rise of a new South Korean cinema culture, and Hong Kong films have broken through to the mainstream.

On this count, the festival circuit that has sprung fully grown and replicated like mad internationally is the Queer film festival -- with more than a hundred now worldwide. There, low-budget video work that shows nowhere else is fully booked year-round, traveling from country to country without the benefit of a distributor. The queer festival circuit has become a production engine as well as an exhibition circuit, driving filmmakers to supply the endless material needed to fill its screens. But like the ethnic-specific events, this is one festival idea that didn't originate with city leaders or governmental funding. Sometimes, still, festivals can spring up organically to fill political needs. They can be sites for identify formation, for people to come to be in community, to feel a sense of belonging in an otherwise alienating culture, places where for at least the length of a film or video program, in at least the space of a lobby, the word can be a different place. I once called SF's edition "the gay Cannes," and I wasn't kidding.

There are lots of styles of film festivals. There are those that emphasize glamour, with glitz and socialites and sex; there are those for cinephiles, political progressives, and auteurs, all dedicated to anti-glamor, if anything; there are those founded by renegades breaking with established ways of seeing things, breaking with commercial formulas, in other words, the explorers and "early adopters;" there are those for the benefit of particular localities or interests, from Provincetown to Taormina; and yes, there are now those festivals that are intended to convey hipness, style, consummate modernity, and exclusivity. Here in SF, so long as opening night is a Jim Jarmusch movie with Tom Waits and RZA up on stage, well, I think we're safe.

If as I've already implied the 80s-90s marked the development of home video as a format, the VCR and then DVD as the essential domestic appliance, and the development of the internet all united into the modern home entertainment center, then film had to find a way to persuade audiences that there was something worth leaving home for, something out there that the living-room couldn't provide. Crowds, excitement, community, visiting stars, foreign directors ... in short, an event. Film had to become a one-time event, like an opera or a concert, for instance, something with a short shelf life that had to be seen live for the experience. It was the film festival, then, that could pull people out the door. Thus, the proliferation of the festival until every town needs to have at least one, until festivals are far more prevalent than, say, newspapers.

I did a lot of research before coming before you today. And I read a few books on festivals: William Goldman's book, *The Hype and the Glory*, on Cannes, published in 1990; Roger Ebert, *Two Weeks In The Mid-Day Sun*, again on his Cannes experience; Brian D Johnson's *Brave Films, Wild Nights*, written on the occasion of the Toronto International Film Festival's 20th anniversary; and Kenneth Turan's recent history, *Sundance to Sarajevo: Film Festivals and the World They Made*. And in all this reading, I discovered something interesting.

Everyone has great stories. But that's it: nobody writes about film festivals in any serious way.

Talk to any festival curator or programmer, and I've been one, and everyone will say the same thing: it's all about the films. And when I attend a festival, I feel the same way. It becomes all about taste and discovery. I still remember where I was sitting, in what row of which theatre, when I saw Claire Denis's Beau Travail in the Toronto Film Festival as a civilian. I remember holding my breath for what seemed like hours in the NY Film Festival throughout the premiere of The Gate of Heavenly Peace, the landmark documentary on Tiananmen Square. I can still remember where I was at Sundance when I saw Afterlife by Hirokazu Kore-Eda. And some of you may remember sitting here in SF as the first audience ever to see Spike Lee's She's Gotta Have It. Those films were profoundly life-altering films for me and many others. It's a dark day when such a film does not come along. I count on them to get me from one season to the next, from one festival to the next. And while they have little in common, they do have one thing: their language is not white English. And that's not incidental to my enjoyment.

Part of what film festivals have always done is to invite films in which other languages are spoken and other cultures are made tangible. This is not the once fashionable academic split of the self and the other. Rather, film festivals at their best have always demonstrated a route out of that binarism by bivouacking a trail right through its core: a way to propel the self through subjectivity into the skin, the drama, the preoccupations and mortality and immortality of the other. Film festivals have succeeded in extending humanity beyond their immediate communities and bestowing it upon cultures seen only on screen.

OK, not always. In the film festival milieu, exoticism and eroticism have also been powerful calling cards. But even those categories have been fraught with conflict and collision. For decades, while puritanical standards restrained local production, foreign films were the place to find sex. Countries and continents were stereotyped. Europe was the site of sophistication: French films taught sexual savoir faire, Swedish films taught positions, then along came Japanese films to combine the explicit with the kinky. Nowadays, French films are once again the source of sex and shock thanks to Catherine Breillat, Gaspar Noe, Bruno Dumont, and others.

While censorship in earlier times of film festivals meant political censorship, and still often does, more often today the censorship is aimed at sexual codes and normative social practices to be enforced at all odds against these pernicious outside influences. To the meddling government, then, foreign cinema is a Trojan horse smuggling in values inimical to the protected society. If in the old days the government was indeed spying on the festival itself, today it's out in the open slapping its hand and stopping the public in its tracks. Yes, film festivals continue to have political import in this most immediate way, challenging local norms and foreign policies, bringing that terribly dangerous medium to bear on taboos and transgressions, crossing borders and boundaries.

In an environment in which marketing drives film exhibition, consider the notion that film festivals have become a global circuit that competes with Hollywood's marketing juggernaut— an alternate worldwide circuit that allows films from outside the U.S. to find recognition. And audiences. Awards. Buzz.

Marketability. Fame and renown. The film festival circuit is the cultural World Cup, unpredictable in its stars and scores, exciting, with a climax of national triumph and personal victory. (And, might I add, that I love the World Cup even more because it's not dominated by the U.S., at least in the male version.)

Consider the film festival as a political intervention into the market monopoly, a thorn in the side of Jack Valenti, a counter-offensive of imagination and difference. And of language, above all language. Cinematic language, yes, but also the language spoken by those billions of people in the world who do not speak English. "Everyone in the world is basically the same," my partner Mary's mother loves to say, she who hardly ever travels. And Mary, who has always traveled, always answers "No, mother, they are all different."

I've recently written a chapter for a new anthology, *Subtitles*, edited by the filmmaker Atom Egoyan and the Canadian scholar Ian Balfour, on the subject of the foreignness of foreign films. I have been fascinated by a US phenomenon of the past two decades: the crafting of film trailers that make it appear that films from Italy, say, or Japan, actually have English as their dialogue language. Not dubbed, but not subtitled either. What on earth do American audiences think? For that essay, I've studied the marketing habits of the 80s and 90s, interviewed some of the principals, and drawn some conclusions of my own about the connection between the monolingual habits of my country and its foreign-policy disasters.

But film festivals have never hidden their languages. They have always sought and served multi-lingual audiences. In many cities, increasingly, the film festival is the only place that such diverse communities can be seen to come together – at least in the lobby -- and to meet each other, to debate ideas in public, to open minds and hearts to others, to extend the boundaries of their own daily lives and to imagine and empathize with stories and players, characters and dramas, cultures and times, entirely different from their own. In film festivals, audiences may vote for their favorites. In film festivals, viewers may question makers. In film festivals, stars may mingle with plebians as films from rich countries and poor countries get to share the limelight. And festival programming isn't driven by the imaginary tastes of 20 year olds. Sue Jean Halvorsen, a Film Society member and a member of the Key Cinema Club that I host, recently forwarded me a comment by German director Thomas Schadt, reporting on statistics that showed the audience for film festivals was, in fact, women over the age of 57. I haven't had the chance to substantiate that, but asking around, I found many folks who agreed, shifting the age to 50. So, take that, Hollywood marketers.

I have begun to think of film festivals as the last refuge of democracy in this increasingly controlled and manacled world of ours, the last place where a true participatory discourse can prevail and where persons of deep-seated convictions and open minds can come to exchange views, surrender control, and be changed

forever by what goes by on screen. We may give up on participatory government some days, but there's always hope in the cinema to get us by. And sitting there in the dark, it's still possible to imagine that a film could change the world, one audience at a time. No wonder that Hubert Bals, the founder of the Rotterdam festival, used to insist (as February's Sight & Sound reminded us) that visits to the cinema ought to be available on prescription from one's doctor.

I want to emphasize that no such prescription for mainstream movies would be healthy. Indeed, it could be toxic. Let me say a few words, as I near the end, on cinematic abdication (and no, that's not the term for some new special effects software). Mainstream cinema, especially in this country, has utterly abdicated its throne – that is, its mission, and its own historical moment. It has turned its back on what is going on in the world, and has become a dark enabler, enabling the American public to do the same.

I started noticing the trend this fall, when the US military started making headlines in its grappling with the enemies of freedom in tribal triangles and mountains throughout Afghanistan and Iraq. While the movies enjoyed far better ratings this past fall winter and spring than the wars, there's a dispiriting link between them that has something to do with the old biblical theme of revenge. As if the tactic of embedding journalists weren't enough of a success, recent movie slates have made it look as though an uncannily crafty Pentagon has started embedding screenwriters, too.

Don't get me wrong: I'm not necessarily talking about war movies. In the fall, I was studying instead Clint Eastwood's *Mystic River*, Tarantino's *Kill Bill: Volume 1*, and *21 Grams*. They were all interesting films, albeit in different genres, as different as a character-driven morality tale, an action-driven cartoon, and an action-driven morality tale can be. Yet look at what's going on in them.

In *Mystic River*, vigilante justice was meant to be a value of Boston's backward working-class enclaves. A bungled job carried out by homeboys was supposedly meant to reinforce the message that the men in suits, the professionals, know best. Just leave the job to them. But as Sean Penn's Jimmy said, toward the end of the film and before Penn himself ever went to Baghdad, too bad they weren't faster. Justice can't wait. Or, in this case, injustice. And as everybody knows, when a director casts Penn in full passionate explosion as the vigilante and Kevin Bacon with cool-as-a-cucumber repression as the cop, the real message being delivered is hardly clear-cut. There's no real catharsis to be had in killing the wrong guy, or capturing him in his hole and spiriting him away – [where? does anyone know?] -- as the US public is just beginning, perhaps, to figure out.

And in part I of *Kill Bill*, which I found infinitely inferior to the follow-up, I was disturbed to find a public matinee audience convulsed in laughter at the cartoonish killings. Once upon a time, such laughter in the face of violence was considered subversive. A long time back and several wars ago, for instance, Francis Ford Coppola could launch a savage critique of the US war on Vietnam via *Apocalypse Now*'s savagely ironic appeal to the dark humor underlining a darker policy. And far more recently, talented David O. Russell managed to do

the same with his brilliant *Three Kings*, a film that ought to be revived right this minute and put back on American screens, if theatres weren't too afraid of our home-grown vigilantes busting up the place; maybe at least the *Roxie* could put it on permanent exhibition as a cautionary tale that this administration, much as we're learning in the 9/11 commission hearings, just plain ignored. Maybe the killing in *Kill Bill Vol 1* was funny to the audience, but of course that was months before the *NY Times* put its first photo of soldier corpses coming back from Iraq on the front page, months before we noticed they're not coming home in body bags this time but in cardboard boxes.

The third film of the trio that bothered me so much in the fall was *21 Grams*, the Hollywood debut of Mexican wunderkind Alejandro González Iñárritu, a mystery caper with a nasty undertow of revenge: vigilante justice, again, in the name of injustice. You got to see the praise at the Oscars where Errol Morris distinguished himself with his solitary statement of political awareness.

But what's up with all the revenge? My colleague Roger Garcia, who joined with me and Jon Else and the *Bay Guardian* editors in the discussion you may have read this week, and whose taste I invariably salute, insisted to me: all films are about revenge. Here I don't agree. Not the ones I like. I'd prefer a different sort of "R" rating on my movies – not revenge, but a more mature emotion, like, *Regret*. As in: I regret that Hollywood isn't doing better. I regret that revenge is being mixed with denial into a lethal multiplex cocktail, basic training for the numbed mind; I regret that the narrow-casted perspective of so many Americans is being reduced even further, the focal length of the lens shortened and shortened, by mainstream movies bent on violent and angry revenge.

Instead of rising to the occasion, instead of inventing new dramas, narratives, plots, or characters, new modes of comprehension or apprehension, to engage with a world irrevocably different from the one to which it used to sell tickets pre-911, the movie machine has taken refuge in old fantasies of triumphalism, drawn from the past, from mythology, from old stories meant to lull the world into a delusional slumber.

The *Lord of the Rings* series has been a huge hit, every part of it, culminating in this year's oscar finale, not just because of a built-in Tolkien audience and Peter Jackson's skill with traditional special-effects and action; no, it's been a runaway success, I contend, much more because of how its structure taps into deep feelings about world chaos, about saving the world and rooting out true evil, which in a fortuitous Afghanistan pre-reference, is off hiding in caves. And look, ordinary lads can do it (no women, never women, in any of these fantasy triumphs)! And then there are the lesser films, all feathering the same American nest of escape from terror, impotence, and anxiety into delusional, imaginary triumph: *Seabiscuit*; *Master and Commander*; *The Alamo*; *Pirates of the Caribbean*; and, in an odd reversal of the notion of triumph that I suppose this concept can't entirely explain, that violently abject whirlwind, *Gibson's Passion*.

Yes, I know, they're only movies. Okay then, what to call this new genre? A *Viagra cinema*, perhaps, to pump up the old vigor; a *Geritol cinema*, with

nostalgia for the old WW2 generation; or maybe a Zoloft cinema, relieving doom and gloom with chemical substances, numbing us to the blows of the world off-screen. It's as though the movie apparatus has taken its cues from the worst of this administration's speeches and moved effortlessly into total deniability and escapism, into a cinematic fundamentalism that does none of us any good, pumping up an amusement park meant not for weekend or summertime relaxation but an amusement park meant to obliterate consciousness, 24/7.

We are living in a country drugged on so-called entertainment. The movies have become the Sirens that Odysseus had to plug his ears against in self-defense. They collaborate in leading us to our doom, encouraging us to hide from the Bogeyman, pay up at the Multiplex and always, obediently, to play Follow The Leader.

Where is our modern Circe, the sorceress who can teach us to plug our ears against the seductive, destructive Sirens of our time? Perhaps the world of film festivals and the festival of world cinema that I so cherish can't do that all on its own. But at least it's a start.

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