



Affirmation? New York Film Festival Report 2007 (Part Two)

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The most “cheer” spread by this year’s offerings, if we stretch the point, was to be found in a number of uncertain nods to the persistence and endurance of the human capacity for–being human. Considering *No Country For Old Men*, *Redacted* and their anxious ilk, this might have been of some consolation if it were not for the way even the more affirmative entries simultaneously evoked crushing environmental and personal obstacles between us and our finer ideals and impulses. The films discussed below whistle in the dark of war, murder, fanaticism, adultery, and/or abandonment. Though they generally made their way with the aid of gorgeous cinematography, editing, sound design, and frame compositions, to achieve their modicum of reassurance, they each get stuck in or play with the implications of painful or questionable philosophical perspectives.

Alexandra aka *Aleksandra* (RUSSIA/FRANCE)

Written and directed by Aleksandr Sokurov;
produced by Laurent Danielou; cinematography
by Alexandr Burov; edited by Sergei Ivanov;
music by Andre Sigle; Galina Vishnevskaya and
Vasily Shevtsov B & W 90 mins.

Stellet Licht aka *Silent Light* (MEXICO/FRANCE/THE NETHERLANDS)

Written and directed by Carlos Reygadas;
produced by Jaime Romandia and Carlos Reygadas;
cinematography by Alexis Zabe; edited by Natalia
Lopez; Cornelio Wall, Miriam Toews, Maria Pankratz
Color. 127 mins.

Married Life (USA)

Directed by Ira Sachs; written by Ira Sachs and Oren Moverman;
produced by Steve Golin and Ira Sachs; cinematography by
Peter Demming; edited by Affonso Goncalves; music by
Dickon Hinchliffe; Pierce Brosnan, Chirs Cooper, Patricia Clarksdon,
Rachel McAdams. Color. 90 mins.

The Man From London (HUNGARY/FRANCE/GERMANY)

Directed by Bela Tarr; written by Bela Tarr and Laszlo Kraznahorkai;
produced by Gabor Teni; cinematography by Fred Kelemen; edited
by Agnes Hranitzky (and co-director); music by Mihaly Vig; Miroslav
Krobot; Tilda Swinton, Erika Bok, Janos Derzsi. Black and White.
135 mins.

Persepolis (FRANCE/USA)

Written and directed by Marjane Satrapi and
Vincent Paronnaud; produced by Marc-Antoine Robert
and Xavier Rigault; animation coordinator Christian
Desmares; editor/compositor Stephane Roche,
music Olivier Bernet; the voices of Catherine Deneuve,
Chiara Mastroianni, Danielle Darrieux. B & W. 95 mins.

The Darjeeling Limited (USA)

Directed by Wes Anderson, written by Wes Anderson,

Jason Schwartzman, and Roman Coppola, produced by Wes Anderson, Scott Rudin, Roman Coppola, Lydia Dean Pilcher; cinematography by Robert Yeoman; edited by Andrew Weisblum; music by Randall Poster; Owen Wilson, Adrien Brody, Jason Schwartzman, and Anjelica Huston. Color. 91 mins.

Alexandra is about an old Russian woman who visits an army base in Chechnya, the Russian Iraq. The opening scenes engage our curiosity through Viscontian slight of hand. As in *Ossessione*, for quite some time, director Aleksandr Sokurov doesn't let us see anything but the back of the head of his well padded, white-haired protagonist, Alexandra (Galina Vishnevskaya), as she exits a train in a dusty, forlorn Chechnyan backwater. The revelation of her face does not pack (anything remotely like) the erotic punch that we get when Visconti's camera finally reveals Massimo Girotti frontally, but the wait does perhaps create added value for Vishnevskaya's old visage. Old does not usually sell. The build up of desire to see who she is identifies a shrewd director who aims to engage the audience in spite of itself. The mystery continues as the brusque, self-assured Alexandra, perhaps not the most sympathetic of protagonists thus far, refuses the help of local Chechnyans with her luggage and is soon greeted by a group of Russian soldiers who behave in a deferential manner, as if she were a high ranking official. Unless the spectator knows what is coming, the vague, if unlikely, promise of celebrity is in the air. But, when Alexandra arrives at the local army base, and we learn that she is coming to visit Denis her grandson, a handsome and buff Captain, who is overjoyed to see her, something more important and much more basic than celebrity greets us. The welcome provided by those under Denis's command turns out to be more than just the willingness of underlings to curry favor with a superior officer; it is an echo of the hunger of young men in an alien outpost for mothering. This may surprise American audiences. It is the last thought that occurs to those who make American war films; which means the importance of the maternal finds no place in them at all.

Inevitably, there must be comparisons between *Alexandra* and Brian De Palma's *Redacted* (please see Part One), as both open up windows onto failed military and political policies, the bill for which is being paid not by the authorities who made countless mistakes but by the young whose lives are being bartered. The contrast between these films could not be greater. Where De

Palma's central point in *Redacted* is that humanity has been the first and most persistent casualty in Iraq (and foregrounds the paternal), in *Alexandra*, the war's horrors engender a collective desire for the underside of the maternal wing. Alexandra, a magnet for the young men who serve under Denis, allows them a way to intensify their memories of home, while preventing them from wallowing in the self-pity that threatens as they congregate around her. The initial off-putting, cool-eyed realism with which this traveling grandmother greets all situations slowly reconfigures itself, as the film unfolds, into an emblem of the solidity of the genuine in human life which ultimately transcends the idiotic mistakes that have inspired those who have been neither so down-to-earth nor so honest in their engineering of the invasion of Chechnya. The obscenities of the American barracks in *Redacted* are missing entirely here. So is the homicidal xenophobia against the Iraqis with which De Palma endows the American forces. All reports support De Palma's depiction of the attitudes of American soldiers toward the Iraqis; however, I know nothing about the accuracy of the picture painted by Sokurov. However, much as I was touched by the warmth of its depiction of fellow feeling across the trenches, I have to believe that it is at least somewhat idealized, though I suspect Sokurov has his reasons for his portrayal of his war, just as De Palma has his. If De Palma's raw brutality in *Redacted* is an attempt to cut through the soporific and disingenuous denials spewed by the current occupant and the media he controls to a great extent, the more hopeful among us might say that in emphasizing the best in humanity Sokurov hopes to endow his audience with the benefits of good models of behavior. In any case, in *Alexandra*, the Russians and the Chechnyans *do* mistrust and misunderstand each other. There *is* mutual fear. But there is also an essential desire on both sides to connect on a human level. The soldiers in *Alexandra* are reminiscent of the portraits of American boys in World War II films made during that period. Even the sets are reminiscent of those "we're all in this together" mid-century movies.

A certainty that the war will blow away at least some of the Chechnyans and the Russians whom we see reaching out for each other hangs over Sokurov's film. There is no suggestion that human love can overcome the perils of military combat, for which there appears to be no reason, as in *Redacted*. But *Alexandra* insists on the importance of moments. There are moments of warm generosity between Alexandra and some local Chechnyan women and the illusion of possibility when they ask for her address as she leaves the camp. On each of the women's faces is written the likely futility of the gesture, but the assertion of that hope stands as a bulwark for each of them in

this storm. Likewise, the reunion of Alexandra and Denis is shadowed by the probability that either Alexandra will die of causes associated with old age before the war is over, or that her beloved Denis will die in combat before she can see him again. But they robustly take what they can get of life in the time allotted to them. They pass through moments of anger, affection, and even a physicality tinged with eroticism. The night before Alexandra leaves, in an inverted pieta, Denis embraces his grandmother to reassure her that "all will be well," and his gesture is charged with a stunning beauty that unleashes the erotic bonds embedded in all family ties. The next morning, Denis and his men are called into action and uncertainty envelops all. In *Alexandra*, humanity rises to the occasion in the face of death, no matter how perverse or absurd the situation. Sokurov lavishes a compassionate love on these ordinary people bereft of any of the comforts of a civilization that has betrayed them, as they cherish the significant moments of human affection they can pull out of the meaningless rubble around them.

Stellet Licht is also about the ability of human love to transcend the wreckage caused by our demons. It tells the story of an adulterous affair in a Mennonite community in Northern Mexico, where the people who live in a self-contained religious society still speak a medieval German dialect called *Plautdietsch*. There really is such a dialect spoken today by Mennonite diasporic groups who live in Mexico and South America, as well as by some Mennonites in the United States and Canada. However, the film, not a documentary, weaves a tale of fiction and miracles. Zaccharias (Jacobo Klassen) is so possessed by uncontrollable desire for Marianne (Maria Pankratz) that he can see no other way for himself than to leave his wife Esther (Miriam Toews) and their five children. Esther and Zaccharias handle the situation with a low key stoicism that attempts to maintain civility and to permit the family to continue to function. But Zaccharias has crying jags and Esther is so distressed that she dies when her heart gives out during a rainstorm—it would seem that she has succumbed to a broken heart. The film ends with Esther's funeral during which, as she lies in state in a room adjoining the one in which her loved ones are gathered in mourning, she appears to be resurrected. Her younger children witness her re-entry into life and call their father, who, understandably pays no attention to what sounds like a fantasy. But we too see Esther open her eyes. Are we being given a privileged glimpse of the subjective desires of her children? Or into the heart of divine mystery? In the last frames of the film, when Zaccharias agrees to look in on Esther, it seems as if questions will be answered. But although director Carlos Reygadas keeps us in the room with Esther, as she, alone now, murmurs words of pity for her

husband, he doesn't permit us to witness the moment when Zaccarias walks through the door separating them. Will he find the corpse he expects or the revived woman that we and the children have seen?

In setting his mystical tale in a community cut off from the larger culture that surrounds it, Reygadas uses a variant of the strategy of isolating a cast of characters on a deserted island. The situation gains intensity from the sense that no one can leave and everyone must allow things to play themselves out as they will. To his credit, in choosing a Mennonite community for the setting of this magic tale, Reygadas scrupulously avoids using the clichés that have become part of the mass media playbook regarding this ascetic Christian sect. No one is fanatically austere, immaculately pure, or unbearably naive. No one threatens shunning. There are no hypocritical bearded elders having their ways with beautiful, clear complexioned, young girls while enforcing impossible moral standards on others. Rather, Zaccharias's family and co-religionists are earthy, disciplined, and socialized to respect the daily contact they will have with each other and the soil. The unlikeliness of miracles among such down-to-earth people throws the audience back on an appreciation of a universe of infinite possibilities that stands apart from the ways of human cultures. This universe cradles a limited people in an infinite embrace. Reygadas evokes that infinity through his astonishing visual and sound design.

Stellet Licht begins with a passage from the unlimited starry sky to the local action of the movie, as a montage slowly moves us out of the stars and onto the finite plain on which human life is enacted. The film ends with an inversion of that passage back to infinity. On the plane of human existence, Reygadas impresses on the viewer the silence of reality into which the noise of culture intrudes itself. Only a small part of the dazzling beauty of existence, human beings are anything but grand. As Zaccharias, Esther, and Marianne struggle with the forces at work on their emotions and desires, they appear as leaves in the wind. In *Stellet Licht*, the world cannot be judged by whether or not it conforms to human happiness, or to the rules of justice we have invented. With a fatalism associated with medieval Germanic cultures, Reygadas minimizes human will.

The miraculous tinge of the final scene has angered more than one rationalist, as it radiates with a promise of understanding and forgiveness. Moreover, Reygadas's message of transcendence may not play well for some viewers simply because the agrarian community he has chosen as his stage, so mildly affected by the industrial revolution, may not seem to have

pertinence for those of us who live where the beauty of the creation is being deconstructed by war and industry. What has the comparatively benign lust of Zaccharias to do with the much more venomous lusts playing out in Washington DC and many of the major world capitals? If our erring patriarchs are in the grip of something beyond their control, they are also systematically depriving us (with impunity) of the pristine comforts of mundane level on which we live as they cavalierly despoil the earth, air, and water around us. In the world in which I live, the environment cannot become an emblem of a larger plane of abundant life and energy, as Reygadas attempts to create it. For all we know, the pollution in easy view also reaches unremarked up into the stars, which no longer seem immune to the predations of human greed. There is a cloistered virtue to the beauty of *Stellet Licht* that prevents it from being a ringing affirmation, wondrous as it is as a cinematic experience.

Still Reygadas's cloistered comfort is preferable to the version of optimism proffered by Ira Sachs in his latest film, *Married Life*, at least to those who continue to believe in the prohibition against murder. At his press conference, Sachs blithely told the assembled that his film was an ode to his belief in second chances. All well and good. Yet some may question whether this happy privilege should also be extended to killers who have managed to conceal their deeds, the situation of Harry Allen (Chris Cooper), the protagonist of his film. The story of the film, which concerns Harry's plan to kill his wife because he doesn't want her to suffer when he leaves her, is based on a British novel called *Five Roundabouts to Heaven*, by Jonathan Bingham. According to what we heard at the press conference, in Bingham's book there are serious consequences to Harry's actions. (I have not read the novel.) In the film, *Married Life*, however, there are no consequences to even the most heinous crimes. Says Ira Sachs, "These are not bad people." He rejoices in Harry's new beginning as the film ends at a party and, throughout the film, he surrounds Harry, his friends, and his former lover with sumptuously beautiful sets, elegant cinematography, and perfectly realized period costumes.

It's the late 1940s; you know, that time when film noir was emerging, through its shadow haunted black and white photography, as an expression of American fear of what the war and post war events was doing to the structure of American society. *Married Life* uses luscious color to achieve a similar effect of secrets abounding, and well it should. All the central characters are committing adultery, lying to the people who trust them, and resonating with irony as they break all of the ten commandments. But Harry is not just sleeping with Kay (Rachel McAdams) the

beautiful widow of a World War II pilot, he is also plotting to kill his wife Pat (Patricia Clarkson) so she won't feel bad when he leaves her. He goes to lengths to find a poison that will do the job without his getting caught. What would be the point of punishment for his crime? After all, he's trying to arrange the world kindly. For his maximum pleasure. And Pat's minimum pain. (Apparently in Harry's philosophy losing your life does not count as an irrefutable bummer.) Harry unburdens his tormented soul to his good friend, handsome, suave Richard (Pierce Brosnan), supposedly a confirmed bachelor, to relieve the tension. And Richard concerned for his friend's sanity and appalled by his intention to inflict bodily harm on Pat, who is also his friend, immediately notifies the authorities. NO, he doesn't. Richard immediately conceives a passion for Harry's mistress Kay—a girl with a face and figure to kill for—and Kay reciprocates. No one but us knows that, meanwhile, wife Pat is also having an affair and planning to leave Harry.

It's all played for high melodrama, not the camp it sounds like in this summary. And when the moment arrives that Harry doesn't kill his wife, because of an accident beyond his control, the film asks us to rejoice in his realization that living with Pat might not be so bad after all. Always out for his own comfort, what's Harry to do when he discovers that he not only hasn't killed Pat, but that Kay is now in love with Richard? Makes sense, doesn't it? We're also supposed to feel warm and runny inside because Richard has after all these years, found true love. To do this we must write off the fact that Harry has killed the family dog as a dry run, to make sure the poison is painless and effective and that Richard helped him bury the dog's body. Oh, just a dog, I can hear Ira Sachs saying. Harry never killed a PERSON. Let's forget that it isn't Harry's fault that he doesn't kill Pat. And that Richard is guilty of important sins of omission. After all, Richard shows great tact in not telling Kay what Harry had in mind. (Why make trouble?) And by waiting a year before socializing with Pat and Harry after he and Kay marry. Dear Harry needs time to heal from his infatuation with Kay. With friends like these, who needs tainted Chinese imports and waterboarding?

So, these are not bad people? What, some may wonder, it would take to earn Sachs's disapproval. It's times like this when those same some may feel that the old PCA had something. Movie characters did not poison the unoffending family dog with impunity back in the day in which *Married Life* was set. They also did not get free passes from a writer and director who never speculated about whether if they were ready to kill their nearest and dearest once (or acquiesce to the killing) they might not be prepared to do it again for equally self-serving reasons. This was the

“happiest” ending in NYFF 2007. Some may wonder if the soldiers who raped and murdered the Iraqi teenager in *Redacted* ghost wrote *Married Life*.

The Man From London, a film based on *L’Homme de Londres*, a novel by Georges Simenon, is also about murder, but this murder gets beyond the planning stage, no dog is killed in the process, and, in the time tested way, it is followed by an official investigation. Certainly, director Bela Tarr does not give this murderer a free pass. However, he does construct the crime film in an unusual way. Neither killer nor victim is ever really known or of felt concern to us. Rather, Tarr explores the place of anonymous breakdowns of social order in our personal lives. Most of the time, the mills of justice grind in the background of *The Man From London*, which foregrounds the perceptions and point of view of an accidental witness to the murder, who, like us, has no connection with anyone involved. Centered inside the daily life of an ordinary man, *The Man From London* is principally about the texture of the world of the protagonist, Maloin (Miroslav Krobot), a portly middle aged working man, as he experiences it first hand: fog, light, shadow, skin, walls, floors, windows, sounds. These are much closer to Maloin than any broken laws involving strangers. Tarr does not deliver the Hitchcockian ordinary man “excitingly” caught up in crime. Crime, per se, is not a break from the boredom of the mundane; here, it is a phantom occurrence for those burrowed into the center of the mundane details of their lives, as most of us are. In other words, Tarrs film asks us to entertain the possibility that it is only on an abstract plane that murder committed by and on strangers causes a stir and demands an investigation. With this in mind, it becomes a matter of course that the investigation must be undertaken by a stranger, the man from London, since abstraction entails distancing from an enveloping context. Only the appearance of the man from London, a Mr. Brown (Janos Derzsi), impels Maloin to struggle with his de facto alienation, as an ordinary man, from moral principle, an alienation linked, surprisingly, to the absence of desire in his daily grind.

The film begins at a harbor, where the murder takes place. We see the incident, as Maloin does, through windows, from heights, through structures that obstruct our view. Tarr’s preternaturally sensuous images have far more presence than the distantly observed murder, which we see through the murk of Maloin’s becalmed life that can barely compute anything outside the accustomed sights. This is anything but a police procedural. Mr. Brown, arrives and carries on his investigation on the periphery of the film’s field of vision, and ours. The detective, so much the vital center of every film he or she generally appears in, here is secondary to the slightly

better than subsistence living situation of Maloin and his family, which is impressed on us as in all its gritty detail. Maloin's world, compelling as it is in its "thingness," is the obverse of the consumerist society. Tarr's revolutionary point, in part, is that things do not have to have designer flair to captivate us. They hold us because they are what defines the ordinary life. Maloin's is defined by the surfaces around him as he trudges back and forth between home and work where he has a position of a kind of watchman and makes his sidetrips to a café. These are surfaces that demand only stock responses; barring the way to challenge, new decisions, the pushing of envelopes. It is only the investigation of the official outsider, that prevents the crime from being digested by the enzymes of repetition and routine.

Slowly, as Brown makes his investigatorial rounds, Maloin must decide whether or not he will reveal himself as a witness. The most significant development of this new twist of circumstances in Maloin's life is that, because he is suddenly faced with a moral abstraction, desire also briefly enters into the implacable world of things in which Maloin is virtually embalmed. The flicker of desire manifests itself principally in his decision to buy his daughter a fur, a feeble, transient, silly stirring toward another kind of relationship to things, one that includes the abstractions of luxury and style. Thus the murder, which will inevitably be sorted out by an abstract process of justice, becomes significant in the telling of Maloin's tale principally because it highlights an unsuspected relationship between desire and the law in ordinary human life.

The first impression of the ordinary is that, devoid of desire, it is ugly. A moody, dank nature envelops clothing, human physicality, shops, apartments, machinery, and industrial sites in Maloin's world, on which every assault time can make on matter is evident. Even the café to which the characters repair in their leisure moments and the fur shop with its version of luxury items contain only a hair's difference from Maloin's functional apartment and the industrial harbor watch tower. The fur, the shop, and the café can only represent the stuff that dreams are made of within a context such as Maloin's. And yet there is a tradeoff for the brilliantly evoked grittiness that abounds. Tarr shows us a world of absolute solidity. *The Man From London* affirms the animal world of here and now with an assurance that emphasizes something awesome, if not beautiful, in "the thing itself," obstreperously present, untouched by either human fantasy nor human hunger for the ideal, this includes concepts of guilt or innocence in the face of crime.

The alignment in Tarr's film between desire with moral sense is an inversion of what is typically presented in commercial entertainment. Think of Hollywood's almost obligatory

opposition between the repressed man of intellect and the sexualized man of action, free to be guided by physical animality. By contrast, Tarr defines our animal nature as conservative and profoundly unsexy. Tarr impassively acknowledges the power of the unvarnished thing, the basic body, giving it points for the marvel of its durable intractability. However, because Tarr lives in a moral universe, he achieves his drama by detailing the odd relationship of materiality, whether human or inanimate, to the abstractions that make up law and ethics—and fire the imagination. Tarr depicts a riveting disconnect between the terrain of daily experience, on one hand, and, on the other hand, yearning and the alien duties of “the watch in the night,” that is “the man from London,” a stranger who arrives for a brief stay in which he holds the world accountable to the ineffable law, and then disappears again, leaving everything as it was before. Indeed, at the end of the film, Brown, fortifies the borders between the two terrains by absolving Maloin, who could be prosecuted by perjury for withholding information at first, of any moral responsibility, telling him to go home and forget all about what he has seen.

What would be from a more clichéd point of view a happy ending, in Tarr’s film, closes the door briefly opened for Maloin to his chance for freedom of spirit, a chance that he keenly understands even more powerfully at the moment that it eludes him. The main point of this journey through which Tarr leads us, which he enunciates in the press kit book we received, is that Maloin’s dilemma reveals “man’s indestructible longing for a life of freedom and happiness.” Forgetting for the moment the sexism of Tarr’s verbal construction, his unexpected linkage of the freedom to desire with the freedom to make moral decisions permits a bracing contrast with the dogmas of consumerist cultures that seek to identify desire with objects, while hiding the facts that their glamour comes only from our freedom to imaginatively accord them the magic of beauty and that our ability to know right from wrong is part of the same freedom. Yet at the same time, Tarr casts a Rousseauian shadow, if we are born with the impulse toward freedom, everywhere we are (mostly) in chains.

Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* is, by contrast, almost entirely a narrative of desire that gratifies its heroine’s powerful longing for freedom and self-definition. In Satrapi’s world, however, if dreams can come true, they don’t necessarily ultimately enter into reality in the shape we at first imagine. *Persepolis* is a highly sophisticated feature length cartoon based on a series of graphic novels by Marjane Satrapi that relate in fictionalized form her upbringing in Iran as it went through the Islamic revolution. The film satirizes the extremism that idealism can breed and the hedonistic

hypocrisy of the youth culture of Europe during the last decades of the 20th century. It also celebrates Satrapi's grandmother (the voice of Danielle Darrieux), a free thinking rebel, fictionalized in the film with a delightful esprit de jeunesse, despite her years, who Satrapi credits with inspiring her own buoyant determination to find a way past the repressive revolutionary Islamic regime in Iran.

The main title of *Persepolis* is showered by a cascade of blossoms, which seems to be anomalous considering the political nature of the film. Yet, eventually, we find out why that main title design was chosen, a delightful revelation that I will leave a surprise for all those who plan to see the film. The narrative begins in an airport with Marjane (voice of Chiara Mastroianni), as an adult, as she recalls the important events of her life. Satrapi makes use of the power of animation to give a smart economy to her recounting of the disappointed idealism of many of those who were eager for the overthrow of the Shah, which did not lead to the freedom the intelligentsia had imagined. She also uses this power of animation to create interesting rhythms as she tells of the time she spent as a student in Austria, to which her parents sent her because she was so outspoken they feared for her life. It enables her to make sharp, humorous observations about the political naivete of student rebels in Europe, as well as the unavoidable lack of sincerity and compassion in their social lives, as they are all in the fluid and confusing process of growing up. As we all know, the mutability of youth involves the young in hypocrisy and betrayal, as well as the cruel absolutism of naivete. Satrapi makes a particularly wonderful use of her medium in portraying this arc in the cycle of Marjane's development when she relates the tale of a romance between Marjane and a young man named Marcus. Marcus, who at first is drawn as a golden boy, bathed in the idealized glow of her protagonist's crush on him, is then redrawn as a particularly disgusting fool when the relationship goes sour and Marjane's perspective alters radically.

The gentle humor of *Persepolis* leavens the grief and moments of terror that her family experienced after the revolution, affirming the endurance of personal resistance despite the continual threat of arrest, torture, and death. Marjane is bracingly (and comically) a young woman who voices her objections to the fundamentalism espoused in her college classes in Iran by women teachers shrouded in heavy veils. She also is shown smart mouthing the men who make up a "big brother" neighborhood patrol that stops her on the street for wearing what they consider provocative clothing. Feisty Marjane lays the offense at their door when she tells them to solve the problem by taking "your eyes off my ass" and then makes a fast getaway, while they are

still nonplussed by her defiance. With numerous similar displays of cheek on the part of Marjane and her grandmother, Satrapi gives us the Iranian social upheaval in a very different mood than we are used to. However, a friend of mine of Middle Eastern heritage, who knows the graphic novels well as I do not, felt that *Persepolis* watered down the books, and displayed certain racist overtones. As he saw it, the sinister characters all were drawn with clichéd Middle Eastern features and the protagonist and her family looked more Caucasian. That was not my perception, but readers may wish to make a comparison between page and screen to judge the aptness of my friend's reservations.

Persepolis ends on a note of uncertainty, as how could it not? The disposition of Iran is, at this writing, in greater doubt than ever before. But certainty was never the goal of this film which uses the flashback structure to contrast the sober dawning caution of full adulthood with the capacity of childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood to ignore the most intimidating social pressures. The film is a beautifully nuanced account of growing up female in a politically tumultuous time, under a regime particularly onerous in its patriarchal entitlements. It also provides an unusual warm but critically incisive perspective on the particulars of Iranian history of the last few decades. Perhaps its happiest aspect is that it takes the paralyzing fear and desperation out of uncertain political situations and replaces them with a wonderfully female-nuanced grace under pressure. (Deal with that, Papa Hemingway.)

Finally, we come to Wes Anderson's *Darjeeling Limited*, with an emphasis on "limited." As with Noah Baumbach's *Margot at the Wedding* (please see Part One), Anderson's film suggests both a great desire for cinematic freedom and a skill with things cinematic as yet insufficient for the purposes of his goal. Giving Anderson points for guts and initiative, it is still necessary to note the essential shallowness of his latest endeavor. *Darjeeling Limited* is a loose jointed story about three rich brothers, played with good humor by Owen Wilson, as Francis; Adrien Brody, as Peter; and Jason Schwartzman, as Jack. The boys are caught in medias res as they undertake a pilgrimage through India, dragging along with them a deliciously crafted set of suitcases and other assorted leather items, to look for their mother, Patricia (Anjelica Huston), who may have taken on the spartan life of a nun in a remote village in the mountains after disappearing without explanation from their lives. When they confirm their suspicions and discover her in austere glamour high on an Indian hill, Huston delivers a splendid cameo appearance. But I'm not sure that I picked up on any organic wholeness to this madcap journey that justified the sense of

accomplishment and pride that Anderson radiated during his press conference, when he spoke about the film. It comes off as a set of effervescent fragments joined by some running gags, mostly about the luggage and other assorted leather items.

Boys looking for mom instead of pop might seem at first to make a nice change in the western tradition of "the search for the father." Yet a thread common to each of the improvised encounters among Francis, Peter, and Jack is the oedipal structure of their relationship. Lurching around on a train, or making their ways through the Indian countryside, these guys haggle about their places in the pecking order in true patriarchal style. Their jostling for position by betraying each other's secrets, often quite comically, and by sheer confrontational intimidation occupies much more screen time than their relationship to their mother, which is so vaguely attended to that it is reduced to a ghostly, regressive desire for "mommy," which she may (or may not) understand. (Is there any reason besides regression that boys would value their mothers?) In any case, Ma disappears from her mountaintop the day after they find her, breaking her promise to spend the next day with them, seemingly performing the disappearing act that Freud recommends to mothers so that their boys will not be too close to them and thus develop uncertain masculine identities. Perhaps, I am being overly harsh with this larky film—I'm sure Wes Anderson would think so—but, in terms of gender construction, *The Darjeeling Limited* strikes me as a roundabout way of arriving at the very stale same old/same old.

When we leave the boys, they are still traveling and still reasonably good natured. The big difference is that they have to drop their suitcases in order to make the last departing train of the film. Will they now be traveling without "baggage" in the larger sense? Maybe that's what Anderson intends (he was coy about the image when asked about it during his press conference) but nothing of the sort happened on the screen in front of our eyes, or, at least, not in front of mine. Dropping a suitcase does not a new family relationship make. I don't know why this had to happen in India either, or on a train for that matter. Among the notes in our press kit, are Anderson's comments that he made *Darjeeling Limited* because he felt like making a film in India, he felt like making a film on a train, and he felt like making a film about three brothers. When a great artist proceeds from such compulsions, magically, it turns out that there is an inherent organic unity to them. But, sadly, being guided by impulse, in the case of a director of Wes Anderson's caliber, makes for nothing more than doodles. Much as I want to resist the evidence, everyday I see something that tells me that the Romantics were not correct in believing that

releasing the inner poet was just a matter of liberation from the dead hand of history and tradition. Being uncritically spontaneous can also result in a likeable mess that was more fun for the actors to make than for the audience to see. Who can name that mysterious ingredient that makes a storyteller an artist? How and why when David Lynch goes trawling in the subconscious does he, in his own words, meet up with "the big fish" while Wes Anderson just, at best, exudes a zany optimism that there must be a pony in there somewhere?

Be it noted, in closing, that I am not bemoaning the lack of "happy talk," pratfalls and couple chemistry in the offerings of New York Film Festival 2007. After all, the world of 2007 is dark and menacing and part of the reason for that is, in the words of Tennessee Williams in *The Glass Menagerie*, the middle class has been matriculating in a school for the blind. To further borrow from Williams's figure of speech, that same class is now having its (our) fingers "pressed on the fiery braille of reality." But the best part of affirmation is that which sustains us honestly precisely in such darkness, whatever the mode selected. Great tragedies are among the most affirmative works in our artistic tradition. Great comedies find a sense of well-being in the larger picture of the universe, even if they must trudge through the nine circles of Hell to do it. With the exception, perhaps, of Sokurov's *Alexandra*, this year's more positively framed films do not, as I see it, provide anything that resembles a sustaining vision. (I can't count Bela Tarr's magisterially beautiful film sustaining in the way that I mean.) Maybe David Lynch will have a film ready for 2008.