

**THE
REEL
THING**

**POWER
OF THREE**



ISSUE 3

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Editor's note

"My life is like a movie"

...used to be a braggadocious statement. It was a testament to a deliriously fun night out, a memorable party with friends or an unbelievable event that was just so good it could have been written. Watching films as a child, you think your life is going to turn out just like in one of those films you see, that the good guys will always win, the right guy will end up with the right girl and there will always be a sarcastic comeback on the tip of your tongue. When you grow up, however, you realise that life is rarely as neat as a film, that sometimes you are the villain and that relationships don't always turn out

the way you want them to, for no good scriptable reason. And so, the "life like a movie" becomes a desirable quality, a feeling that you are finally achieving the impossible standard that these films set for you as a child - an aspiration that only few achieve, and even then only for a fleeting moment.

But then, suddenly, everybody's life *is* like a movie, only it's one of those films that you once thought to be so incredibly far-fetched and dystopian that it would never come close to being a reality. Oh, the irony. Your world is now all about lockdowns, incessant governmental signage, full of uncertainty and lost hope. As you view the world through your hand-held screens, you may begin to wonder if perhaps there is a screen somewhere in the ether with you playing on it, someone behind the scenes writing these scenes while another critiques:

"that's just unrealistic - I think you're pushing the monotony a little too hard."

If this pandemic were truly like a movie, then this third lockdown would be the final showdown in the last act, where the end is in sight but there is still a huge struggle to get there. The 'good guys' now know what they need to do to win, and they will fight until it is done. But who are these 'good guys', the main characters who will save the day and get the happily ever after? One of them is probably an NHS worker, saving lives day in and day out as they do above and

beyond what their job requires; another may be Boris Johnson, or Dominic Cummings, or Matt Hancock any other politician who has been thrown into the thick of it (admit it - despite their numerous failings over the past year, it would be fascinating to watch their storyline). Another, perhaps, could be you, reading this, an average citizen, thrown into a pandemic and having to deal with it as best you can. If I am being totally honest, you'd be my favourite character.

We chose 'Power of Three' for this issue not only because we are in the third lockdown, but because so many films utilise the number to fantastic or disastrous effect (whoever is writing this one seems to know this). It is a truly magic number. Trilogies, character trios and love triangles have dominated the screens since film began, and there is a good reason for it: the number sells and intrigues an audience. However, some may also say that "three's a crowd", and there is a good reason for that too: sometimes it can be one try too many, an awkward addition to a perfect pair.

We hope that in this, our third issue, we have hit the magic of that number, and that you enjoy the articles we have to offer.

by Jenson Davenport

Trilogies need to learn when to quit.



Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior (1981)

Humans love the number three. It's the perfect number, offering us a sense of harmony and comfort. This specific psychological obsession often finds itself naturally transposed into cinema, with some of the most successful franchises comprising three films. Whether it be one epic story broken up into three chapters, like in *The Lord of the Rings*; or three stand-alone films revolving around the same group of characters, like the Sam Raimi *Spiderman* movies, isn't it strange that the second entry is always the best? This is a ridiculously bold claim – and it's meant to be – however I genuinely believe it holds true 99% of the time: without beating a dead horse, *Godfather 2* is renowned for being one of the best sequels of all time; other such classics include *Shrek 2* and *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*, both being impeccable pieces of cinema that adhere to the second-is-best rule.

This tendency towards the second film's superiority in trilogies requires some serious exploration. For me as a viewer, the second always has an advantage over the first. It doesn't need to spend time introducing the characters, their

relationships between one another, or even the overarching plot of the film in instances where the trilogy is one epic story. The audience is already aware of these features. The lack of a need for introduction, or conversely the familiarity the audience has with the premise of the previous film, allows the sequel to capitalise on this and develop upon these ideas.

The first example that always springs to mind is *Mad Max 2* from 1981. After the events of the first film, we are introduced to a completely new Max to the Max we knew from the first film. Moving past the role of police officer in the first film, Max is now a lone wanderer, with only his trustee Blue Heeler dog (creatively named Dog by Max) for support, unable to deal with his trauma and forced to survive in this apocalyptic wasteland. The change between *Mad Max 1* and *Mad Max 2* is stark, and it works incredibly well. Add in *Mad Max 3: Beyond Thunderdome*, however, and the franchise begins to flop. Apart from the only redeeming thing which is the wonderful Tina Turner, *Mad Max 3* feels like the unbranded version of *Mad Max 2*. The atmosphere is the same, but the execution is just not there. A lot of the time, it feels to me as though the director has become deflated by the third film, and as a result tries to either rehash the previous films, or be too ambitious and fails.



The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring (2001)

I didn't expect to mention Sam Raimi twice in such a short piece, but here we are. The third *Evil Dead* film, *Army of Darkness* – though I don't hate this film as nostalgia is a strong mistress – falls into the latter category. While the first two *Evil Dead* films are quite campy at places, there is no doubt that they are horror films, and good ones at that, with *Evil Dead 2* being one of my favourite horror films of all time. *Army of Darkness*, on the other hand, is more of a parody of the first two films. Despite the fact that I enjoyed the film profoundly over a decade ago, would a third *Evil Dead* film, sticking to a purely horror genre, have worked? I'd argue not.

To quote Paul Simon, as I often do, “if you establish some kind of comedic pattern, by the time you do it twice, it reinforces it; by the third time you have to alter it to be fresh.” The same applies to films. Be it a premature climax of the overarching plot already reached in the second film, or an original idea adequately harvested, there are possible explanations why the third film can never – and I use that term figuratively, as there are always exceptions to the rule – rise to the same level as the second film.



Whit Stillman's 'Doomed Bourgeois in Love' Trilogy

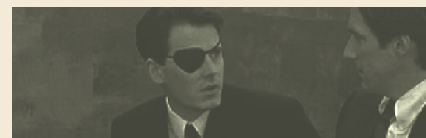
Whit Stillman's benign indictment of the young American bourgeoisie is so charmingly executed that, by the end of it, even being held in derision seems like a sophisticated fate.



The first film in the series and of Stillman's career, 1990's *Metropolitan* (currently streaming on MUBI), offers up for our enjoyment (and ridicule) a world filled with preppy girls and tuxedoed boys, earnestly trying to seem older than they really are, towards the close of Manhattan's debutante season. Travelling almost exclusively by taxi, they hop back and forth between

sumptuous ballrooms and elegantly decorated apartments—never, it would appear, to be hassled by their seemingly absent parents. Here they lounge around playing bridge and talking Charles Fourier and Jane Austen, cigarette in one hand and drink in the other. By the end of the night, they are cha-cha chaing around a spacious beige sitting room, blissfully unaware of the irony in their serious discussions of social mobility. The group's dynamic is somewhat disrupted, however, by the arrival of outsider Tom Townsend (Edward Clements) whose fatal flaw seems to be that he is more petit bourgeois than haut, and can't afford a proper winter jacket. But Tom can talk the talk and is swiftly adopted into their crew. Once in, Tom's initial disdain for the privileged class is displaced by the pleasure he takes in their highly aesthetic lifestyle and intellectualism. His hypocrisy is self-evident in the fact that he openly admits to

not reading novels at all, instead preferring 'good literary criticism'. In many ways, he is the biggest pseudo-intellectual of them all, but Stillman's portrait of him is in no way damning. He simply and sympathetically demonstrates the trials and tribulations of being a teenager trying to find your social footing at the same time as carving your own identity.



The second instalment, *Barcelona* (1994), sees Stillman leave the ever-self-affirming atmosphere of the Upper East Side to indulge in the comical possibilities provided by the anti-American sentiment present in Spain during the last decade of the Cold War. Here Ted (Taylor Nichols), a Chicago salesman working abroad, is ambushed by the unexpected arrival of his cousin Fred (Chris

Eigeman), a naval officer. Their intellectual exhibitionism often fails to leap the language barrier and repeatedly results in confused-looking Spaniards, humorously revealing the failure of such performative language when there is no audience present to lap it up. In bed after a night of romance, Fred queries whether his whole life he has been shaving the wrong way and quickly spirals into an existential crisis, to which his companion can only reply, 'I think maybe my English is not so good.' Ted's own recent failed romance has seen him take a vow of celibacy until he meets the girl he wants to marry, but he is so afraid of how unrelenting Fred's teasing will be if he finds out that he hides his Bible inside the sleeves of a copy of *The Economist*—it doesn't get more

bourgeois than that. Although more fast paced than his debut, the allure of *Barcelona* lies in the brilliance of Stillman's dialogue.



The trilogy is concluded with *The Last Days of Disco* (1998), which is set in the early 80s and follows roommates Alice (Chloë Sevigny) and Charlotte (Kate Beckinsale) as they chase budding romances with yuppie salesmen against the backdrop of the dying New York club scene. In between boogieing to Chic's 'Everybody Dance', the group discuss the originality of ordering drinks (apparently a vodka tonic is universally and eternally a basic-bitch drink) and condemn—

in all seriousness—the Tramp from *The Lady and The Tramp* as 'a self-confessed chicken thief and all-around sleazeball'. The film is a funny and vibrant look at the end of a very specific era; but as with the rest of his trilogy, it captures a charmingly authentic picture of human interaction which transcends its setting.

The endearing earnestness of Stillman's characters, their delightfully clumsy navigation in society, and their romanticisation of the mundane, mean that if not for our status as voyeurs that allows us to laugh *at* them, we would almost certainly be laughing along *with* them. Stillman reminds us in every instance to look at ourselves first; we may not be as self-aware as we may think.

By Millie Butler-Gallie

NOTES

on



THREE generations IN MINARI

The same evening as I was writing this article, Keira Knightley announced on the Chanel Connects podcast that she will no longer appear in nude scenes directed by men. “I feel very uncomfortable now trying to portray the male gaze.” Her latest decision spoke to a recurring thought I have that may either be a legitimate stance or unjustified bias: that some artists aren’t exactly eligible for making their art.

Moments like this occur often for me when viewing artworks portraying the experience of immigration. With specific regard to films, central spotlights for immigrant characters are scanty, while storylines that mould them into supposedly funny caricatures are legion. Between the extremities are the ones that many immigrants of racial minorities find hardly relatable. A typical example would be the much-praised *Brooklyn* - in the stand-up comedian’s memoir, Ali Wong recalls that her mother commented at the time:

“That white lady going through Ellis Island was like a country club compared to my experience trying to get by in America.”

Were it a story about a young Korean immigrant couple struggling to build a new life in Arkansas, I would argue that *Minari* could easily fall into the same category as the one about an Irish girl moving to New York - unrelatable not because their journey is not tough enough, but that such toughness is too concrete, as their adversity could in a large part be attributed to the stubborn husband’s obsession with farming his 20 acres of land in the middle of nowhere. What enables the film to strike a chord with immigrants of any race and ambition of any kind - and thus elevates it from a plain tale of surviving the American wilderness, to a moving one that captures the essence of being adrift in a new environment - is its inclusion of not one but three generations.

The same house on wheels accommodates Jacob and Monica, the first generation of immigrants; their children, David and Anne; and grandmother Soon-ja, who travels from her home in Korea to take care of her grandchildren. Following the family’s interactions with

each other but also with the outside world, it’s hard not to pick up on a “*progression*” of adaptability along the three generations. This manifests itself most starkly in their use of languages: Soon-ja hardly seems capable of using English at all, which invites occasional side-eyes and mocking from her grandkids; Jacob and Monica, having lived in America for some years, speak passable English but are more confident in Korean; David and Anne communicate in Korean with



their families in daily conversations, and speak flawless English with each other. More generally observed, stages of such a progression show various degrees of compatibility with America: the Yi children are the American-borns who still get asked why their faces are flat, but can mingle with local peers effortlessly; their young parents are the newly-landed, the ones that stay quiet at church gatherings and plant only Korean vegetables on American soil; compared to the rest of the family, Soon-ja the grandmother barely has any contact with the American society at all, and appears to have transposed her previous life in Korea down to the last detail across the Atlantic. Their cohabitation under the same roof is the process of immigration condensed into one miniature: from complete foreigners to what even their own grandma calls “American kids”, all it takes is three generations

Soon-ja’s part in the Yi family’s life is what makes their Asian origin undeniable and, with her bagfuls of traditional Korean medicine and lack of knowledge on cookie baking, brings upon her entry a sense of intrusion rather than the expected familiarity. Everything about her screams foreignness to the sensitive David, who at first refuses to share a room with Soon-ja because “she smells like Korea”, despite not having even been to the country. Yet as time passes, her existence becomes indispensable: not only does she grant Jacob and Monica a reprieve from their non-ending fights, a rapport also starts to form between her and her grandchildren. In the most pivotal scene of the film, she encourages David to venture into the forest, leading him to a creek that she thinks is perfect for growing minari, a common Korean wild herb. “Minari is truly the best,” she says, “it grows anywhere, like weeds, so anyone can pick and eat it. Rich or poor, anyone can enjoy it and be healthy. Minari can be put in kimchi, put in stew, put in soup. It can be medicine if you’re sick.” So much about minari the plant reflects the American dream of Jacob and Monica, who have decided to come across the ocean to “save each other”: hope-lending and exuberant, unbiased and all-welcoming, generous and restorative.

But the above qualities are nowhere to be found once they arrive. As Soon-ja preaches to David about minari, was it not her tentative attempt to reconnect her grandchild with South Korean culture - which is much older than America - and point the second-generation immigrant towards the fundamental layer of their multifold identity, one that’s hidden deep in the woods and therefore warned against as threatening and dangerous, but is in fact full of life, nourishing and healing and, as their improvised silly song goes – just “wonderful, wonderful”?

The film starts with Jacob’s clear vision of his private garden of Eden. The ending, however, douses his American dream with undiluted violence: Soon-ja, with both her movement and speech limited by a stroke, accidentally sets fire to the garbage, a fire that eventually engulfs the farm in flames. Knowing that Soon-ja is the character that channels Koreanness into the family’s American living, the scene’s relentless candour in acknowledging not only the grandmother’s love, but also her potential to destroy lifts *Minari* instantly into the top tier of immigration films, turning the story into a cautionary tale about the danger of neglecting one’s weakened provenance.

The immigration experience *Minari* paints out for us is three generations imbricated; and in their symbiotic existence, what stands for foundation – the grandma figure that antedates the two later generations - can nurture as well as demolish. This abstract imagery of a three-layer conflation reminds me of what André Aciman describes as “irrealis”, “a time in the future when the past will have become an everlasting present”. The combined immigrant experience woven by the three generations in *Minari* is exactly the “melding of past, present, and future tenses” he speaks of, a state that is “no longer time”, but “eternity”, “afterlife”, “heaven” - and, in the end, “death”. “The Garden of Eden is big,” muses Jacob at the start of the film. Perhaps Soon-ja’s final act of destruction is what completes this circle of irrealis. And by giving the now scorched farmland a chance to reflect and start anew, death in truth serves as the beginning of a Terrestrial Paradise.

By Eleanor Zhang



A New Hope



Star Wars and the Spirit of Community

by Maddie Day

The first time I was introduced to the *Star Wars* Trilogy, I was probably about eight, when my dad suddenly decided that his two Barbie-the-Swan-Princess-loving daughters needed to watch a two-hour film about men shooting at each other in space. It was a well-intentioned move – he wanted to educate us on a cultural classic – but it didn't work; all I remember of the experience is an orange desert, the face of a young Mark Hamill and being incredibly confused.

So, when my friends decided that in this third lockdown we would systematically go through every *Star Wars* film ever made, I did not jump for joy. Most of them had seen at least some of them before, and had enjoyed them (most of them are also men, just saying). I was reluctant at first, partly because of my previous experience with the films and also partly because I had worn the 'Haven't Watched *Star Wars*' badge for so many years, that I stubbornly didn't want to take it off. However, with a little bit of peer pressure, I agreed to join in on the experience.

Needless to say, the films aren't perfect. The rampant and persistent sexism was my first issue – George Lucas, you know women exist, right? And not just for the sake of being the love interest? Okay, just checking. The second – and more important, as film criticism goes – was the fact that the writing felt incomplete with the stories sitting within this abyss of space, never quite convincing me of the integrity of their plot lines. I felt like each film was missing some essential thing, and that it was just launching you into a half-built world full

of unexplained moments and an absolute refusal to do proper exposition. When we moved on to the prequels, things began to make more sense – I finally understood the importance of the Jedi council being a lost entity, the true significance of the establishment of the Empire, and why Yoda was such a revered and important figure. But why should I have to watch three extra films just to fully understand the significance of one?

However, I did end up liking them as we continued watching. There is a comforting sense of nostalgia in the dated quality of production, with the slight overacting and often laughable



effects providing consistent entertainment, even through badly-written moments. Part of my enjoyment probably also came from finally being able to understand the references I had absorbed from other movies and shows from over the years. I finally saw the stormtrooper hitting its head, witnessed the infamously misremembered "I am your father" line, as well as Han Solo's frustrating "I know".

This cultural knowledge is, in my opinion, the most valuable thing about the films. Franchises are nothing without the communities they create, and for *Star Wars*, it seems that the

cultural response to these mediocre films is what transforms them into lasting masterpieces. In spite of all my reservations, I began to enjoy them more and more as I discussed them with my friends. As we chatted about what happened in each film, we started to imitate the actors' voices, hum the soundtracks and quote the lines back to each other, forming little in-jokes and references that only made sense to us. Over the week or so that we went through the films, and "Star Wars tonight?" became a frequent question in the house, one which was either met with an excited "yes!" or a disappointed "no – I have work to do". It was this shared excitement and enthusiasm which made *Star Wars* more enjoyable for me, and I bet it is the same kind of energy that made them successful in the first place. Franchises like *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings*, and the Marvel Superhero movies are not smashing box-office sales solely based on the quality of the films themselves, but also because of the communities they found as a result of their films. It's these communities which give the films meaning and significance in our lives, the effect of them expanding beyond the films themselves; you often hear of people falling in love and having life-long friendships with other enthusiasts after meeting them at midnight viewings, going to comic-con or talking through online groups and pages. Films like *Star Wars* remind me of the brilliance of human connection, of shared experiences that we seem to have lost in the past year. Watching them with just a handful of friends began to restore my faith in the world, and gave me a *new hope*.

Maddie Day - Editor
Nina Jurkovic - Director
Kyran Kinlan - Designer
Eleanor Zhang - Editor

OFAS RECOMMENDS:

WATCH:

Citadel (2020) - John Smith

A short film filmed during lockdown, combining scraps of Boris Johnson's speeches and snippets of the views from Smith's home to present a unique look at the Covid pandemic.
<https://mubi.com/films/citadel-2020-john-smith>

BLUEOX - Fearless (Music Video) - Animated by Rohitash Rao

This music video uses thousands of paintings to create a mesmerising video accompanying BLUEOX's cover of Fearless by Pink Floyd.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DrIKbRHAY6I>

Give yourself permission to be creative - Ethan Hawke

Ethan Hawke on why creativity is essential, and falling in love with acting.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WRS9Gek4V5Q>

TRAILERS:

The World to Come

Reminiscing about *Portrait of A Lady on Fire* but finding last year's *Ammonite* lacklustre? Fear not: the lesbian period drama trend is extending into 2021! Starring Vanessa Kirby and Katherine Waterston, who we know are more than capable of extolling womanhood with thespian virtuosity, based on their separate performances in *Pieces of a Woman* and *The Third Day*.
<https://youtu.be/CcUOmj-7BQU>

Promising Young Woman

What happens when the prey becomes the huntress? Who says sex predator can't be female? With Carey Mulligan's character serving colourful ingenue outfits in daylight, all the while expanding a hit list at night, Emerald Fennell's debut film as director tells a thrilling tale of love through revenge.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7i5kiFDunk8>

Three Identical Strangers

A brilliant documentary about a set of identical triplets who finally meet for the first time as adults. There are lots of twists and turns in this one - don't read the Wikipedia beforehand!
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c-OF0OaK3o0>

ARTICLES:

How Japan's 90s teen delinquency crisis inspired a wave of killer movies - James Balmont

<https://www.dazeddigital.com/film-tv/article/51285/1/japan-90s-teen-delinquency-crisis-killer-movies-j-horror-battle-royale>

Take Her to the Moon for Me - Paul Fischer

A new father writes about showing his daughter her first film, and reflects on his own experiences of falling in love with cinema.
<https://www.brightwalldarkroom.com/2017/08/08/take-her-to-the-moon-for-me/>