

one creation myth can actually be correct and many of us feel that the estimate of one is high.

The real problem standing in the way of our accepting alternate pasts is that the past leaves very tangible signs of itself in the

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present. There is the fossil record to tell us what things were like a good long time ago. And all objects we see are in some senses artifacts of the past. The lamp next to me as I write this stands as testament to my memories that the lamp was here this morning. That memory could be wrong and lamp may have just winked into existence an hour ago. But seeing the lamp is at least circumstantial evidence that my memory is correct. Just about any of the timelines that lead up to the current instant will have to have had the lamp right here two seconds ago and a great many of them have to agree that the lamp was here this morning. The fossil dinosaur I see in the museum is at least circumstantial evidence that there were dinosaurs alive at some point, no matter which timeline I look at that led up to the current instant of time.

But the lamp being present is also evidence that there will be a lamp here for some time into the future, and most of the timelines into the future will also have the lamp here in an hour. So once again we have a symmetry. But it is a weak symmetry since the dinosaur bone gives us evidence of an animal here 200 million or so years ago and there is not much around that gives us evidence of an animal that will be around in 200 years, much less 200 million years into the future. So the concept of alternate pasts has some disbelief to overcome, but then so does alternate futures and alternate histories.

It nonetheless would be interesting to see if a good writer could give us a convincing alternate past story. It might be easy enough if it were set back in the Triassic, though it would be less interesting than a setting more recent. But any convincing alternate past supposedly from another timeline is probably indistinguishable from a viable theory of our own past. [-mrl]

2. THE MOOR'S LAST SIGH by Salman Rushdie (Pantheon, 435pp, \$25.00)
(a book review by Arthur Kaletzky):

The reader comes away from Rushdie's latest, fabulous novel with two certainties: one can argue whether Rushdie is the language's greatest active novelist, but it would take an entire series of new Punic Wars to produce puns better than his. Also, no matter how much one disagrees with the reactionaries' adulation of the bourgeois family in real life, the existence of the institution allows great fiction to be written about it.

As Rushdie's readers might expect, the Moor of the title is actually two people: Boabdil the Unlucky, the last Sultan of Granada who was defeated by Ferdinand and Isabella, and Moraes Zagoyby, the scion of a Keralan spice-trading family, member of India's Christian and Jewish minorities and the narrator of the

book. The three generations leading up to the Moor are full of hilarious adventures and misadventures which are so improbable that the novel easily qualifies as fantasy. Characters include physicist-mystics, loose women, several versions of V. I. Lenin, fundamentalist politicians of various fundaments, British colonialists, artists, cricketers and Snow White. If one includes Moraes' generation, all sexual preferences are amply covered, with the sex scenes much more explicit than those in Rushdie's earlier work.

The quality of the writing never ceases to amaze--there is always a startling pun or a delightfully crafted irony waiting for the reader in the next paragraph. The plot is complex, with some flashbacks and many backward references, but the existence of a single first-person narrator helps sort it out. The vocabulary and grammar of the book reflects all of its characters and settings, and is thus full of weird conjugation, Indianisms and goodness-knows-whatisms.

The book overflows with riches--so much that it is hard to keep the length of a review in reasonable bounds. It is sufficient to say that I have not been so delighted by any book since Rushdie's last,

3. FROM DUSK TILL DAWN (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule: Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino team up to tell a crime and vampire story, an elaboration on a segment from 1973's VAULT OF HORROR. Then they turn up the violence and throw in a lot of visual effects. The result is fast but uneven, sometimes witty but sometimes strangely serious, occasionally entertaining but never worthy of the talents involved. Rating: 0 (-4 to +4). A very mild spoiler follows the review in which I discuss some sloppy aspects of the filming of scenes late in the film.

Let's say you are a video store clerk with some ideas of what you would like to see in films. So you make the crime film you have in mind, inspired by Hong Kong crime films, and it is a moderate success and popular with critics. You take most of your remaining plot ideas and combine them all in one script and surprise, the film is an international sensation. You bask in fame, but soon the question arises: just what do you do for an encore. The world is waiting for your next film expectantly. Can you imagine the pressure? What are you going to give us next, Mr. Tarantino?

Well, there is an old Hitchcock plot you can turn into a short film for FOUR ROOMS. This time the critics are unimpressed. But your name is gold so you make another film. This time you dust off a horror script you wrote as a video clerk. So what happens? Well, in my opinion you have made a fairly standard video store sort of horror film, a hyper-version of a story that has been done before. FROM DUSK TO DAWN is somewhat dressed up with familiar actors and a big special effects budget, but these can not raise the film much above its modest origins. As director, Robert Rodriguez handles his characters and his first large budget well. Rodriguez is best

known for his ultra-low-budget EL MARIACHI and still-low-budget DESPERADO. By his standards this is an epic spectacle film. But Tarantino, whose real forte is in creating the script, the writing is already a big step down. He needed to be associated with a strong film and this was not it.

The Gecko Brothers are loose and headed for the border. Richard Gecko (played by Quentin Tarantino) has helped Seth Gecko (George Clooney) escape from prison and the two are cutting a swath, killing and kidnapping their way to the Mexican border. Along the way they kidnap a family of three: widower and pastor Jacob Fuller (Harvey Keitel), his daughter Kate (Juliette Lewis) and son Scott (Ernest Liu). They sneak across the border and make for a rendezvous at a trucker and biker bar. The most sophisticated and stylish thing about this bar is its name, The Titty Twister. It is a place of drugs and sleazy strippers with wild bar fights during the day. Then after dark the folks really let their hair down and not, long after, their fangs. Yes, the whole bar is a front for a den of vampires. Our two killers and three hostages find themselves besieged by, if not an army, at least a platoon of vampires presented in the special effects tradition of FRIGHT NIGHT. If this plot seems new and creative you haven't seen the "Midnight Mess" chapter of 1973's VAULT OF HORROR.

FROM DUSK TO DAWN will be a real disappointment for most Tarantino fans. While his trademarked hyper-violence is present in all its gory glory, the dialog is not nearly so finely honed as it was in PULP FICTION. My guess is that Tarantino has not rewritten his script to give audiences the sort of writing characterizations--he has given to previous films. One place where this film does stand out is in one of Harvey Keitel's rare subdued performances.

FROM DUSK TO DAWN may well get the attention of the critics because of the names involved and the ad campaign, but more creative vampire films get made and go unnoticed to video stores and to cable. In specific, whatever creativity FROM DUSK TO DAWN has, it pales next to the latter two chapters of Ted Nicolaou's nearly unnoticed SUBSPECIES trilogy or Anthony Hickox's SUNDOWN: THE VAMPIRE IN RETREAT. You will find them on the same shelf of your video store where FROM DUSK TO DAWN will probably end up. I give the new film a 0 on the -4 to +4 scale. My suspicion is that

Tarantino used up his creative plots on PULP FICTION and now his writing subsists of small borrowings from old Hitchcock plots and an Amicus anthology film, and a bit from NATURAL BORN KILLERS.

Spoiler..Spoiler..Spoiler..Spoiler..Spoiler..Spoiler..Spoiler..

While Rodriguez gives us some fast-paced action, much of it does not make a lot of sense. We once again have the BLOOD SIMPLE visual image of a dark and dusty room with bullets cutting holes in the walls so we see beams of light pierce the room. But Rodriguez does not do it right. Following a beam backwards should take you directly to a source the light. If the beams are from sunlight they should all be parallel. But Rodriguez has them pierce the room at all angles as if there are many suns in the sky. It is important to the plot of a vampire film that the beams of light be from sunlight as you can imagine. The same error was made in NEAR DARK.

A vampire must be staked through the heart to kill it. Technically the stake should pin the vampire's heart to the coffin, according to expert Montague Summers. But Rodriguez allows several scenes to pass where vampires are staked in the stomach. [-mrl]

4. OTHELLO (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule: Laurence Fishburne and Kenneth Branagh bring the classic tale of suspicion and betrayal to the screen. The production is handsome but much cut down from the play and does not have the caliber of acting we have seen in other recent productions of Shakespeare plays. Rating: +1 (-4 to +4)

When adapting Shakespeare to the screen there are conflicts involved that the Bard never knew about. He wrote in an artificially poetic Elizabethan English that conveys better to a 20th century audience than many people realize, but still requires acting skill to help get the idea across. He also intended his plays to be an afternoon's entertainment that would last a lot longer than a standard film. Most film adaptations are nowhere near accurate representations of the plays. They are usually trimmed down, and often lines and even scenes are given out of order. There seems to be a particular respect for Shakespearean actors because it is no easy matter to make the original prose flow naturally. Orson Welles was a master filmmaker who had more experience than perhaps anyone else did at adapting the great works of literature to other media. But if you look at his own adaptation of OTHELLO one sees a tremendous visual style and only

the barest respect getting the original play on film.

Kenneth Branagh has a better understanding than most about how to do cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare and did about as good a job as is possible for any director in his MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING. As an actor he has an expressive face and conveys by just slight exaggeration many of the ideas in his face. It takes extreme skill to do that without making the performance hammy and unrealistic, but Branagh has the kind of face that allows him to convey much of the meaning. In MUCH ADO and now in OTHELLO one can almost tell what he is saying without hearing the words.

Unfortunately, in OTHELLO he is not directing, so is responsible for only his own performance. His acting is not shared by the other performers in OTHELLO making the understanding of this film much more labored than that of MUCH ADO. Laurence Fishburne does a reasonable but much more traditional Othello, conveying all the emotion, but without Branagh's articulation.

Unfortunately acting honors go only to these two. For once the two name actors really are the best thing on the screen. Irene Jacob is fetching as Desdemona, but her line readings are uninspiring. Much of the end of the play should work on pity for the wrongly accused Desdemona, but she just does not convey enough emotion to have us feel a lot of sympathy for her character. Other performances, with the possible exception of Anna Patrick as Emilia, get the lines read but are indifferent.

The play has moments of visual style as we might expect from Oliver Parker. Parker does not have much experience as director but is a familiar face acting in Clive Barker horror films, which themselves depend more on visual impact than on story. Occasionally we wonder why Parker dwells so long on a single scene. Even the very first scene, a gondola slowly making its way past the camera, seems to go on too long and then pay off with only a very trite image. Feeling the need for a little action he adds a minor chase scene, apprehending Iago, at the end.

This is a film that will be remembered as "1995's OTHELLO," not "The OTHELLO" in the same sense that MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING is the

interpretation for our generation. I give it a +1 on the -4 to +4 scale. [-mrl]

5. LEAVING LAS VEGAS (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule: A prostitute and an alcoholic have a relationship in the short time while the alcoholic intentionally drinks himself to

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death. The story is downbeat, but it is also a moving study of the both love and self-destruction. There is more than a little of the George/Lenny relationship of OF MICE AND MEN in this story. Stand-out performances by Nicholas Cage and Elizabeth Shue make this one of the better films this year. Rating: low +3 (-4 to +4)

LEAVING LAS VEGAS is about people on the margins of society. That has been done before in films like BARFLY, but it perhaps has never been done as well as in this film.

Ben Sanderson (Nicholas Cage) has gone from being a film executive who drinks too much to a drunk who cannot do anything for a living or even to save his own life. Alcohol has replaced his wife, his son, and now his job. So he has decided to treat his alcoholism as a fatal disease, has literally burned the remnant of his previous life behind him, and has gone to Las Vegas to die in a spree of drinking and possibly some high living. Almost immediately on arriving he runs into (almost literally) prostitute Sera (Elizabeth Shue). When he sees her again he hires her but chooses to just talk, telling her his plan to drink himself to death. Seeing that he needs care and desperately needing someone to care about she strikes up a relationship, overlooking his indifference. The one ground rule they set is that neither will try to reform the other. In a year with many films about relationships, this is one of the most unique. At times they relate as lovers, friends, mother and

child, prostitute and pimp, nurse and dying patient. Rare is the film where we see so many aspects of a relationship, or so many different sorts of love. Why Sera is even interested in the heartache of falling in love with a man committing slow-motion suicide is the enigma at the heart of this film.

Stylistically the film is well-handled although perhaps a bit slow-paced for some viewers, though those viewers would be unlikely to come to this film in any case. One false style move is to have Sera's character developed by having her open her heart to her analyst. It is becoming too easy and too much a cliché to have people in disreputable professions able to open up only to their analysts like the prostitute in KLUTE and the hired killer in DIARY OF A HIT MAN. One indulgent director Mike Figgis allows himself to be in cameo roles with familiar people. It is something of a tribute to this film but also a distraction that people like Bob Rafelson and Lou Rawls would agree to do cameos. Julian Sand also is present in a small role as Sera's bizarre Latvian pimp.

This is a film that does not pull its punches about the lives of either prostitutes or terminal alcoholics. The dialogue is often raunchy and watching Cage's character deteriorate is not an uplifting experience. This is an adult film both in the usual

sense and for the fact it is aimed at a thinking, mature audience. I put off seeing it for a long time because this is just not the kind of film I generally want to see. In spite of that I was impressed sufficiently that it will inevitably be on my top ten of the year list, probably high. I give it a low +3 on the -4 to +4 scale. [-mrl]

6. DEAD MAN WALKING (a film review by Mark R. Leeper):

Capsule: Tim Robbins gives us a three-dimensional view of the issues raised by the death penalty as a nun tries to help a convicted killer on Death Row. What sets this

film apart is that it presents multiple and conflicting sides of the issue seemingly fairly and does not try to force any particular point of view. This is a complex film about a complex issue. Rating: high +2 (-4 to +4)

I like a film that gives me questions rather than answers. I like a film that can show conflict without making one side the villain. I like a film that fairly shows two or more sides of an issue without telling me which side I should choose. There were two films like that this year, curiously both about dedicated but independent-minded members of the Catholic clergy who come into conflict with their communities. The earlier one was Antonia Bird's *PRIEST* and now comes a film that is in some ways similar, Tim Robbins's *DEAD MAN WALKING*. The newer film is based on Sister Helen Prejean's 1993 book of the same title, an account of her relationship with a Death Row inmate.

Sister Helen (played by Susan Sarandon) is a nun who lives among the poor of the St. Thomas Housing Project of New Orleans doing her view of good. Her order does not wear the habit in spite of occasional disapproval and pressure from other members of the Catholic clergy. Sister Helen receives a request from death row inmate Matthew Poncelet (Sean Penn) to help him submit an appeal of his death sentence. Poncelet was convicted of the murders of a dating couple committed while he was under the influence of drugs and alcohol. While taking a dislike to the man's bigoted views, Sister Helen offers him help. When his execution date is actually scheduled, she agrees to be his spiritual advisor and becomes the first woman ever to take on that role in the prison. But her support of Poncelet brings her into conflict with the parents of the victims of the crime. Sister Helen determines to visit them, to try to offer them solace, and to try to understand their point of view. Only then does she get an understanding for the degree of the damage that the crime has done.

Sister Helen finds herself embroiled in more controversy. To the Catholic chaplain of the prison, her mission is to convince Poncelet to take the holy sacraments. She is startled to realize that this is what the chaplain means when he talks about saving

Poncelet and that her definition of saving him is quite different. The film has Sister Helen follow the proceedings until they are resolved. Her efforts to help the racist are detested by the victims' parents and by the community.

Tim Robbins, who scripted as well as directed, has captured many different viewpoints in the film, an approach much more common in documentaries than in narrative films. He shows the effect the planned execution has on the family of the of the inmate and the effect of the crime on the families of the victims. He shows the Church's perspective and that of the community. Occasionally there are little digs at one point of view or another, but they are far more mild than one would expect from the creator of the film BOB ROBERTS. In the end perhaps the strongest opinion he expresses is that capital punishment does little to help the people who have been most hurt by the crime.

Susan Sarandon is a good actor though not one of what I would consider to be our first rank of powerful actors. She does, however, choose her roles carefully and wisely and then contributes a lot to the films in which she is cast. She has Orson Welles's ability to lend respectability to a film just by being in it. This role was not a real stretch for her or for Sean Penn, but both play their roles with genuine authenticity. The real surprise is Raymond J. Barry as the murdered boy's father who gives the most moving performance of the film. R. Lee Ermey, as the woman victim's father, can add one more insensitive, angry male to his portfolio. It is a part that he plays well, but too often. You may remember him yelling his way through the first sequence of FULL METAL JACKET. He played almost the same role in the TV series "Space: Above and Beyond," as well as voicing the leader of the little green soldiers in TOY STORY. A few other cameos are present, including Clancy Brown as a traffic cop who seems in the film only to deliver one joke.

DEAD MAN WALKING is a provocative, well-made film on a surprisingly intelligent level. Rate it high +2 on the -4 to +4 scale. [-mrl]

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Television has made dictatorship impossible but
democracy unbearable.

-- Shimon Peres

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