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Cinema-Going as Religious Practice

The Habit of Cinema-Going

A visit to the cinema is not simply a visit to see a film. For the most regular cinema-goers ('I go every Friday or Saturday night') a cinema visit may be a part of their 'life structure', along with working, eating, sleeping, shopping and relating to family and friends. Such a pattern of living may not be articulated as such, and may not be as neat as a person might wish, but it will exist in some form. As a major component (binding commitment) in a person's life, then, cinema-going is functioning as a religious practice for some. The regular, rhythmic habit of cinema-visiting contributes to the shaping of concrete living.

A second potentially religious aspect of the cinema-going habit is the acknowledgement of a need for rest and relaxation. It is not at all puzzling that religions receive a bad press for being killjoys, because very often they have been. Versions of Christianity throughout its history have been negative about dancing, card-playing and the theatre, for example. It is puzzling in the extreme, however, that religions have not been able to turn their respect for the need for relaxation into an appropriate lens through which to 'read' the world of entertainment. When people go to the cinema, whatever else they are doing, they go to enjoy themselves. Only those employed to be film critics, or to lecture or write on something to do with films, watch films for a job. Most people go for fun, to enjoy an alternative to the world of work; to 'escape' whatever fills much of their time. Like most contemporary entertainment, the practice of cinema-going functions as a form of 'sabbath rest' for people who need a break.¹ Whatever else films may do to and for

¹ Deriving from the Jewish Sabbath tradition, 'Sabbath' being the seventh day of the week, on which no work was to be done. Adopted in a variety of forms by Christian groups (most of whom, from earliest Christian times,

people, it is not primarily for education, moral uplift, or spiritual nourishment that people are cinema-goers. The quest for relaxation may get tangled up with all sorts of other desires: to be scared, excited, titillated, or simply to have somewhere to go with a friend. But most are going to enjoy themselves.

Large numbers of cinema-goers (most?) go with friends.² However, whether people arrive in groups or individually, watching a film in a cinema is a shared experience. Cinema-going is therefore religion-like in being an experience enjoyed in the company of others. Excellent films can keep people enthralled even in video form, when watched on a standard-sized television in a living room. This experience is happening even more since the arrival of 'home cinema' technology packages. Even so, large-screen cinemas and cinema theatres create a different kind of experience again.³ You may not know who you are sitting next to, but laughter, gasps of shock or surprise, and shed tears are infectious in a large group. As Martin Scorsese has commented: '... I can ... see great similarities between a church and a movie-house. Both are places for people to come together and share a common experience'.⁴

A fourth religion-type feature of the cinema is related to architecture. A number of contemporary buildings vie for the right to be termed 'today's cathedrals'. Shopping centres and multiplexes are high on the list.⁵ Multiplexes attached to shopping centres are

¹ (continued) in two distinct directions: either accentuating the prohibition aspect, or encouraging the opportunity for recreation. Here I am stressing the latter, and in effect drawing on a 'Sabbath principle' within human living, without claiming any association with a particular day of the week. I do, however, note that a weekly cinema-going habit would inevitably continue a practice of structured recreation on a seven-day cycle.

² The exception to this may be the late afternoon/early evening times in large cities when individuals are found watching a film between work and home, sometimes as a 'chilling out' time. In some respects, cinema has perhaps here taken over a function more recently occupied by TV.

³ B. Plate, 'Religion/Literature/Film: Towards a Religious Visuality of Film', in *Literature and Theology* 12 (1998), 26-8.

⁴ Scorsese made the remark at the end of his TV/video documentary *The Century of Cinema: A Personal Journey* 1996, cited opposite the frontispiece of C. Marsh and G. Ortiz (eds.), *Explorations in Theology and Film*.

Alongside sports stadia, I suggest. Ironically, medieval and modern cathedrals are recovering a clear sense of identity and purpose in the present, not least through being places which can bring together people from very different walks of life and a wide geographical region to explore their spiritual lives in relaxation.

arguably their 'chapels', whether or not they actually have a chapel.⁶ As 'cathedrals' in their own right, multiplexes offer their own form of communion. They bring people together from far and wide, but dispense a common food.⁷ They offer a wide choice of side-chapels (small theatres) alongside one or two main sanctuaries (large screens). They have trading posts in addition to the popcorn dispenser, where icons (posters of film stars) and 'texts' (biographies of saints/stars, videos, DVDs, screenplays) may be bought.⁸

The parallel between a multiplex and a cathedral may appear to break down, of course, when the precise meaning of 'cathedral' is explored: a multiplex contains no throne ('cathedral') for anyone like a bishop. But I am not so sure. The identification of 'cathedral-like' structures in today's world merely demands the parallel identification of whose voice is being deemed authoritative in Western culture. When the malls and multiplexes become the cultural equivalent of cathedrals, who is sitting on the throne? Critics of the whole exercise I am undertaking might cry 'Mammon' in both cases, as a way of observing the consumerist society in which we live. Again, though, things are not so simple. If cinemas and multiplexes in any sense participate in religion-like activity in Western culture, then film directors, (and producers, editors, and screenplay writers) or the film critics who shape our patterns of film-consumption may be functioning more authoritatively or at least more influentially than bishops. Such an observation highlights both the complexity and fragmentation of patterns of authority in a post-Christendom culture.

Attending a cinema 'religiously', then, i.e. as a regular, binding commitment, brings the cinema-goer into a range of practices

⁵ (continued) buildings which function in the way that cathedrals once did in the medieval period are certainly shopping malls. This is not meant to imply, of course, that cathedrals were built for a commercial purpose; they obviously were not. But they did function as centres at which commercial transactions took place. I am most grateful to Geoff Sharpe for discussion on this point.

⁶ As shopping centres sometimes do. Even if they do not have chapels, they increasingly have chaplains.

⁷ R. Butler in 'A Night at the Pictures in 1994', in *Independent on Sunday*, 16 December 1994 wrote: '... (P)opcorn, Coke, hot dogs, ice-cream. They're the heart of the multiplex business ... The concessions stand runs right round the gleaming central tower ... The tower is to the foyer what the altar is to a cathedral'; cited in C. Marsh, 'Did You Say "Grace"?': Eating in Community in *Babette's Feast*, in Marsh and Ortiz (eds.), *Explorations in Theology and Film* 207.

which structure life, provide relaxing space, and create a shared experience for which cinema buildings are carefully designed.⁹ For those who attend the cinema less often, individual visits may take on huge significance as 'special occasions' even though there is no reason to think that the watching of films more generally (on TV, video or DVD) has no place in their lives. If cinema-going is a particularly important form of film-watching, it is not the only way in which film takes on cultural significance. It merely accentuates aspects of contemporary living touched on in the more general practice of film-watching. These observations about the 'religion-like' quality of cinema-going do, however, press the point about a range of activities in contemporary Western life which may have taken the place of religion.

Three sets of questions arise. First, is cinema/film especially significant in this regard? Is it any more significant than watching TV or playing or watching sport, for example? Second, is there any particular value in identifying such cinema-going habits as akin to religion? And, what understanding of 'religion' do you need to have to be even able to do this? Third, where does this leave religion as more traditionally understood?

Is Film a Special Case?

Not everyone watches films. There are even counter-cultural people in the West who, by choice, do not own televisions. Most people do, though, watch a film at some stage, even if they do not go to the cinema very much. Even so, watching films is only one of a range of activities currently competing for the sociologists' attention as 'substitute religions' or 'alternatives to religion'. The 'secularisation thesis' suggests that Western culture has gradually becomes less and less dependent on, and therefore more detached from, religion. People simply do not believe in God or gods any more, it is said. Society functions therefore without reference to religion. Explicitly religious people become fewer and fewer and their religious activities become increasingly more privatised.¹⁰

⁹ Late on in the research and writing for this present work I discovered M. Jancovich and L. Faire *The Place of the Audience: Cultural Geographies of Film Consumption*, a fascinating study of the development of cinemas in Britain, using Nottingham as a case-study. Though it will not be possible to refer extensively to ways in which their work is relevant to this present enquiry, I note here simply the many points at which the communal function of cinema is highlighted in their study, as well as fluctuations in the

This is a distinctly Western perspective, often accompanied by the implication that those who resist the thesis have failed to recognise that being beyond religion is to be culturally advanced, like a snake that has shed its skin. Globally speaking, religion flourishes in many forms, not all of which seem life-enhancing. Even in the West, the secularisation thesis seems less accurate when you bear in mind the burgeoning of interest in 'spirituality', which rides on the back of the apparent failure of religion (and of Christianity in particular). And it is here that the question of what film is doing to people finds a place.

Religion is unpopular, but a spirituality is something that people seem to 'have' or need by virtue of being human.¹¹ Either they therefore explicitly tap available mainstream or alternative religious resources (hence, so-called 'pick 'n' mix spirituality'), or they can point to a whole range of activities which have taken the place of organised religion in their lives, whether or not they were ever religious in any formal sense. Three examples of the latter will suffice. Deep allegiance to a football/cricket/rugby/baseball/ice-hockey team becomes almost a reason to live, and shapes a 'liturgical' year.¹² A soap opera provides a central narrative through which a person lives their life. Discussion of the narrative and the issues it raises provides a context for ethical reflection. Identification with and differentiation from leading characters contributes to their own character development. Reflection on episode after episode creates a 'reading community' around which life is structured. For some TV-watchers, reflection on a soap opera may be the only way in which reflection on living happens. A third example is education. 'Lifelong learning' is currently being promoted for many reasons and in many different ways. At its best, it enables people who may not have had or taken earlier opportunities for formal learning to gain confidence in learning, whether for employment purposes, or personal development. When education functions as the primary way in which people discover more about themselves, and develop their sense of self-worth, skills, and self-confidence, it plays a similar role to religion. If one of the possible meanings of 'spirituality' is 'life structure' then lifelong learning can certainly become a life structure which shapes a person's whole approach to living.

And what of film? I am not suggesting that film-watching has any *unique* claim to have replaced religion in Western culture.¹³ It is, Sport, TV and education are but three other contenders.

¹¹ C. Marsh, *Christianity in a Post-Atheist Age*, 23-4, 29-30.

however, important to identify ways in which any of these pastimes may be doing more than merely bringing people together for a common purpose, or keeping people entertained. I am thus using film as a case study, both because I am a participant (I am a cinema-goer and film-watcher and also know something about religion 'from the inside'), and because film-watching more than some other similar activities helps me 'get at' the issues in which I am especially interested. To put it bluntly: I could have used sport as my case study, but some of the parallels with religion seem more stretched than with film. Film also seems to provide, as ensuing chapters will make clear, so much more compelling and wide-ranging evidence of having a religion-like function.

Cinema-Going as Religion, or as Substitute for Religion (and is there any difference?)

I am suggesting that cinema-going functions as an alternative to, or a replacement for, traditional religious activity. My concern, though, is to examine the way in which it does not simply fill in the time left by the absence of religion, but actually enables film-watchers to participate in the business of religion. This is the line of thought adopted by John Lyden in his recent *Film as Religion*.¹⁴ I shall begin this section by examining Lyden's approach before going on to clarify, through dialogue with a recent autobiographical work by the British journalist John Walsh, the definition of religion with which I am working. What, in short, is the point of considering film-watching and cinema-going as religious activities?

John Lyden's case rests on two basic convictions. First, he contends that 'there is no absolute distinction between religion and other aspects of culture'. We have a tendency, he notes, 'to label certain sorts of activities as "religious" chiefly because they fall into patterns that we recognise from religions with which we are familiar'.¹⁵ To have a chance of respecting film as a religious/theological resource we need a looser definition of religion, and a more flexible way of understanding how culture and cultures work. Lyden's second conviction is that interpreters of film, theology and culture must respect what films are actually doing in Western society today. Influenced by film critics such as Martin Barker, Lyden is keen to develop an approach which will make sense of films as watched by average film-goers. Though interpretative skill and refined

analytical methods may be used in examining a film's content, Lyden's view is that no particular skills should be needed to recognise real or hidden filmic meanings. The fact is, Lyden suggests, that films are already functioning religiously, i.e. are offering inspiring and thought-provoking images and worldviews, in relation to which film-goers are exploring and constructing their approaches to living. It is because of this that Lyden develops the religion-film dialogue as an 'inter-religious dialogue', an approach I shall come back to in chapter 6. Lyden has thus latched onto a basic feature of contemporary Western culture. Without devaluing religion, or buying into the secularisation thesis, he is both respecting the *de facto* function of film, and calling for a re-examination of what being religious means. It is intriguing that his approach finds echoes amongst some in the world of film studies.¹⁶

So far so good. But Lyden is an ally for me as I seek to develop my own position. Though critical of some approaches to the theology/religion-film dialogue, Lyden remains sympathetic to religious and theological interests. If he notes that some re-thinking is needed on the religion/theology-film scene, he is not claiming that the cinema is replacing religion. He wants to treat film 'as religion' simply in order to get it taken seriously in the world of religious and theological studies within which he moves.

With John Walsh, a British journalist, things are rather different. In *Are You Talking To Me: A Life Through the Movies* (2003), Walsh does not theorise very much about the relationship between religion and the cinema. His humorous and stimulating autobiographical account of his early life is offered as a simple demonstration of the fact that films now provide the narratives through which people discover themselves and make choices about how to live. Religion for Walsh means the Roman Catholic Church, and his life-story supplies evidence of the church's loss of grip upon him, as films helped him make more sense of the life he was living.

The power of cinema for Walsh is clear:

I grew up mesmerised by the movies. My relationship with the Big Screen was more heady, more intense, more hungrily passionate than my civilised involvement with books, my light flirtations with theatre, my patronising kiss on the forehead of television. Watching films in the dark never seemed to me a passive activity. It was more like visiting a shrine, going to a great dark church for prolonged communion and prayer, even if the only prayers were that Clint Eastwood should waste the bad guys in *A Fistful of Dollars*, or that Julie Christie should find

¹⁴ J. Lyden *Film as Religion*. Middlesbrough: Middlesbrough Press, 2001.

true love with Alan Bates in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, or that Kim Novak should, at some point, take her clothes off in *Vertigo*.¹⁷

Walsh's book stands as evidence, then, of how deeply cinema can shape people. The eight films he examines in some detail are related to particular points in his life. But their impact upon his self-discovery is deeper than mere recollection that they 'meant something to him at the time'.¹⁸ Walsh shows how he keeps recalling and reinterpreting scenes from these influential films throughout his life. It is through constant reference to some of these films that he goes on learning and making connections. He suggests that it is the films watched in early life which are especially significant (his autobiography only takes us through to his early twenties). This may, admittedly, be no different from music and novels, and it is not altogether clear that films retain their power to be influential in later life. It is, however, striking that Walsh was aware, at the age of twenty, that he was 'giving up the Catholic religion and having nothing to put in its place'.¹⁹ He refers to the gap being filled by 'a new, secular obsession about the interconnectedness of things'. This came from his viewing of Nicolas Roeg's *Don't Look Now*. It is also clear that it was the power of the cinema-going experiences throughout his youth and the emotional impact of films upon him which would make the cinema the likely replacement for church.²⁰

Lyden and Walsh represent, then, two contemporary interpreters of the film-watching experience who share the sense of the extent of the cultural significance of film. Both want to respect fully what films actually do to people. But different conclusions are being drawn. For Walsh, cinema (perhaps amongst other things) has replaced religion. Or, if religion continues, then it is misguided. For Lyden, films are functioning religiously, but we need to expand our grasp of what 'religion' is to make sense of this cultural development. Lyden may want to take Walsh to task for having such a restricted view of religion. Walsh might simply declare a lack of faith, and suggest – as do many critics of the theology/religion-film debate – that despite his sophistication Lyden is basically wanting

¹⁷ J. Walsh, *Are You Talking To Me?: A Life Through the Movies*, 8–9.

¹⁸ The eight films Walsh examines are *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1962), *The Innocents* (1961), *Red River* (1947), *The Sound of Music* (1965), *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *Cabaret* (1972), *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (1974) and *'Don't Look Now'* (1973).

¹⁹ Walsh, *Are You Talking To Me?*, 309.

²⁰ Walsh, *Are You Talking To Me?*, 12–13, 16–17. Deacy notes that the film critic David Thomson records a similar view.

to rescue religion via his expanded definition. It would clearly be unhelpful to pretend that cultural resources are more explicitly religious than they are. This is not, however, what Lyden is up to. He is not claiming that film is religion in order to rescue religion. He is using religion as a means of clarifying what films are actually doing. Walsh's account of the *de facto* function of film, however, challenges those who want to speak of a film-religion dialogue *at all* to explain why such a dialogue is necessary and useful. If, as Walsh is suggesting, the cinema has replaced the church anyway, then what is the point? There is no dialogue worth having. The value of asking whether cinema-going should be viewed as a religious activity is, I suggest, twofold. First, it invites a filmgoer to reflect on the part that films may play in the process of developing a worldview and an ethic. 'Much of the time, we don't even realise the effect that films have on us'.²¹ But the complex way in which they move us, get us thinking, compel us to make links and draw contrasts with life-experience past and present indicates that films are doing something important to their viewers. Second, to fail to view film-watching as a religious habit would require scrutiny as to how and where, then, viewers are doing their basic meaning-making. Even if the answer to the question of whether film-watching is religious practice is negative ('it is not in the cinema where I work out the values I live by'), posing the question nevertheless has a useful cultural function.

Through the rest of this book I shall, of course, dispute the view that film-watching has no religious function. Cinema-going and film-watching cannot, in my view, ultimately prove to be wholly satisfactory substitutes for religion. But they are undoubtedly functioning as alternatives to religion in Western cultures today. Both for those who are identifiably religious, and those who are not, they are fulfilling at the very least a religion-like function. But what understanding of 'religion' am I working with to be able to say this?

I am operating with quite a traditional definition, such as that supplied by John Hick: 'an understanding of the universe, together with an appropriate way of living in it, which involves reference beyond the natural world to God, or gods, or to a transcendental order or process'.²² I shall, though, inevitably be working mostly with an understanding of how religion *functions* in drawing the critical comparison between cinema-going and religious practice. Around the four religion-like aspects of the cinema-going ritual noted at the beginning of this chapter – a regular life-pattern, a

respect for rest, participation in shared experience and recognition of a 'holy place' – I am recognising the importance of a cognitive framework which acknowledges respect for a transcendent reality. Am I, then, trying to claim that all film-goers are implicit theists? No, that would be absurd. I am, however, asserting at the outset three things with respect to this working definition. First, more people who watch films are theists of a kind than care to admit it. It is simply that they have not done enough thinking about God in relation to a living tradition of God-talk to bring their feelings, beliefs and thought into some sort of coherent shape. By the end of the book I shall have shown that any exploration of the question of transcendental order is a theological enquiry, and that engagement in God-talk cannot but be existentially and socially useful. Second, the way that films often work gets people doing something which is identifiably theological. It is, in other words, not possible to be moved to the core of one's being, or to ask questions about ultimate meaning and value without raising theological questions. Third, the fact that such a process of thinking and believing is evoked by the practices of cinema-going and film-watching is culturally significant. If the churches are not getting theology discussed in the public arena, then this is a cause of sadness. The theology/religion-film dialogue is, however, not a strategy for getting theology discussed publicly via the backdoor. It is a response to the fact that this is where theological discussion – sometimes explicit, sometimes inchoate – is happening already. This book is thus part of the attempt to highlight what is actually going on, and why the religious and theological interpretations of the practices of cinema-going and film-watching are important not just for the identifiably religious.

And What Will Happen to Religion?

If cinema-going and film watching are to be viewed in any sense as religious practices, where does this leave religion as more traditionally understood? This question can only be addressed directly at the end of the enquiry. In this opening chapter I must, however, supply a basic framework within which I approach the question. I can do this with reference to two concepts to which I shall return in Chapter 6: tradition and spirituality. My suggestion that film-watching and cinema-going will not ultimately prove to be satisfactory substitutes for religion cannot alter the fact that religion has to re-find itself in the West.

Walsh's 'autobiography through film' is an intriguing example of how he has used films to locate a set of narratives within which to

supposedly secular age of this same need to 'find a tradition'. The popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* both as a book and as a series of films is surely due to the fact that it supplies a whole mythology in relation to which readers and viewers can undertake some fundamental reflection on human living. Whether or not it is indeed to be read as a re-presentation of Christianity is not at issue here. If functions as a tradition-supplying resource. Cinema is thus one of the contemporary channels which supplies narratives for people to 'live within'. By enabling film-goers both to find a tradition and to develop the habit of constantly interacting with the narratives they live within, the habit of cinema-going sharpens a contemporary question: whether *religions* actually achieve in the present what they claim.²³ Perhaps religions have largely stopped achieving what they have in the past. If cinemas fulfil 'religious' functions so strongly today, have religions lost their way? Or is the claim that cinemas have largely taken the place of churches, synagogues, temples and mosques in the West proof that metaphysics is dead, and that most people in the West are simply keeping themselves entertained in preparation for forthcoming oblivion? If religions claim to have better stories, more fulfilling practices, and more truth, then where is the evidence?

A second challenge issued by the religious functioning of film concerns spirituality. The term 'spirituality' is widely used in the contemporary West ('I have a spirituality but I am not religious'). It is being used in at least three senses: to denote a religious faith; to refer more generally to the inner life; to signify a way in which people structure their lives. In referring to the term I must simply acknowledge the ambiguity at this point. Whether or not people consider themselves religious, they still have the task of structuring their lives, and adopting and rejecting particular moral values and philosophical outlooks. They must still decide whether there is an 'inner life' or not. The vast growth of the yoga 'industry' in the West, the expansion of the 'Mind, Body, Spirit' sections in chain bookstores and the evident 'devotion' to fitness regimes which large numbers of people now follow confirm that it is in the midst of these explorations where contemporary religiosity has been relocated for many. Reservations about organised religion are not reflected in a neglect of spirituality in this life-enhancing, life-structuring, health-seeking sense. It will, then, be at least in this realm of contemporary experience that the important cultural/religious function of film and the cinema will need to be explored: where spirituality persists, even whilst religions apparently wane.

Of course, the persistence of spirituality does not necessarily prove that people are theists. There are many reasons for organised religion's decline in the West. To point to the fact that religiosity gets diverted does not, though, mean that theism remains intact in a different form. People may have stopped believing in God.²⁴ The novelist Nick Hornby is an example of a writer who is prepared to admit a keen interest in spirituality, whilst believing that Christianity has had its day. Religions have had a monopoly in the past, and their role has to be re-thought today, especially since, for so many, there is 'nothing out there'.²⁵ Again, though, things may not prove so simple. To locate the expanding interest in and function of film in Western society – in the context of resistance to religion but support for spirituality – requires us to re-examine many features of both cinema-going and religion. Because films do things to people on many levels (psychological, social, spiritual, moral, philosophical), they need closer scrutiny.

The focus of this study is therefore on what films actually do to people and on what people do with their film-watching. I approach the task as someone interested in religion, hence the content of this first chapter. The two worlds of film and religious studies inhabit the same space, however, when it comes to the evident cultural function of film. What follows, therefore, can be considered a contribution to cultural studies. If it may appear to some to have an apologetic purpose, then this is only because of the blind spot which becomes evident in interdisciplinary studies when it comes to religion. It is not the main aim of this study to deal with that blind spot, though this may come about as a by-product. My main purpose is to ask how theology is to be done, given that film – as an example of an increasingly significant cultural medium – is getting the supposedly 'non-religious' to do a theology-like thing anyway.

²⁴ S. Bruce, 'The Problems of a Liberal Religion: A Sociologist's View', in M.D. Chapman (ed.), *The Future of Liberal Theology*, 221–41.

²⁵ N. Hornby, *How to Be Good*; 244; C. Marsh, 'Sex, Shopping, and Other Unsettling Theological Matters (1)', *Feminist Review* 31/1 (Jan 2004) 77

Case-Study A

Cinema-Going in 2001

What impact might a regular habit of cinema-going have upon a person? Even allowing for the fact that it obviously depends on the viewer, and the location of the habit within their overall life-structure, there are nevertheless conclusions that can be drawn from the films on offer. Scrutiny of UK releases throughout 2001 leads to some telling insights.

Had a person gone weekly to the cinema for the first quarter of 2001, watching the films that were most heavily publicised and thus likely to prove 'blockbusters', they would have seen five of the films that eventually featured in the twenty most-watched films of the year: *Cast Away*, *What Women Want*, *Hannibal*, *The Emperor's New Groove* and *Miss Congeniality*.¹ Of these, only one, *Cast Away*, could be considered to have received anything approaching 'critical acclaim'. Tom Hanks' Oscar-nominated performance led to the suggestion that the film is 'metaphysics for the masses' (*Independent* 13.1.01). That apart, Mel Gibson (*What Women Want*), Disney (*The Emperor's New Groove*), Sandra Bullock and others (*Miss Congeniality*) and Anthony Hopkins as Hannibal Lecter (*Hannibal*) are likely to have been the reasons behind their box-office success. As far as the consequences of viewing are concerned, a Disney film and two romantic comedies may not have lingered in the mind, whilst *Hannibal* might have left some disturbing scenes in the memory.

By contrast, had our imaginary cinema-goer viewed all films rated as four or five stars in the *Independent* during the same period, then in addition to *Cast Away* they would have watched: *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *Requiem for a Dream*, *Sexy Beast*, *Traffic*, *The Low Down*, *Songs from the Second Floor*, *Shadow of the Vampire*, *Best in Show*, *Dark Days*, *Audition*,

¹ Their top twenty positions being thirteenth, eleventh, sixth, twentieth and eighteenth, respectively. For such listings, see the British Film Institute's website < www.bfi.org.uk >.

