Films dealing with the concept of Belonging
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The following eleven feature films all examine the concept of belonging on a number of levels. These would be suitable films for students to study as their self-selected texts. My reason for selecting to write about these eleven films is that these are meritorious texts, ones that strongly resonated with me and films which have been released in the last few years. I also find that more substantial texts such as feature films, short stories and novels afford student more opportunities to thoughtfully explore the concept they are studying. Ultimately, it is essential for students to have ownership of their work and the texts they chose to explore the concept of belonging must have a relevance to them personally. A word of warning. Integral to the examination of any text is a consideration of how it has been composed, in this case how various cinematic techniques have been used to elucidate the concept of belonging. This is an essential part of studying for the Area of Study and something students must do for themselves. The other task that students must do is to find a way to integrate their response within the Area of study, finding points of connection and departure between all texts (including their prescribed text).

Babel

Babel (MA) directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu has been nominated for numerous Academy Awards in 2006 and has received mixed reviews around the world. It is an ambitious lengthy feature film that examines the concept of belonging on a number of personal, cultural, historical and social contexts. The post-9/11 film intertwines three main stories which are seemingly unconnected but the viewer finds out towards the end of the film, how these three stories are intrinsically connected, adding an extra level in the film in terms of global citizenship and how a sense of global belonging is primarily an economic consideration.

The film unfolds in just a few days during which the different characters will test their own sense of belonging which is intrinsically connected to their identity and their status within a new global community.

Belonging in the film is connected to the connections different people make in terms of the depth of their feelings and their sense of identity. The central story of the film is the flawed relationship between Richard (played by a mature Brad Pitt) and his wife, Susan (Cate Blanchett in another of her Academy Award nominated performances). The two Americans on a tour of Morocco are trying to solve their marital problems by physically removing themselves from their ordinary geographical and social contexts. Their hope that the majesty of the desert would somehow breathe a new air into their marriage. This mutual belonging to the marital institution is at the core of the film. Unfortunately for them, an accidental firing of a Winchester rifle by two Moroccan boys injures Susan and for the remainder of the film, we see how this act of terrorism (which is how the accidental shooting is perceived by the media internationally) binds the two characters together, as Richard tries to rescue his wife despite the resources available to him. What is fascinating to watch is Richard's sense of identity and how he perceives that his economic and social status makes him belong to a special category of citizenship. This is also echoed by the wealthy business man in Japan, who incidentally gave the rifle to a local Moroccan farmer when he was visiting the country on a safari in the past.

As the film demonstrates, a sense of belonging can emerge from the connections made with people, places, groups, communities and the larger world. The second story in Babel involves a Mexican illegal immigrant, Amelia, who is the live-in nanny for an affluent middle-class couple that we do not
see for the first hour of the film. The connection between the nanny and the children is indeed a precious one, since the children communicate with their beloved nanny in fluent Spanish. Amelia needs to visit Mexico for the marriage of her older son but is unable to find alternative care for her charges. The father of the children (who she speaks to on the phone) is adamant that this is a real emergency and that Amelia simply has to look after the children, despite her personal needs. This shows that as far as class division go, the schism is a great one and that Amelia needs to sacrifice her own personal needs in order to appease her ‘masters.’ The film suggests that belonging to American society is not easy, or fair.

Viewers of the film must also consider different aspects of belonging in terms of experiences and notions of identity, relationships, acceptance and understanding. This is seen primarily through the third main story involving a complex and lonely mute Japanese adolescent, Chieko, who socially belongs to the upper privileged echelons of Japanese society. Chieko is a smart and inventive young woman who is still grieving for her dead mother and is experiencing profound problems of belonging in her world. She is despondent in the scenes with her caring father and she needs to validate her existence in terms of making connections with others in the film, primarily through her many failed attempts to seduce men. This problematic aspect of the film, that could be confronting for some students, shows how a notion of belonging can be seen as an accretion of a person's sum of experiences and how they perceive their self in a particular context. The film brilliantly loses all diegetic sound in the scenes where Chieko is involved to show the audience how she perceives the world.

Babel also presents the many barriers which prevent belonging. These are connected to economic means as seen in the first part of the film through the tribulations of the Moroccan family, in Arabic. The film shows, in a raw manner, how a sense of patriarchal rule is accepted in communities and how this is not challenged by people who are suffering under its rule.

The film would also be an excellent choice for students studying ‘Retreat from the Global’ or the new option, ‘Navigating the Global’ in English Extension 1.

Happy Feet

Happy Feet (G) is an animated meritorious film directed by George Miller that centres on the obstacles of Mumble (voiced by Elijah Wood) who despite his impressive heritage (Hugo Weaver and Nicole Kidman) does not belong to his own community because of his inability to sing. This is the basic premise of the film and throughout the narrative exposition the viewer discovers how essential it is for everyone to belong to a community, to relish in their own identity and to form meaningful connections with people and the wider world. The film wears its morality on its sleeve which is part and parcel of its status as an animation; designed to appeal to children as well as adults.

Even though, an inability to sing is not a crucial skill in our community, the film argues that this is a legitimate reason to ostracise Mumble because singing is an essential courtship ritual in the penguin community; one that would allow a penguin to take his/her rightful place as the next generation of breeding penguins. It seems that there is no room in this community for people who do not belong; it “just ain’t penguin,” Memphis (Mumble’s father) reassures the audience. Nonetheless, Mumble is forced to look elsewhere for a community that he can belong to. Despite his growing affection for Gloria, who has no problem belonging to this community, since she is a superb singer, Mumble must move away from his community in order to find out how he can belong. This physical movement away from one’s community seems to be a recurrent motif in texts dealing with the concept of belonging. Mumble is aided in his quest to belong by his brilliant ability to dance. In his search to make meaningful connections with others, Mumble joins a coterie of smaller Adelie penguins with a penchant for pebble collecting and stand-up comedy.

The film explores many aspects of belonging, including the potential of an individual to enrich or challenge a community or group. This is shown in the second half of the film when
Mumble becomes friendly with the Adelle Amigos penguins who appreciate his dance moves. In Ramon, their leader, he finds a true friend who appreciates him just as he is, and for the first time in his young life, Mumble feels he belongs, forgetting his own personal woes.

The film becomes hilarious when Mumble meets Lovelace the Guru (voiced by Robin Williams), who is a kind of a love guru. Lovelace is revered within his own community and the feeling of belonging in this close-knit community is inspiring for Mumble. However, his own sense of identity and the importance of his own quest as well as his desire to belong to his own community alongside his parents and Gloria, propel him to seek as answer pertaining to the depletion of fish stock. In this way, the film demonstrates that an individual does have the capacity to enrich a community, and inferentially change the world.

The last third of the film changes its tone dramatically and students can investigate how this is achieved by George Miller through colour, design elements and music. The genial tone of the film changes dramatically as Mumble is plunged into a kind of 'heart of darkness' where he discovers that human greed and a disregard for the environment are the main obstacles preventing all other helpless creatures (such as the gorgeous seals we meet) from belonging harmoniously and coexisting on planet earth. A sombre lesson about the possibilities of belonging indeed.

The moral of the lesson does become somewhat of a polemic and the happy denouement is somewhat contrived, although necessitated by the film's status as animation. Mumble and Gloria do find true love and Mumble, thanks to his renewed knowledge and increased self-esteem gained through his time in exile, is finally accepted by his own people and feels that at least he does belong! Ideologically speaking, this is an interesting result and it does remind one of the panegyric couplings in As You Like It, reinforcing the notion that marriage is the most stable institution in terms of belonging. One shudders to think what the result would have been if Muble's mark of difference was something more pronounced than his inability to sing, for example in terms of religious beliefs, sexual orientation or ethnicity!

Pan's Labyrinth

Pan's Labyrinth (MA) was a critically acclaimed film in 2006 that won a number of Academy Awards and a host of important international prizes. The film directed by Guillermo Del Toro can be summarised, according to fellow teacher Kim Bow, in two words: "Franco and Freud". It is set
in Spain in 1940s during the oppressive post-war repression of the Franco regime and examines the problems that a young imaginative child, Ofelia, faces in terms of belonging. The problems faced by the lonely, assertive and charming young Ofelia in terms of belonging are personal (she is despised by her stepfather, Captain Vidal), cultural (she has no role to play in the militaristic patriarchal community where she is thrust), historical (she does not fully understand the role of the fascist Franco regime and its opponents) and social (the marriage that her mother made was purely in terms of social mobility and economic necessity) contexts. In order to escape her personal feelings of dissatisfaction and alienation Ofelia retreats into the world of fantasy where she imagines herself as a young princess in search of a quest. The fantastical creatures she meets in this world that she has invented through her imagination assure her that she belongs here and that she is valued.

_Pan's Labyrinth_ clearly shows how a sense of belonging can emerge from the connections made with people, places, groups, communities and the larger world. This is shown by the rebels, who are presented sympathetically in the film, particularly Mercedes and her heroic brother. On the other hand, even though Ofelia sympathises with them (due to the kindness shown to her by Mercedes) it is clear that she is too young to appreciate their role politically and historically. She is unable to make any real connections with the new harsh and brutal military environment that she is thrust into. This is partly to do with the physical incapacitation of her heavily-pregnant mother who is forced to belong to her new role as the wife of a fascist officer. In the film's sombre dinner-party scene, it is clear that the wives of the other officers that come to visit Captain Vidal, scorn Carmen because of her humble class origins. In fact, Ofelia's rebellion is not only a stance against the pure evil of Captain Vidal but also a reaction against the passivity shown by her own mother.

As the film progresses, the viewer sees Ofelia's inability to belong to the real world in terms of experiences (and the abusive treatment she receives from her stepfather) her strained relationships with her mother, her lack of acceptance of her situation, her longing for her biological father and a lack of understanding of what is happening all around her. The film's use of magic realism, when dealing with Ofelia's fantastical world is engaging and lyrical as well as highly significant. The audience is left to wonder if this is a fairy tale about the shortcomings of fascism or if the film is a charming fairy tale about a young girl suffering under the oppressive regime.

Of course the film is highly allegorical through the dramatic function of the three lead female characters. Carmen, Ofelia's mother, is a living embodiment of the old Spain and how she is suffering under the strain of war and the ensuing civil war. Mercedes, as an integral part of the rebel group, is symbolic of the new left wing ideological way of thinking who wanted to restore a sense of pride and fairness in Spanish society, and the aptly sacrificial lamb, Ofelia, is perhaps a representation of a mythopoetic Spain that is steeped in tradition, folkloric superstition and an ability to survive. As such, through Ofelia the film demonstrates the potential of the individual to enrich or challenge a community or group and how this in turn examines the concept of belonging.

**Children of Men**

_Children of Men_ (MA) is a brilliant futuristic dystopian film, in the vein of _Blade Runner_ that demonstrates just how precarious the concept of belonging is on a global scale. The world in 2027 is in a state of total disarray and nothing can be taken for granted. The world is a hellish version of our own world and nobody feels they belong to their own community and the world; the most disturbing aspect of this new world is achieved through a design element that reminds us England has descended into a form of anarchy that is associated with the third world and through the conscious recollections of the Holocaust, with the inhumane cages full of illegal immigrants that dominate every public space. In fact, throughout the quest of the main anti-hero, Theo, the film demonstrates how the very notion of a community has been destroyed, as has identity. England has become a constant battle ground, ruled by a totalitarian regime; something we are told is necessitated by the new global status quo. This is due to infertility that has gripped the human world (the infertility interestingly enough does not extend to the animal world) and consequently challenged every notion of belonging before descending into utter chaos. Notions of nationality identity, usually intrinsically connected with the notion of belonging, are debunked in this world as thousands of illegal immigrants try to enter England under martial rule. One can only wonder what hellish lifestyle they are trying to escape from in their
native lands. The confusion brought about by the collapse of traditional institution of belonging (family, church, State) is highlighted in the film by the many languages spoken by the various 'illegals' and the lack of subtitles to explain their plight.

We are told that the battle for Seattle is in its 1000th day and this combined with news footage convinces the viewer that this world, originally penned by P. D. James, had indeed descended into a vision of Hell. More specifically, we are told courtesy of a public service announcement "The world has collapsed, only Britain soldiers on." The premise of the film is an ingenious one.

In a world where no child has been born for twenty-seven years, the underground movement has discovered a woman pregnant and they commit themselves in doing everything to rescue her and to smuggle her out of England. It is within this context that the film's central premise is played out. A woman (an African woman called Kee) has been found heavily pregnant and Theo is entrusted by the secret underground organization, 'The Human Project,' to ensure her smuggling out of England along with her precious baby.

The essence of a speculative text is to serve as a cautionary tale. It is here that the film's director, Alfonso Cuarón and his fellow writer Timothy J. Sexton, have taken a bold gamble in increasing the scope of the original novel and presented the viewer with a disturbing and truly frightening scenario: what if the vision of John Howard and George W. Bush is wrong? What will happen if the allied forces in Iraq are defeated and the entire world becomes a new Iraq, forever trapped in a permanent state of civilian war and insurrection? This premise, at the core of the film then makes the audience question aspects of belonging in terms of experiences and notions of identity, relationships, acceptance and understanding. A number of relationships exist in the film and each one them force the audience to examine how the individual participants within these relationships feel about belonging to social and personal institutions. The primary relationship in the film is between the government employee, Theo (Clive Owen) and his estranged wife Julian (played by Julianne Moore). Despite the collapse of their marriage, due to the death of their only child Dylan, the two clearly still care for one another. The lack of acceptance and understanding of what has taken place in the past is what has caused the marital rift between these characters. Yet again as with so many texts, belonging to a marital partner is presented as the most desirable state to be in, as shown through Theo's inability to resume a life on his own. This is shown, particularly, through his attire that makes Clive Owen (one of the world's most handsome actors) look decidedly dishevelled. Despite their troubled past, it is Julian who convinces her former husband to assist her with the apocryphal utopian group she belongs to, the Human Project.

It appears that Julian has found a new institution to belong to and through this it is suggested she possesses the potential to enrich humanity and her particular community, the rebel group. The second most important relationship in the film is between Theo and his friend Jasper, an anachronistic rebel who recalls the days of the hippies with his likes: the music of the Beatles and the Stones and smoking illicit substances. Jasper provides a sanctuary for Theo and Kee and during this quiet interlude and one hopes that the two can find an oasis where they can feel safe. This idyllic time, due to the film's status as a dystopic thriller, is short lived and the film propels itself into the third more sombre section of the action. However, it is worth noting that the character of Jasper is a very important one because he is part of the baby boomer generation, the same generation that the film-maker is addressing in his work and is asking them to reflect about their own sense of belonging in a turbulent apocalyptic world after 9/11. Jasper along with the audience must consider what it is that is preventing them from belonging to a global citizenship as it did in the past. This confronting question is at the crux of the film and is reiterated by the graphic violence used in the film and the sparing use of the hand-held cameras that make the action sequences all the more visceral. Mr. Cuarón's intention is made clear at the commencement of the film where he presents his lead character, Theo, performing the most mundane of tasks, ordering a cup of coffee during a work break. The random bombing that occurs there and the scene of devastation that follows is a clear signal to the audience that this is a world devoid of any certainties, a violent world where acts of terrorism are indistinguishable from authorised random acts of brutality carried out by the government itself.

Ultimately, the character of Theo and his embracing of his mission is part of the film's positive message. In this world of utter chaos and turmoil, he, along side humanity, has found a new hope, a vision of a more peaceful world to belong to. It is due to this that he ultimately succeeds during the film's denouement, despite the personal cost to himself.

The Lives of Others
The Lives of Others (MA), directed and written by Florian Henckel von Donnersmark has won the Oscar for Best foreign film in the 2007 Ceremony, narrowing beating the brilliant favourite, Water. The film centres around the seemingly misanthropic and humourless, Captain Gerd Wiesler (played by Ulrich Mühe, who tragically succumbed to cancer shortly after the release of the film) and his desire to belong to a regime and a society that the audience clearly sees as brutal, inhumane, unfair and unjust. Captain Wiesler is initially a very antipathetic figure as he seems to lack personality and compassion. When we meet him at the beginning of the film, he is interrogating a prisoner and he carries out this task as an officer of the Stasi methodically, cruelly and without emotion. The world according to Wiesler is monochromatic: people either support the government or they do not. In his minds, there is no room
for dissidence of any sort. A contemporary audience cannot hope to understand such as character without being familiar with the historical and social context of the politics of East Germany before the reunification of the country.

Wiesler's messianic sense of belonging can only be understood by the symbiotic connections Captain Wiesler has with the totalitarian Party. This is established early when he ensures that a young man who made a joke at the expense of the reigning political ruler is reported and punished.

He readily accepts his role in assisting the fascist East-German government hold on power with a systematic inhumane system of control and surveillance. His support for his political masters is given a booster shot when a former school peer, the lascivious Lieutenant-Colonel Anton Grubitz who is now in charge of the Stasi's Cultural Department, orders him to spy on the leading playwright of the day, Georg Dreyman, and Christa-Maria Sieland, his lover and the most famous actress of the day. This becomes the turning point of the film. Through Georg and Chista the audience finds two characters with whom to empathise since they want to belong to a freer world, one characterised by freedom of artistic expression and the right of people to live under democratic rule. The audience also gradually discovers that this surveillance is partly motivated by the lecherous desire of a Minister to sleep with Chista.

What Wiesler discovers whilst he is managing this investigation is that his allegiances have shifted somewhat and that he is no longer purely "the party's sword and shield". He beings to question and to quietly challenge the false patriotism of other party members and work associates and to no longer feel that he belongs to the state. This is a direct result of his 'secret' experiences that he accrues from the contact he has with the world of Georg and Chista. Through them, he discovers the beauty of music and literature and his stern demeanour gives way to a compassionate and sympathetic individual who now begins to value human contact and is even prepared to sacrifice his own happiness to protect those that he originally despised.

In this way the film shows how the potential of an individual to challenge the ruling party. His dawning realisation of how mundane and pitiful his former 'blind' life was and his embracing free speech and thought is delicious indeed! Wiesler comes to despise the ruthless and vituperative government that prosecutes people and turns one against the other for the sake of a falsified national unity and collective security. This aspect of the thriller is perhaps what has resonated with the members of the Academy Award; acknowledging the resonances in the film and the society in the US in 2007.

*The Lives of Others* demonstrates that the barrier which prevents belonging to a fair, just and egalitarian society is the manipulation and falsification of truth. A timely lesson indeed.

**Water**

*Water* (M), directed by the Indian-Canadian Mehta Nair, is one of the most moving films released in the last few years. It is a magnificent film which I would personally compare to a lyrical poem on screen that
examines the heart-wrenching quest of a young child widow, Chuyia, to belong to a community that will provide her with the most basic of human needs: love, comfort and compassion and nurture. The need to belong moves beyond the personal milieu in the film and enters the social, cultural and political due to the film's clever structure. The story of the young widow Chuyia who is sent by her 'cruel' parents to live alongside other Hindu widows in penitence at the age of eight, is supported by the equally poignant story of the beautiful widow Kalyani (played by the impossibly beautiful Lisa Ray) and her idealistic suitor (played by Indian heartthrob John Abraham) who shares Ghandi's vision of a post-colonial India where all citizens can feel a sense of belonging. The film's narrative involving the widows is cleverly intruded upon by actual scenes featuring Ghandi and his entourage as they criss-cross their way through the vast expanse of India.

At the centre of the film, we find the widow ashram at the foot of the Ganges where widows are sent to spend their rest of their lives in poverty and misery. Most of these women were betrothed/married, often without their knowledge, as is the case with Chuyia, to much older men who die decades before them. Even within this miserable existence, a sense of belonging can emerge from the connections made with people, places, groups, communities and the larger world. This is shown in the early part of the film through the interactions between the widows. Chuyia has no idea why her parents have condemned her to this living misery and she is too young to appreciate the historical/economic/cultural context that made this low-caste couple act in this way. I must admit that as an observer, I found it impossible to forgive them for their actions, although I could appreciate that poverty is clearly the answer. Nonetheless, Chuyia makes the necessary connections with her fellow widows, primarily Kalyani who as the most stunning of the inmates has not been forced to shave her hair and is forced to work as a prostitute on the side, providing the ashram with the funds to facilitate its existence. Another interesting character who provides Chuyia with a sense of belonging is the kind and gentle Shakuntula who spends her time assisting a local holy man. Despite his spiritual enlightenment, he remains blind to the suffering endured by the women and through this, the film's director is subtly challenging the type of spiritual belief that would allow such injustices to be perpetuated. I feel that the director is subtly also encouraging her viewers to challenge the oppressive patriarchy that can be located within organised religious institutions as well. Chuyia finds an older sister and partly-mother substitute in Kalyani. The latter falls in love with the idealistic law student Narayan who wants to rescue her from this existence but ultimately their love affair is doomed due to their experiences and their different social status. Through this tragic affair (Kalyani ends up drowning in the Ganges as another 'Ophelia'), the students exploring this film as part of the Area of Study may consider aspects of belonging in terms of experiences and notions of identity, relationships, acceptance and understanding. They have to consider how Narayan's parents are adamant that this marriage cannot take place due to the circumstances of the bride (a widow is not the best marital prospect for a well educated Hindu young lawyer in 1948) and be confronted by the hypocrisy in the society where Narayan's father (a respected and wealthy Brahmin) has sexual contact with Kalyani (against her will) whilst knowing his son is in love with this confused young woman.

The power of the film lies within its raw but sympathetic exploration about the institutionalised oppression of a group of unfortunate women who have no way of belonging to their own society due to the patriarchal dogma that informs religious beliefs. This quest to belong is dramatically juxtaposed against the historical account of India trying to belong to the world of nations against British colonial rule. The exquisite beauty
of the film derives from the lack of simple answers and even though Gandhi and his followers (such as Narayan) are a pervading presence throughout the film, the director is never tempted to turn her film into a polemic. The film explores many aspects of belonging, including the potential of the individual to enrich or challenge a community or group as shown by Narayan's action; ensuring that Chuyia becomes part of Ghandi's entourage and as such, ensuring she has a future in a new post-colonial India.

**Brokeback Mountain**

*Brokeback Mountain* (M), directed by Ang Lee, explores a young man's love for another and the inability for them to belong as a legitimate loving couple due to the cultural, historical and social contexts. The main obstacle preventing them from belonging to each other and the world at large is the institutionalised reality of homophobia.

The love story centres on the story of two itinerant ranchers/sheep-herders in the early 1960s; a time of sexual revolution and rebellion. Not that any of this is evident in the film. Jack (played by Jake Gyllenhaal) is presented as a gay character who has hopes that he can find love in the world. The object of his affection, the humble Ennis (played by a mumbling Heath Ledger), is presented as a typical heterosexual male who aspires to belong to society by finding employment and starting a family. Yet, both men yearn for something else, which the audience interprets as their same-sex attraction. The film aptly demonstrates that a sense of belonging can emerge from the connections made with people, places, groups, communities and the larger world. This in fact constitutes the real problem of the film. Even though the type of intimacy and the depth of the emotions shown by the two men (particularly by Jack) is admirable and beautiful what they feel is the 'love that cannot speak its name.' Wisely, the film's director does not bother with trying to explicitly name the affection the two men share for each other. Instead, taking a leaf from an English teacher's book, he 'shows' their love against the dramatic natural background. In fact, the fact that the two men only meet in a natural environment throughout their lives does insinuate that this affection is real and ought to be seen as natural and not 'unnatural'.

By exploring the film, students may consider aspects of belonging in terms of experiences and notions of identity, relationships, acceptance and understanding. Ennis has the most problems accepting his emotions and his relationship with Jack. He openly tells the latter that he 'ain't no queer', whilst at the same he is unable to keep away from Jack. Ennis finds it impossible to belong to the vision of manhood that he wanted for himself and that mainstream society has constructed for him. He is initially seen as a hard working man who is working hard to save money to marry his sweetheart, Alma. When he does this, he soon discovers the disjunction between illusion and reality. He is unable to accept his true feelings for Jack and notably after their first sexual contact he feels sullied and throws himself into work, something that lasts throughout his life. Jack, on the other hand accepts and understands his feelings and he wants to be honest with himself and try to live a decent and loving life with Ennis.

The oppressive homophobic context of the film prevent either characters from challenging the prevailing social ethos. As the years progress, Ennis becomes grumpier and Jake, in a desperate attempt to belong to the mainstream society, makes a marriage of convenience and finds life working for an obnoxious father-in-law, gruelling. Hopefully by being inspired by this tragic tale of two individuals and their quest for belonging, the audience can aspire to live their own lives in the hope of fighting discrimination but banality as well.

It is also worth students considering how different the outcome of the film times. Or...
of the film would have been if it was set in different times. Or would it?

**Transamerica**

The amusingly but appropriately titled, *Transamerica* (MA), was one of the most intelligent comedies in 2006 and has justifiably earned an Academy Award Best Actress nomination for its lead actor Felicity Huffman (better know for her role in *Desperate Housewives*). At the core of the film is the simple premise that Bree feels that she does not belong in the body she was born with. She feels that this gender prison is a physical barrier to her happiness and an obstacle that she can overcome thanks to the world of surgery. We first meet Bree as an intelligent and thoughtful individual who is working hard to earn enough money to be able to afford the gender-realignment surgery that she hopes will change her life. Bree's identity as a woman trapped in a man's body is integral to how she feels she belongs in the world. We see her discuss this with her understanding psychologist and later with her vituperative mother who refuses to acknowledge Bree's condition. The historical and social contexts of 2007 and attitudes about non-normative sexuality is what has made this film, and its subject, of transsexuality, possible, as well as the indisputable star power of Felicity Huffman.

Bree shows the viewers how a sense of belonging can emerge from the connections made with people, places, groups, communities and the larger world. Living as a woman and being involved in manual labour is arduous but Bree shows how it is possible. She is comfortable with her lot in LA and she has found a niche that she belongs to. This is attested by her psychologist, who as a representative of the State, must be convinced that Bree is in a sound emotional and cognitive state to make the gender realignment possible. Bree's sense of belonging as woman and a transsexual is also demonstrated by the connections she has made with a support group of transsexuals that we encounter in the latter part of the film.

Through Bree's journey in the film, students may consider aspects of belonging in terms of experiences and notions of identity, relationships, acceptance and understanding. The major complication in the film involves a child that she has fathered when living as a man, a result of sexual experimentation. The child, now a young hustler called Toby, in the streets of New York has found himself in a spot of bother with the police and Bree is called upon to bail him out. Structurally, this allows the film to remove Bree from her comfortably setting and social context and to show her trials and tribulations when confronting her past and her old identity in a new setting. After paying Toby's bail, Bree convinces the young man that she is a charitable Christian worker and after a number of hilarious incidents the two set out across America in a dilapidated car. This premise provides the film with much of its hilarity. The audience concurs with the assertion made by Bree's psychologist that she can only truly feel a sense of belonging in this world as a woman after she has accepted her past and she shows a understanding for the set of circumstances that brought her where she is today. This involves a rather painful reconciliation with her own family. Of course a film examining the life of a transsexual in a sympathetic light would not have been possible in the past and this shows students how attitudes to belonging are modified over time. During the road journey across/ transamerica the audience discovers that discrimination and misconception is one of the many barriers which prevent the possibility of belonging. Through the troubled character of Toby and his lackadaisical attitude towards drugs and casual sex, the audience also realises that he too is striving to a belong in society but the lack of positive parent role models prevent him from doing so.
Sophie Scholl - The Final Days

Sophie Scholl - The Final Days (M) is a new inspirational and poignant film from Germany which explores a young woman’s ardent idealism and her quest to belong to the kind of society, and world at large, which is contrary to the vision of the Nazi party. The film was directed by Marc Rothemund in a style that resembles a documentary and part of the veracity of the film is the fact that the screenplay was written by consulting actual court transcripts of the real life courts case involving Sophie and the Nazi Party.

Clive James in his recent historical tome, Cultural Amnesia, canonised Sophie Scholl and I thoroughly endorse his pronouncement. Part of the film’s tragedy is the fact that we are given enough information about the personal hopes and aspirations of this earnest and wonderful young woman to realise that her faith to belong to a free and fair world where injustices, including the unspeakable genocide of the Jewish people, do not take place. Sophie School and her brother Hans were part of a German resistance movement known as the ‘White Rose’ at a time when dissent was not tolerated by the Nazi regime. On the contrary, such dissent was squashed with the utmost brutality associated with the regime. This is demonstrated at the end of the film when the death sentence imposed on Sophie and her brother is not carried out within the customary 99 days but is in fact carried out within 24 hours of the pronouncement of the sentence, as a lesson to the rest of the Germans.

Sophie is a university-educated young woman, sensible Catholic who believes in God’s grace whose ambition is to marry her beloved fiancée (fighting on the Russian Front) and to live peaceful and prosperous life. Against this ordinary ambition to belong to a wholesome society is Sophie’s strong moral character and personal integrity that have justifiably made her into “an honourable Gentile”.

Sophie believes that a sense of belonging can only emerge from the connections made with people, places, groups, communities and the larger world. We witness the loving relations she forges with her brother and her fellow students as they work diligently and furtively to distribute their leaflets denouncing the Nazi Party and Hitler’s vision in Munich. Sophie’s deep commitment for human life, honesty and integrity is what motivates her to endure the relentless interrogations and to continue to do so even after she has been sentenced to death. Faced with the choice of belonging to a false world that is contrary to her own personal beliefs she chooses death as a testament of her convictions.

The film affords students the opportunity to consider aspects of belonging in terms of experiences and notions of identity, acceptance and understanding. More importantly one needs to question the film’s production at this historical juncture. At a time, when certain civil liberties are taken away, purportedly to fight terrorism, the film poses a crucial question to young people: would you have the moral strength to follow Sophie’s example? Sophie’s own perception of identity as a German woman does not coincide with the hysterical doctrine of the
Nazi Party. She does not accept their version of the utopian vision set out by the Fuhrer and for this she is willing to die.

The film presents the aim of the Scholl's as a way of creating a mass student rebellion; something that alas does not eventuate. Through this, students can explore many aspects of belonging, including the potential of individuals to enrich or challenge a community or group. Such a group, the official Nazi demonstrate the actual German loses on the battlefield as one of utter and angry denial. The potential of Hans and Sophie to enrich their society by disseminating the truth about the actual outcome of the war and by exposing the atrocities perpetuated by the Nazis can truly inspire students studying this film. Contrary to the serene demeanour in the face of adversity during their court appearances is the tone of desperate hysterical fury adopted by Dr. Roland Freisler, the head judge. It is as if though the actions of these university students have a direct impact on the outcome of the war; which of course, they do not.

Sophie's refusal to belong to a society ruled by such an unjust regime is also echoed through her cell-mate, a committed communist and her parents who despite their overwhelming and heart-wrenching impending loss, applaud her actions.

Ultimately, as many reviewers have noted, Sophie is the kind of decent, principled person we would all like to be.

The film would also be a terrific text to study in the 'History and Memory' Elective in English Advanced.

**Donnie Darko**

Donnie Darko (MA), directed by Richard Kelly, is a cult art-film, well loved by adolescents, that examines the inner world of its eponymous character and demonstrates that he does not belong in any context, including personal, cultural, historical and social. Donnie played by Jake Gyllenhaal is a handsome, very intelligent high school student (especially when it comes to science), whose periodically eccentric behaviour is generally prompted by the suggestions of his friend Frank, a six-foot rabbit with the glassy eyes and pretty teeth of a Buggy-looking killer. His status as an outsider, a modern day Holden Caulfield, reiterates his inability to belong to a social group. This is also echoed in his family life and his relationship with Gretchen, who although admits Donnie has his own set of problems he is a much better candidate for a boy friend that the bullies at their school.

The film has been problematic in its reception by audiences and critics alike. However, through DVD and a recent director's version, the film has reached a whole new audience and has become a huge success with the under 25 group who has no problem accepting the conflicting styles that make up the film. Essentially the film is a social satire, a grim teenpic and a science fiction film. Donnie's inability to belong in his community, peer group and society at large is connected with the cultural, historical and social contexts. The film, is set at the time of the presidential campaign between Michael Doukakis (who is beloved by Donnie's parents) and George Bush (father of the current controversial US President). This period was historically an economically prosperous one and this type of middle-class wealth and material comfort (the possibility of not paying for Donnie's expensive sessions with the clinical psychiatrist is never discussed in the film), as exemplified by the Darko household. However, the suggestion in the film is that Donnie's inability to belong to this 'phoney' society is an embodiment of America that was lulled into a false sense of security and has lead to the current moral malaise that is associated with the George W. Bush administration.

If a sense of belonging can emerge from the connections made with people, places, groups, communities and the larger world, then Donnie falls on all accounts. He is estranged from his politically-aware sister (played by Jake Gyllenhaal's real sister, Maggie, his school peers, his therapist and his parents. Despite the amiability between him and his English teacher (played by Drew Barrymore) he fails to make a real connection with her either and, she in turn proves to be ineffective. Perhaps this is due to the nature of the film as a bleak teenpic where all adult characters are seen as ineffectual and irrelevant to the lives of teenagers.

The film toys with the notion that Donnie can be seen as a hero when he embarks on his own personal campaign to discredit the motivational speaker (played by Patrick Swayze). However, even though the latter is exposed as a paedophile the film does not endorse Donnie's potential as an individual capable of enriching his urban community.
Perhaps what prevents Donnie from belonging is his morbidity and his conviction that the 'end is nigh'. This is conveyed successfully through Jake Gyllenhaal's acting prowess.

The crash of a jet engine at the beginning of the film is revisited at the end of the film, where we discover that despite Donnie's morbid melancholy he manages to create a time portal and to save his family from death.

Monsoon Wedding

Monsoon Wedding, directed by Mira Nair examines the concept of belonging on a variety of contexts including personal, cultural, historical and social. It does this through the main intertwining stories of the two cousins, Aditi and Ria and how the close-knit Punjabi family gets together to celebrate the arranged wedding of the former. As part of the forthcoming nuptials, we meet the servant, Alice and the man who comes to fall in love with her, Dubey the rather unattractive single bachelor and wedding planner. The courtship between this low caste couple is juxtaposed with the wedding and courting of the upper caste lead couple. In this way, the director is able to examine how individuals belong to particular social classes and how they accept this fact as a given. The parents of the bride, Lalit Verma, and his wife Pimmi are presented as a typical middle-class couple who are financially in dire straits as the need to belong to their cultural mores and traditions demands they spend more than they can afford. The cultural importance of the prolonged wedding ceremony as a way of belonging to a cultural group is highlighted in this film and is informative for an audience who may not be as well versed in Hindu cultural traditions. For the people participating a sense of belonging can emerge from the connections made with people, places, groups, communities and the larger world. For Aditi, (even though she appears to be part of the new generation of Indian young woman well versed in the comforts of the digital age) belonging to a future husband seems inevitable even though her heart belongs to another; the philandering news journalist who clearly feels that India belongs to the global community more than its historical traditions. For the groom, Houston engineer Hermant Rai, belonging is seen as an eclectic concept. It is also worth noting that the notion of cultural and historical belonging is examined well during the TV Debate which examines India's role in the modern world. He clearly feels that he belongs to the sophisticated business world of Houston and yet he chooses to come to Delhi in search of an Indian wife who will respect and abide by his cultural traditions. His decision at the end of the film to forgive Aditi's sexual past and embrace the future together can be seen as a progressive ideal. This pertains to how he sees himself, both as an Indian male but also a worldly young man who understands the complicated and complex ways of the heart! A juxtaposition between the young people in the film and their older parent counterparts certainly reminds the audience that attitudes to belonging are modified over time. Despite the gender credentials of the film, the audience can still question the issue of sexuality as seen through the characterisation of Aditi's younger brother who does not want to enrol in a boarding school. This decision to send him off to boarding school is presented by Mr Verma as a way to introduce his son to the kind of life he aspires for him. This includes belonging to a social milieu, one that is associated with a more western middle-class environment. More poignantly in the audience's realisation has that this young man is gay and his future will not be bright as his parents anticipate since, he will find it impossible to belong within this cultural context that does not acknowledge his own sexuality.

The film certainly explores many aspects of belonging, including the potential of an individual to both enrich or challenge a community or group to a certain extent. This is achieved through the character of the unmarried Ria, who wants to become a writer. Ria, who financially depends on her uncle (Aditi's father) and is clearly accepted as one of the family is outspoken and assertive and even challenges Aditi's ethics. In this way, her honesty makes her an endearing figure; so when the disclosure of her childhood abuse by her rich uncle Jet (the one who incidentally offers to cover her tuition) is made, the audience feels for her. Ria's decision to air this dark secret family skeleton during the wedding celebrations is certainly dramatic but poignant as well since it is done as a way of protecting her younger cousin who is potentially, Jet's next victim. Ria's disclosure shocks everyone but despite the family's adherence to belonging to a traditional family unit, the head of the family, stands by Ria and states, "These are my children, and I will protect them from myself even if I have to."

The film also represents choices not to belong, or barriers which prevent belonging. For instance, the physiognomy of the actor playing Dubey (Vijay Raaz) emphasises his simian appearance but also reminds the audience of his position in the caste system. The woman he loves, Alice, also reminds the audience of the social dimensions of belonging when she asks him if he wants "tap or fridge water" the implication, here is that Dubey does not belong to the privileged class to warrant fridge water.

Australian audiences, who do not belong to a similar cultural milieu, as that presented in the film, will have difficulties understanding the possibilities presented by a sense of belonging to, or exclusion from the Nair's film and the world it represents. This is particularly the case in terms of the wedding customs which are shown in the film as well as the significance of the music and songs which accompany the wedding celebrations.