

Hollywood arthouse – *Vanilla Sky* (2001)

Director: Cameron Crowe

Screenplay: Cameron Crowe based on *Abre los ojos* by Alejandro Amenabar & Mateo Gil Rodríguez

Editors: Joe Hutshing & Mark Livolsi

Music: Nancy Wilson

Producers: Tom Cruise, Paula Wagner & Cameron Crowe

Cinematographer: John Toll

Cast: Tom Cruise, Penelope Cruz, Kurt Russell, Jason Lee, Cameron Diaz

Since its inception during the 1910s, Hollywood has been one thing: a business. Driven first by European immigrants and then by Wall Street investors, film has never been an *artefact* but instead, primarily a commodity. However, unlike most commodities, all films are unique and so producers have attempted to reduce risk through a number of techniques including the remake.

Abre los ojos (*Open Your Eyes*, Spain, 1997) opened in North America in April 1999 and, in common with most subtitled movies, did little business in the 66 days of its run, finishing with a box office cume of \$368,234 (source: www.the-numbers.com/movies/1999/OPNRS). Although the original film was not particularly successful outside Spain, it obviously appealed to Cruise as a vehicle for his talents and therefore a sure-fire box office success.

It is commonplace for movie aficionados to prefer the foreign language original to the Hollywood remake. Hollywood is always likely to commercialise the property and hence dilute any intellectual pretensions the original may have had. Internet Movie Database voters certainly prefer the original giving it 7.6/10 (9111 votes) to the remake's 6.9/10 (31147). However, I believe that *Vanilla Sky* has the edge over Amenabar's film.

Crowe is quoted in *Sight and Sound* as saying his film was a 'cover version' of *Abre los ojos*. Crowe's background as a *Rolling Stone* reporter (see his *Almost Famous*, 2001) may explain his use of a music industry term. Indeed, the films are exceptionally similarly plotted, the main changes being that Hollywood loses the shootout and Sofia's confusion as to who she is at the end. However, once Tom Cruise (rather than Eduardo Noriega) is cast in the lead then the movie, even if Cruise had acted as a simulacrum of Noriega, is bound to be different. In addition, Crowe's conscious grafting of popular culture references, through the soundtrack and in the *mise en scene*, reinforces the American dimension to his version.

Vanilla Sky is also interesting in that it received an exceptionally varied response from critics. For example:

Overblown and idiotic, this new "erotic thriller" is neither erotic nor thrilling; it's long, boring and self-indulgent. (Washington Post / Stephen Hunter)

A mostly fascinating, often frustrating, boldly uncommercial Hollywood version of a boldly uncommercial art film. It's very atypical of the previous work of both director and star, and it's as personal a film, I suspect, as Cruise will ever make. (Seattle Post-Intelligencer / William Arnold) (quotes from www.metacritic.com/video/titles/vanillasky)

On first viewing I found it difficult to establish the degree to which Crowe's critique on the emptiness of celebrity was intentional, a confusion shared by the *Sight and Sound* reviewer:

a flawed and frustrating but oddly engrossing picture – a study of millennial Manhattan tensions that juggles (unintentional?) pretension with (unintentional?) profundities. Alright, so maybe *Vanilla Sky* is finally more about artifice than it is about art. Yet – as with the two levels it moves between – its skill is in making you wonder if there's really much difference between the two. (Xan Brooks, 2002, p. 64a - February)

However, after repeated viewings *Vanilla Sky* strikes me as more of an arthouse film than typical Hollywood fare. Although generically it is science fiction, this is only apparent towards the end. The central message is about the vacuity of celebrity and the demented worlds that love can lead us into.

For more on *Vanilla Sky* see *Introduction to Film*: pp. 21-2 on music and pp. 43-4 on the use of stars.