

Brains and brawn: Two films

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [July 26, 2003](#) issue

In the middle of a summer of cultural and political discontent, there is a ray of hope—a few Hollywood films are showing respect for the intellect. Mindless films, usually so prevalent in the movie scene, have given way to a few mindful films. Take *Hulk*, for example.

Hulk? It is the sort of summer fare that would not normally call for serious intellectual reflection. Of course, comic book aficionados will insist that the best comic artists are anything but mindless, and will point out that many of the superheroes they create have their origins in literary history. Still, it would have been easy to rely on the latest special effects to draw summer audiences to *Hulk*. But as Peter Bart points out in a recent *Variety* column, Universal Pictures raised the bar when it hired high-concept artist Ang Lee to direct a film about “a brooding and brilliant young nuclear biotechnologist at Berkeley.”

The Taiwanese-born Lee, 49, is credited with several previous films: the thoughtful and creative *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, an adaptation of Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* and an adaptation of Rick Moody’s novel *The Ice Storm*. Lee’s treatment of the Hulk is his first “tent-pole” film. The industry uses this term to describe a film that is distributed more widely in order to sell more tickets in the first few weeks of release. When a tent-pole film succeeds, it makes enough money to “hold up” the studio. With Lee as director and James Schamus as writer, *Hulk* may have the strong early start of a tent-pole film followed by additional success as the public realizes its depth.

As Bart points out, a film that dares to examine the anguish of its lead characters is a box-office risk when summer audiences want only escapism with their popcorn. But it’s a sign of hope when the public responds to deeper fare. Young scientist Bruce Banner (Eric Bana) and his colleague and girlfriend Betty Ross (Jennifer Connelly) perform in the context of a simple comic book story. But they are working within another context as well—the context of a film that uses comic book flare boldly in its editing, and relies on Schamus’s literate script to capture the ambiguity

of a complex relationship.

Connelly has been here before. She played a similar role as the supportive wife in *A Beautiful Mind*, another mindful film about a brilliant but troubled researcher. She adjusts quickly to the fact that Banner makes a dramatic transformation when his anger explodes—into a green 15-foot, 1,500-pound monster of rage. This is comic book territory with a clear message: troubled men need strong women to keep them from spinning totally out of control. Banner's condition was created by the manipulations of his father, a research scientist who is played with shaggy brilliance by Nick Nolte. The film explores the danger of repressed memory, of rage left unexamined, and the risks of human experimentation.

There are clear parallels to Frankenstein's monster, and to the Beauty who tames beasts. The film also suggests that Bruce and Betty understand one another because both have fathers who are egomaniacal bullies.

Perhaps Universal Pictures was encouraged to go with *Hulk* by the success of *The Matrix*. Created by Chicago brothers Larry and Andy Wachowski, the first film in the *Matrix* series was made for \$68 million and earned well over \$200 million. *The Matrix Reloaded* is in theaters this summer and a third installment will be out this fall. The *Matrix* spins a complex tale that involves the contrast between the "real" world and a virtual world where humans are held captive by machines that use them as energy sources.

You do not have to know the Christian story to appreciate the beauty and creativity of the *Matrix* films, but it helps. Morpheus, played with enormous strength by Lawrence Fishburne, has identified Neo (Keanu Reeves), on faith alone, as the One who will save humankind. First, however, Neo must die and be resurrected in order to release others from the control of the machines. I can think of no film made by a religious production company that can match the power in this telling of the challenge facing Neo (the chosen One), a challenge he would rather not accept.

Does it help to be well read to appreciate the *Matrix* series? In *Exploring the Matrix: Visions of a Cyber Future*, a book of essays edited by Karen Haber (St. Martin's Press), Stephen Baxter comments:

The idea that the world around us may not be real reaches back to Plato, who wondered if what we see resembles the flickering shadows on a cave wall. The notion of creating deceptive artificial environments dates back as

least as far as Descartes, who in the 17th century speculated on the philosophical implications of a sense-manipulating “demon”—effectively a pretechnological virtual-reality generator.

In the same book, Paul De Filippo suggests Elaine Pagels as a source for understanding the Gnosticism in the *Matrix* series, points to the influences of the Hindu and Buddhist concepts of *maya* and *samsara*, and quotes William Blake: “If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.”

Not bad for a big-budget summer movie.