ORIGINAL TITLE: Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World
YEAR: 2003
RUNNING TIME: 137 min.
COUNTRY: USA.
DIRECTOR: Peter Weir
SCREENWRITER: Peter Weir & John Collee (Novels: Patrick O’Brien)
COMPOSER: Christopher Gordon, Iva Davies, Richard Tognetti
CINEMATOGRAPHER: Russell Boyd
CAST: Russell Crowe (Capt. Jack Aubrey), Paul Bettany (Doctor Stephen Maturin, surgeon), Lee Ingleby (Hollom, Midshipman), David Threlfall (Preserved Killick, Captain’s Steward), James D’Arcy (1st lt. Tom Pullings), Edward Woodall (2nd lt William Mowett), Ian Mercer (Mr Hoar, Boatswain), Robert Pugh (Mr. Allen, Master), Billy Boyd (Barrett Bonden, Coxswain), Richard McCabe (Mr. Higgins, Surgeon Mate), Chris Larkin (Capt. Howard, Royal Marines), George Innes (Joe Plaice, Able Seaman), Mark Lewis Jones (Mr. Hogg, Whaler), Bryan Dick (Joseph Nagle, Carpenter’s Mate), Joseph Morgan (William Warley, Cpt. of Mizzentop), Alex Palmer (Nehemiah Slade, Able Seaman), John DeSantis (Padeen, Loblolly Boy), Patrick Gallagher (Awkward Davies, Able Seaman), Max Pirkis (Blakeney, Midshipman), Max Benitz (Calamy, Midshipman)

PLOT
During the Napoleonic Wars, Lucky Jack Aubrey captains the crew of the H.M.S. Surprise. When the ship is suddenly attacked by a superior enemy, it is badly damaged and much of his crew is injured. In a bold and dangerous move, Aubrey decides to set sail in a high stakes chase across two oceans to intercept and capture their foe. It’s a mission that can decide the fate of a nation—or destroy Lucky Jack and his crew.

INTERESTING FACTS
Master and Commander was the first Patrick O’Brien novel based on the exploits of Jack Aubrey and his friend Stephen Maturin. The Far Side of the World was O’Brien’s tenth novel. The film Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World is an amalgamation of the first and the tenth.

I am a Patrick O’Brien supporter, I’m even a hooligan. I’ve read the twenty novels about Aubrey and Maturin. For me, since I’ve seen this film Aubrey has the face of Russell Crow and Stephen Maturin is

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handsomer than he appears in the novels. But the *H.M.S. Surprise* is just like I’ve imagined. Reading a novel is a solitary experience. Our imaginations must work with the author’s narrative as the story unfolds, at the cinema, there is always the possibility that some of the audience will read what they see in a different way from that intended by the director of an adaptation from a novel. Nevertheless, for readers the characters became the actors and vice versa.

**ISSUES TO CONSIDER**

One thing that is surprising in watching *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* is the age of many of the ‘sailors’. The midshipmen in particular, as junior officers, are no more than young boys.

Here are two accounts which give some idea of the youthfulness of many of the crews:

‘More than four-fifths of ordinary seamen, and half of able seamen, were aged under twenty-five. Only about a fifth were married. Boys of between six and eighteen were to be found aboard ship, many of them engaged simply in playing as well as learning the ropes...About half of the crew would have been impressed’ - that is, involuntary - but only merchant seamen could be so recruited.’

‘In less well-ordered ships, young midshipmen were at the mercy of ‘oldsters’ – men passed over for preferment who would probably have to spend the rest of their lives in their jobs. Even youngsters could be venomous. As one seaman observed: We had a midshipman on board of a wickedly mischievous disposition, whose sole delight was to insult the feelings of seamen and furnish pretexts to get them punished... He was a youth of not more than twelve or thirteen years of age; I have often seen him get on to the carriage of a gun, call a man to him, and kick him about the thighs and body, and with his feet would beat him about the head; and these, though prime seamen, at the same time dared not murmur.’

Both quotations from *Cochrane The Life and exploits of a Fighting Captain* Robert Harvey, Robinson, 2000

Other issue to consider is the music onboard. Aubrey and Maturin are two music lovers, Maturin plays cello and Aubrey plays violin, always they try to find time to play their favorites pieces onboard, and when they had the opportunity they invited other people to play with them. Even more, they try to enroll officers or sailors who are able to play the music they like.

Finally, science and spirit of the Enlightenment are very present in the movie. Maturin’s attitude, his skill in the practice of medicine and his eagerness to get to the Galapagos Islands to discover the wonders hidden there are a metaphor of his time, of nineteenth century scientists such as Darwin. But Stephen Maturin is not only a prestigious doctor embarked on a ship of the Royal Navy, he is also an effective spy in the service of the Admiralty. However, for this you need to read some of the novels of Patrick O’Brien.

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ACTIVITIES

1. If we stay within the period of *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*, how would you, as a historian, be able to build up a picture of Admiral Nelson? What sources would you have at your disposal? Make a list of the possible types of sources that you could use to construct your portrait and then think about which would be the most useful and accurate. In what ways could these sources be useful to a filmmaker?

2. On board the Surprise you can see children commanding very experienced sailors. What's your opinion about this situation?
3. Compare this two different characters and personalities: the fighter and the scientist. Point out which elements makes them different and even opposed elements and what makes them complementary to each other

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jack Aubrey</th>
<th>Stephen Maturin</th>
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4. Read the text below, it's a letter to Duncan Campbell and it was written by William Bligh, captain of the HMS Bounty in 1788. Once you have seen the film and experienced the rounding of Cape Horn, look back at Bligh’s description and underline which parts of his description reflect what you have seen on screen.

The night, the 28th. of March and our ordeal has truly begun. The westerly gale is bringing strong slanting rain striking our arms and faces as if it were shot from a musket, with the seas breaking completely over the deck. I have never experienced worse conditions. It is with great difficulty that I write my log and these few words!

Three days later. It is difficult to write my log as I am thrown all about the cabin... then possibly the worst moment of all!... This morning I just managed to struggle up on deck following a futile attempt to sleep. I could hardly fail but observe the terrible conditions. A huge sea that was white, as drunken foam and boiling milk mixed together, and we were caught in its grip. I cast my gaze up searching for a break in the greyness above. Nothing!... no sun, no sky and little hope, just a grey, semi-darkness of angry clouds and an infuriated sea.

I struggled hand over hand along the rail and looked up. I could not believe my eyes. Someone had set an extra sail. Men were balanced on yard arms, reefing wet canvas, clutching at wet rope. I glanced up and saw a sailor miraculously hanging in the rigging...grimly clutching at swaying yards. Then I observed the sail and gulped. Second yard main mast, close reefed and stretched to breaking. Clutching a safety rope I leaned out over the ship's gunwale and peered into Neptune's black depths. Waves were ripping past. Bows down we were ploughing along before the wind with a reckless speed certain to destroy us all. Only the merest change in the wind direction, a sudden shift, a gust to turn us just one or two degrees either way and we were done for.

We turned side on to the raging inferno, our masts now almost horizontal - if one were able to rule a line across that raging fury of green, black and white. Then we turned full circle, anti...clockwise I
think, and were lent over, our starboard keel out of the sea...Would we go under? Now I thought for
the moment of truth.
Remarkably we were still afloat. The bows had swung back away from the wind, clockwise, away
from danger. My arms were still locked square into the rails as she righted herself. I looked around
to where terrified sailors clung to various parts of the ship as a clutch of frightened monkeys would
cling to a fleeing parent.
...I have decided that it would be improper and too dangerous to continue any longer. The wind has
changed yet again and in just two days we have been forced back to a position we passed some
three weeks ago. Heavy winds and snow falls are so violent that I have been forced to 'lay to'. The
wind is backing to the west and the sea running high.

5. Read this two texts about punishment and then do the exercises below

‘The Captain gave the order ‘Give him a dozen’. There was
an awful stillness; I felt the flesh creep upon my bones, and I
shivered and shook like a dog in a wet sack. All eyes were
directed towards the prisoner, who looked over his shoulder
at the preparations of the boatswain’s mate to inflict the
dozen: the latter drew his fingers through the tails of the cat,
ultimately holding the nine ends in his left hand, as the right
was raised to inflict the lash. They fell with a whizzing sound
as they passed through the air, and left behind the reddened
mark of sudden inflammation.…
At the conclusion of the dozen I heard the unwilling order,
‘Another boatswain’s mate!’ The fresh executioner pulled off
his coat. The prisoner had said nothing during the first
dozen, but on the first cut of his new and merciless
punisher, he writhed his back in acknowledgement of the
pain; the second stripe was followed by a sigh; the third by
an ejaculation; and the fourth produced an expression of a
hope of pardon. At the conclusion of the dozen, this was
granted, and the prisoner released.’
From ‘Cochrane The Life and exploits of a Fighting Captain:’
Robert Harvey, Robinson, 2000

‘I felt an astounding sensation between the shoulders
under my neck, which went to my toe-nails in one direction
and my finger-nails in another, and sting me to the heart
as if a knife had gone through my body...He came on a
second time a few inches lower, and then I thought the
former stroke sweet and agreeable compared with that
one. I felt my flesh quiver in every nerve from the scalp of
my head to my toe-nails. The time between each stroke
seemed so long as to be agonizing, and yet the next came
too soon....The pain in my lungs was more severe, I
thought, than on my back. I felt as if I would burst in the
internal parts of my body...I put my tongue between my
teeth, held it there, and bit it almost in two pieces. What
with the blood from my tongue and my lips which I had
also bitten, and the blood from my lungs or some other
internal part ruptured by the writhing agony, I was almost
choked and became black in the face...Only fifty had been
inflicted, and the time since they began was like a long
period of life; I felt as if I had lived all the time of my real life
in pain and torture and that the time when existence had
pleasure in it was a dream long long gone by.’
‘Nelson and his Captains’, Ludovic Kennedy. Penguin,
Classic Military History, 2001

• In what ways are the quotations different from each other?
• How does each describe the punishment of flogging?
• Which of the descriptions most fits with the punishment scene in Master and
Commander: The Far Side of the World?