

A Second Look – 2008

My annual list of quality films that were ignored or little seen is inevitably arbitrary and personal. That means that some small independent features, like “Juno,” for example, are **not** cited here because of their eventual wide distribution. These mini-reviews focus on modestly-budgeted productions with sound scripts, capable direction, and stellar acting (no blockbusters or special effects films here). First, there are three domestic dramas, all superbly crafted:

Away From Her – A film that beautifully illuminates the transition towards the end of life as one devoted couple confronts mental incapacity. This sensitive, yet unflinching, look at what will befall us all is the splendid filmmaking debut of Canadian actress Sarah Polley, who, at 28, shows directorial class right out of the box. She also obtains impressive performances from actors more than twice her age, in particular, the luminous Julie Christie, riveting and heartbreaking as the wife in a wondrous performance which earned her an Oscar nomination.

The Namesake – An outwardly modest film but with a great heart, it traces the adjustments an Indian family must make to live in upstate New York. Director Mira Nair’s ability to limn small-town New York and phantasmagoric India is unerring, showing a balancing of cultures in a catalogue of small gestures, near gaffes, gentle asides. The true passions of this family never really erupt, but they are finely sculpted beneath the surfaces. The cast is unfailingly persuasive.

The Savages – It’s tough to make a compelling movie about two disaffected siblings reluctantly seeking out residential care for their elderly father, yet, writer/director Tamara Jenkins has pulled it off with this humane and irreverent portrayal of a process so many of us must confront in dealing with aged parents. For her portrayal of the Savage family she corralled a terrific trifecta of acting talent in Philip Seymour Hoffman, Laura Linney, and Philip Bosco. Linney, like Julie Christie, earned an Oscar nomination for her performance.

Among foreign-language movies of quality, I note the following stand-outs:

The Lives of Others -- A astonishing re-imagining of the spy state, made by a new young director, Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, who has brilliantly recreated a dreary East Berlin and contrasted it with the warm, disheveled digs of an artist/playwright. All elements are worked out with great care: the film’s look is as washed out as the regime itself, and the script is tight and cryptic, with much unsaid yet all fully realized on the screen. The performances are all dead-on and layered with complexity.

Persepolis -- Based on a series of French-language graphic novels, this animated film about the odyssey of a young Iranian woman named Marjane Satrapi is a worthy coming-of-age story. Blessedly devoid of computer tricks foolery but rich in

artistry, it displays a lush look using clever perspective drawings, rich and varied background shadings, and strong silhouettes. Yet “Persepolis” works above all because it is a true, telling human story of one dogged, curious personality seeking the wider world and finding it, even through personal pain and loss.

The Diving Bell and the Butterfly – A truly imaginative rendering of what might seem at first impossible to film: the inner life of a stroke victim (real-life French magazine editor Jean-Dominique Bauby played by Mathieu Amalric) who can only move one eye. What sounds profoundly depressing is lithe and life-affirming. We see the world through that man’s one eye but also are privy to the rich imaginings of his mind as that eye becomes a communication device to those in his life. Rife with spirit and visual brilliance from American director/painter Julian Schnabel.

Middle Eastern and South Asian turmoil continue to haunt our days, as well as script writers and directors, sometimes to great effect. Witness these recent efforts which place these foreign dilemmas in a human context:

In the Valley of Elah - In part a whodunit about a father trying to find the murderer of his soldier son, this movie is truly about the singular human dimensions of a war’s aftermath (in this case, Iraq). Tommy Lee Jones, again a laconic, crusty Southerner, is perfect in his display of knowing ways and nearly silent anguish. Writer/director Paul Haggis’s utterly believable script and his calm direction and style (the film is dipped in a solemn blue tint) deserve full marks.

The Kite Runner -- A thoughtful, faithful adaptation of the major best seller about an Afghan émigré’s redemption. Its highlights include a wonderfully recreated pre-Taliban Kabul, seen through the eyes of two charming kids and a wrenching depiction of an Afghanistan dragooned by fanatics. It handles its potent material with taste and subtlety and boasts solid performances throughout.

A Mighty Heart -- Based on the true-life incident surrounding the kidnapping and murder of journalist Daniel Pearl by terrorists, the film is another superior piece of work by the extraordinarily versatile English director Michael Winterbottom. Among his sound decisions is to use Angelina Jolie—playing Pearl’s wife Mariane—as an actress and not a Star. Better yet, the movie is not all about Jolie, but is, in fact, a fine police procedural set in a rough-and-tumble Karachi, Pakistan, filmed in a fluid, fast documentary style that wholly convinces.

No End in Sight – Charles Ferguson’s compelling documentary about how America sadly, almost inexorably, got into the mire of Iraq. The case is a strong critique but done with great care and restraint, and its authoritative “talking heads” are almost entirely media unknowns who were in on the working levels of Administration policies and know whereof they speak. A more damning appraisal for being so solidly disciplined.

We are in a period over the last decade which could be called the Golden Age of the Documentary. Two other memorable non-fiction films stood out for me among this year's offerings.

War/Dance – An inspiring documentary which transforms the ghastly fate of a group of Ugandan orphans into joy as they come to compete in a national music festival. The film, made by documentarians Sean Fine and Andrea Nix, focuses on several individual Ugandans kids—each with a story more heartbreaking than the last—from the northern refugee camp where they are taught traditional African music to their journey to compete in the National Music Festival in the country's capital Kampala. A heart-stirrer.

Manufactured Landscapes – A documentary both artful and provocative. Filmmaker Jennifer Baichwal uses stunning photos of Chinese industrial sites taken by Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky and expands them into wordless essays on what we are doing to ourselves as societies. Sequences of a massive assembly plant, of computers being scavengered, and of scut work on the Three Gorges Dam are mesmerizing, showing a China we are only now beginning to grasp. Additionally, one section showing the breaking down of ships in Bangladesh is a modern vision of hell.