

Is all of this inevitable?

Five films reviewed

David Walsh
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The Eye of the Beholder, *directed by Stephan Elliott*; Snow Falling on Cedars, *directed by Scott Hicks*; What Planet Are You From? , *directed by Mike Nichols*; Judy Berlin , *written and directed by Eric Mendelsohn*; Drowning Mona, *directed by Nick Gomez*

It's a bit demoralizing sitting through one poorly-made film after another. It seems a great waste: all the money, equipment, talent and time devoted to second-rate work or worse. Is it inevitable that there should be such a large number of bad films? No one in the film industry seems bothered by it, if they even notice the fact. The list of "Top Ten Films at the Box Office" is now ubiquitous, in a way that it never was previously. There is no separate discussion of the most interesting or challenging works; it is more or less taken for granted in the media that "most profitable" is synonymous with "best."

(We learn, for example, that over the weekend of March 3-5 *The Whole Nine Yards* earned \$7.1 million, *The Next Best Thing* \$5.8 million, *My Dog Skip* \$5.8 million and *Drowning Mona* \$5.8 million. I'm never certain what the reader or listener is supposed to make of these statistics. Should he rush out to see one of these films because others have in large numbers? Or invest in the shares of the studios responsible for them? Or what exactly?)

Equally unfortunate is how little contemporary audiences seem to be satisfied with at this point. A few brightly-colored images in the dark, a laugh here and there, one or two shivers of fright, a little heating up of the skin—and one crowd passes out, to be replaced by the next. I don't sense enormous anticipation or excitement among film spectators. I would say that people are rarely surprised or greatly pleased. They get more or less what they've come to expect: large, bland, shallow works.

Eye of the Beholder is directed by Stephan Elliott, an Australian-born director, who previously made *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994). His new film is based on a thriller, involving an intelligence agent (Ewan McGregor) who shadows a female serial killer (Ashley Judd). I presume the original novel had some rhyme

or reason to it. The film does not, in the name of being visually striking and audacious. It is virtually unwatchable, jittery and incomprehensible and pretentious, all at once. McGregor and Judd are likable performers. What are they doing in this?

Oddly enough, *Snow Falling on Cedars*, a very different sort of project one would have thought, had some of the same qualities as Elliott's film. A considerable number of scenes are composed of disparate images, again in the hope apparently that cinematography will make up for unclarity or lack of thought. (Coincidentally, it is also made by an Australian-born director, Scott Hicks [*Shine*].)

The story, set in the state of Washington in 1950, has possibilities: Japanese girl and American boy grow up together, fall in love; internment and family pressure turns her against him; her "betrayal" of him and the war turn him against her; they meet at the murder trial of her husband to which he holds a vital clue. If this could have been told efficiently and in an understated manner, fine. But instead we have histrionics, phony poetry, endless shots of sea and cedars and snow. It's very tedious. And all cut and dried. The Japanese are universally saintly, the local district attorney and mother of the murdered man are spawn of the devil.

Much of the film feels amateurish, the kind of work a precocious film student might produce. If you eliminated the excess and kept only the essential, the film might run 25 minutes, tops. Hicks obviously considers it beneath him to tell a dramatic story in a coherent fashion.

Defense attorney Max von Sydow's lengthy speech about intolerance and xenophobia is honorable, but it comes out of the blue. Up to that point the camera hasn't stopped lurching around long enough to stay on anyone's face for more than 30 seconds, then suddenly this.

A few moments at the end are affecting, when the filmmaker is obliged to wrap things up. Ethan Hawke as the American retains his dignity and is finally moving. The woman (Youki Kudo) spends too much of the time with a sort of sour, self-pityingly look on her face. I couldn't imagine throwing everything away for her.

What Planet Are You From? is a new film directed by Mike Nichols, starring Gary Shandling, based on a story by Shandling. An alien has the mission of traveling to earth and impregnating a human female to insure the survival of his species. A promising premise comes to very little. There are a few amusing moments in the film, but not many. As with so many contemporary films that seek to be marketable, *What Planet Are You From?*, almost by default one feels, ends up in the most conformist and complacent territory: the sanctity of marriage, the family, home, etc.

A few years ago Nichols complained bitterly and publicly that his artistic contribution had largely gone unrecognized. After turning out over the past dozen years or so a series of blunted, would-be crowd-pleasing and essentially second- or third-rate films— *Primary Colors* (1998), *The Birdcage* (1996), *Wolf* (1994), *Regarding Henry* (1991), *Postcards from the Edge* (1990), *Biloxi Blues* (1988) and *Working Girl* (1988)—I don't think Nichols has anything to complain about.

The verdict that critic Andrew Sarris passed on Nichols near the beginning of his career, harsh as it may have been, has stood the test of time: “No American director since Orson Welles had started off with such a bang [*The Graduate*, 1968], but Welles had followed his own road, and that made all the difference. Nichols seems too shrewd ever to get off the main highway. His is the cinema and theatre of complicity. And the customer is always right except in the long view of eternity.”

Judy Berlin is a film by independent filmmaker Eric Mendelsohn. What does the phrase “independent filmmaker” signify? It often seems to mean a director whose films have not yet made anyone a great deal of money—a hack commercial filmmaker in training.

Judy Berlin is a piece of self-involved trivia. A 30-year-old, more or less at loose ends and living at home with his family in New York City's suburbs, meets a woman he went to high school with, who's setting off on a hopeless journey in search of a career in Hollywood. He promises to make a film about their encounter. A high school principal and his vaguely unhappy wife, a high school teacher in search of love, a retired teacher apparently suffering from Alzheimer's disease and various others float ineffectually through the proceedings. It's unmoving and uninspired from beginning to end. It's tragic that this dismal work will be the last glimpse we get of the enormously gifted Madeline Kahn, who died of ovarian cancer in December at the age of 57.

Nick Gomez directed *Drowning Mona* (No. 4, let's recall, on the list of “Top Ten Films at the Box Office” last weekend), about the murder of a detestable woman (Bette Midler) and the search for her killer in a town where almost everyone is glad she's dead. The film is today's version of a “black comedy,” i.e., it is coarse, caricaturing and for the

most part unfunny, its approach largely borrowed from whatever last year's most lucrative “black comedy” might have been.

Gomez, born in Somerville, Massachusetts in 1963, used to be an “independent filmmaker.” He wrote and directed his first film, *Laws of Gravity*, in 1992. The film, which was cited for the truth of its social realism, treated a couple of working class kids in Greenpoint, Brooklyn and their difficulties. At the time, Gomez commented about his film and its central characters, “I wanted to explore them as people on the fringe of society and show their humanity.... I wanted to put a face on some of the problems of these seemingly dysfunctional people and maybe come away with some kind of understanding about the people who are considered the bad guys in our society.”

The choice of subject matter was worthy, but the overall approach seemed somewhat contrived and the results not entirely convincing. The film was widely overpraised. This comment, by a reviewer in the *Washington Post*, was fairly typical. The critic, after referring to “Nick Gomez's astounding, explosive debut,” went on: “Director Gomez, 29, who made the picture on a minuscule budget of \$38,000, is the newest (and maybe the most gifted) member of a young generation of filmmakers—Spike Lee and Oliver Stone among them—who watched Martin Scorsese's “Mean Streets” and came away dying to make movies. He's gone back to what, in essence, was best (and what is now frequently missing) in Scorsese's work—its tension and moral rawness, its rock-and-roll energy and directness—and made its spirit fit his own needs and circumstances.”

I was somewhat skeptical about the film and the filmmaker, writing: “ *Laws of Gravity* is worth seeing, but it is questionable whether it breaks new ground or represents a trend. Let the director make a few films and demonstrate his seriousness and his commitment. It is the body of work that decides the issue, not just one effort” (*Bulletin*, September 25, 1992).

It's no pleasure to be vindicated in a case like this. Is the problem that contemporary “independent filmmakers” have particularly weak powers of resistance or is it that their “independence” was always something of an illusion? Is it possible, in other words, to be independent of commercial filmmaking and its demands in any meaningful sense without having an independent aesthetic and social perspective?



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