

David Walsh picks his favorite films of 2001

David Walsh
29 December 2001

By any serious standard, 2001 was a poor year in cinema, particularly for American filmmaking. In the past fourteen months the American population has experienced the hijacking of a national election, the takeover of the US government by the extreme right, a suicide bombing attack (whose circumstances have gone entirely uninvestigated) on the country's largest city and the launching of a brutal and open-ended colonial war. Only a handful of US-made films even hint at the intensity of the social and political contradictions that have erupted to the surface. The exceptions might include Robert Altman's *Gosford Park*, set in Britain in 1932, and Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now Redux*, made some twenty years ago.

The crisis of artistic and historic perspective has reached an ominous level. It is no doubt true as Trotsky suggested that "The nightingale of poetry, like that bird of wisdom, the owl, is heard only after the sun is set.... The traditional identification of poet and prophet is acceptable only in the sense that the poet is about as slow in reflecting his epoch as the prophet." This observation was not, of course, meant to encourage complacency at the time and should not be interpreted now as an argument for relenting in the insistence that filmmakers, if their work is to have any real meaning to their contemporaries, need to change course. Nothing good, and a great deal of artistic and intellectual harm, will come from continuing to ignore the state of society and the historical processes that have brought it and humanity to their present condition.

Below are two lists of films. The first contains what seemed to me the most successful artistic efforts in filmmaking in 2001. "Successful" is a relative term. I have to confess that virtually none of the works are thoroughly satisfying. The best are honest, but not, in general, inspired. The second list is a response to the qualification established by various publications and

organizations in the US for making out "Top Ten" lists, that a film had a theatrical run in North America in 2001. Brief explanatory comments are included.

1. *Under the City's Skin* (Rakhshan Bani Etemad—Iran) This exploration of the conditions of a working class Tehran family seemed one of the most clear-eyed and truthful examples of international cinema this year.

2. *Apocalypse Now Redux* (Francis Ford Coppola—US) Coppola's reedited and extended version of his 1979 film was a highlight of 2001. The film retains its power as an indictment of US imperialist madness.

3. *The Faith of the Volcano* (Ana Poliak—Argentina) This deeply-felt, although gloomy, film about the social and psychic consequences of Argentina's military dictatorship and its aftermath takes on a new significance given the present crisis in that country.

4. *Gosford Park* (Robert Altman—US) A sharp look at class society and its cruelties. See yesterday's review.

5. *Kandahar [The Sun Behind the Moon]* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf—Iran) Veteran Iranian filmmaker Makhmalbaf considered the wretched state of the Afghan population, particularly its women, under the Taliban. The misery has now been compounded by the US bombing and invasion.

6. *I'm Going Home* (Manoel de Oliveira—Portugal) The 92-year-old Portuguese filmmaker Manoel de Oliveira has made one of his more appealing films, the portrait of the artist as an old man.

7. *The Road* (Darezhan Omirbaev—Kazakhstan) The Kazakh director Omirbaev examines the condition of an opportunistic and selfish filmmaker in the former Soviet republic. Unfortunately, one has the sense that the filmmaker hasn't a clue as to the significance of the USSR and its collapse.

8. *The Orphan of Anyang* (Wang Chao—China) Another stark, chilling glimpse at modern China.

During a police raid a prostitute leaves her infant with a passerby who becomes attached to the child. All goes well until her pimp decides to claim the child for his own.

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9. ***Durian Durian*** (Fruit Chan—Hong Kong) A young woman from a provincial Chinese town, a classical dance school graduate, travels to Hong Kong to work as a prostitute, and then returns home to family and old friends.

10. ***Lumumba*** (Raoul Peck—France/Haiti) The life and death of the Congolese politician, Patrice Lumumba, murdered by imperialism and its agents in 1961.

For a number of exquisite moments, an honorable mention goes to ***The Diaries of Vaslav Nijinsky***, directed by Dutch/Australian filmmaker Paul Cox.

In my opinion, the ten best films that played in North America in 2001 (in alphabetical order):

Apocalypse Now Redux

Band of Outsiders —Jean-Luc Godard's 1964 film, about two men who convince a woman (Anna Karina) to take part in a robbery, has long been unavailable.

The Circle —Jafar Panahi's powerful film about the plight of women in prison-like, contemporary Iran.

The Day I Became a Woman —In the first (and best) section of Marziyeh Meshkini's three-part film, an Iranian girl finds out at nine that she has legally become a woman and must give up her childhood friends and games.

Gosford Park

Journey to the Sun —Turkish director Yesim Ustaoglu's forthright and intelligent film about the oppression of the Kurds.

Kandahar (The Sun Behind the Moon)

The Legends of Rita —The fate of the Red Army Faction terrorists who fled to East Germany. Not a work of genius, but a sincere effort by Volker Schlöndorff.

Lumumba

Va Savoir (Who Knows?) —French director Jacques Rivette's latest film, about art and philosophy and life in Paris, has a certain charm, but lacks urgency.

Performances worth noting:

Kirsten Dunst and Bruce Davison (*Crazy/Beautiful*)

Cate Blanchett (*Bandits*)

Nargess Mamizadeh and Maryiam Palvin Almani (*The Circle*)

Nazim Qirix (*Journey to the Sun*)

Dina Korzun (*Last Resort*)

Sergio Castellitto (*Va Savoir*)

Robin Wright (*The Pledge*)

Scarlett Johansson (*The Man Who Wasn't There* and *Ghost World*)



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