

Devil's Knot, The Congress, The Giver and The Last Sentence: A few of this year's films

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As 2014 draws to a close, we would like to comment on a number of films that were released in North America and, in some cases, globally in the course of the past 12 months. In this article, we consider three disappointing films by directors who have done interesting work in recent years: Ari Folman [*Waltz with Bashir*], Phillip Noyce [*Rabbit-Proof Fence* and *The Quiet American*] and Jan Troell [*Everlasting Moments*—and a valuable film from someone whose body of work has generally been self-involved and not very inspiring (Atom Egoyan).

Devil's Knot

Veteran Canadian director Atom Egoyan has made a fictional film based on the case known as the “West Memphis Three,” about three young men who were tried and convicted as teenagers in 1994 for the murders the year before of three young boys in West Memphis, Arkansas. In *Devil's Knot*, Egoyan revisits the horrific killings and subsequent gross miscarriage of justice already documented in four non-fiction movies and numerous books.

Egoyan's new movie represents a departure from previous films such as *Chloe* (2009), *Adoration* (2008), *Felicia's Journey* (1999) and *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997), works that, despite a strained effort to invest them with psychological complexities, do not have a great deal to say. Nor was his overwrought and implausible film about the Armenian genocide, *Ararat* (2002), a historical or dramatic success.

By contrast, *Devil's Knot* is an adept, straightforward recounting of a judicial travesty. The movie begins when three eight-year-old boys—Stevie Branch, Michael Moore and Christopher Byers—go missing from their homes. Almost immediately, the police, under pressure to solve the heinous crimes, start promoting the idea that the boys were victims of a Satanic cult. They proceed to frame three poverty-stricken local teenagers. Damien Echols (James Hamrick), Jason Baldwin (Seth Meriwether) and Jessie Misskelley, Jr. (Kris Higgins) are witch-hunted in an atmosphere of religious bigotry and anti-occult hysteria.

Echols, a member of the goth subculture and the most articulate of the three, seems an especially ready-made patsy. With virtually no evidence, the prosecution accuses the trio of carrying out a

ritual murder and obtains their conviction. Echols is sentenced to death.

Assisting the defense, on the other hand, is investigator Ron Lax (Colin Firth), who starts from the humane assumption that whether the boys are innocent or guilty, “three dead kids is enough.” The more Lax probes, the more he becomes convinced the accused did not commit the killings.

Pam Hobbs (Reese Witherspoon), the mother of the murdered Stevie Branch, also starts to question the outcome of the official investigations, fearing her husband Terry (Alessandro Nivola) may have had something to do with his stepson's killing.

Firth and Witherspoon are convincing as the main protagonists in the carefully scripted, moving dramatization of a case that stands as an indictment of a backward and corrupt legal and judicial system. The movie's postscript states that after “18 years in prison, Damien, Jason and Jessie negotiated a rare Alford Plea with the State of Arkansas. Under the terms of the deal, they were set free in 2011, though they remain convicted felons.” (When a defendant offers an Alford Plea, he asserts his innocence but admits that sufficient evidence exists to convict him of the offense.)

Egoyan should be congratulated for branching out in his film work.

The Congress

Written and directed by Israeli-born Ari Folman and loosely based on *The Futurological Congress*, Stanislaw Lem's 1971 short science fiction novel, *The Congress* is a step backward from Folman's first feature, the brilliant *Waltz with Bashir* (2008), which focused on Israeli soldiers complicit in war crimes in Lebanon in 1982. The earlier movie was a rarity in its skillful combination of high art and high politics. And, like *Waltz with Bashir*, Folman's new film is part live-action and part-animation. It is, however, less cohesive and aesthetically far less engaging.

In *The Congress*, an aging actress (Robin Wright) is persuaded to be “sampled” by the nefarious head of Miramont (an amalgam presumably of Paramount and Miramax) Studios, Jeff Green (Danny Huston), allowing the studio to scan her and purchase her digital likeness to be used in whatever future film it chooses. The

deal is championed by her longtime agent Al (Harvey Keitel), who continuously admonishes the actress for making “lousy choices” in her personal and professional life.

The movie then jumps ahead 20 years, switching gears from being a fairly unusual, chilly take on Hollywood’s obsession with youth and its increasing drive to digitally replace human beings into a rambling, histrionic mish-mash of cartoon images. In this part of *The Congress*, entering the animated zone requires consuming a chemical substance that transforms the individual into his or her own avatar, which can then mutate into anything it desires.

Folman is a serious and dedicated artist. He took almost five years to create *The Congress*, explaining to *Slant* magazine: “The live-action part went really smoothly. ... But the animated part was very complicated, because it’s all classic technique, hand-drawn. The European system of financing films made us do it whenever and wherever somebody was willing to give us money. Even if there was no studio, we had to establish one. The work was split between Israel, Luxembourg, Brussels, Liege, Hamburg, Berlin, and Poland. Then we got stuck with the assist work: Philippines, Ukraine, Turkey, and India. This is 55 minutes of material [made in] 10 countries—only because of budget reasons.”

However, Folman is working with inadequate and half-thought through ideas about some of the major problems of our time and, in the end, this helps trip him up. For example, he commented in the same interview that the Polish Lem wrote *The Futurological Congress* “about the ’60s communist era and dictatorship. ... He made an allegory, so he wouldn’t be attacked [by the Polish Stalinist regime]. But with dictatorships, it doesn’t really matter what exactly it is, communist or fascist. In the end the idea is always the same. I didn’t want to talk about ... communism, because it was not a part of my life, I wasn’t there.”

With such banal and ahistorical notions about “communism” and “dictatorship,” and no intention of offering a critique of modern capitalism, it is very difficult to make a coherent, convincing film about the “entertainment business,” now dominated by a handful of global conglomerates. *The Congress*’s furious goings-on, a brew of politically charged tidbits that includes a repressive apparatus and executions for opposition, serve to a certain extent to conceal the intellectual and social unclarity. In its totality, this is a very uneven work.

Folman, the child of Holocaust survivors, is rightfully agitated about the film industry in particular and the world in general, but is able to offer little original insight into the problems that plague them. One suspects that a refusal to come to terms forthrightly with the nature and evolution of Israeli society is central to Folman’s artistic difficulties and even impasse.

The Giver

Australian-born director Phillip Noyce has created a totalitarian dystopia in his new movie *The Giver*, based on the well-known 1993 children’s novel by Lois Lowry. Featuring Jeff Bridges and

Meryl Streep, the post-apocalyptic movie centers around a highly circumscribed, conformist universe where there are “no winners or losers,” no color, music, history, geography or weather and no emotions nor pleasure of any type. Like the animated world in *The Congress*, the emotionless society in *The Giver* is maintained by the administration of drugs—the filmmakers’ dig, in both cases, at the pharmaceutical and psychoanalytical industries.

There is still inequality in *The Giver* (the elders—represented by Streep—make the stringent rules). And there are drones! As fate would have it, the new receiver of past memories (Brenton Thwaites), who is taking over from the present receiver (a gruff-voiced Bridges), decides to risk everything to revive the memory of all that was eradicated, both good and bad.

Noyce’s cinematography is striking, shifting from dullish gray to the full spectrum of the rainbow, but the movie’s plot and final denouement are telegraphed from virtually its first nanosecond.

The Last Sentence

A biopic, *The Last Sentence* by octogenarian Swedish filmmaker Jan Troell, concerns itself with Torgny Segerstedt (1876-1945), a liberal Swedish newspaper editor who began fiercely criticizing Adolf Hitler in 1933 when the German leader was appointed chancellor.

Torgny (Jesper Christensen), whose wife (Ulla Skoog) and mistress (played by Pernilla August, longtime collaborator of Ingmar Bergman and former wife of director Bille August) both eventually commit suicide due to his mistreatment or indifference, rails against the Swedish government for being neutral during World War II and refusing to fight the Nazis.

If there is a saving grace in this drab movie—with its drab politics and drab characters and drab dialogue—it arrives in those segments when Torgny confronts Sweden’s monarch as well as its foreign minister, both genuinely foul beings. A more serious picture of the Swedish ruling elite of the period would have been intriguing.

Unfortunately, Troell decided to focus instead on the dull personal life of Segerstedt, a former Lutheran-pastor-turned-atheist, with all of its upper-class provincialism and unpleasantness. This is not rich, fertile soil for a fascinating film. As part of their portrait of the journalist, the filmmakers insist on pointing out that Segerstedt’s inordinate passion for his dogs was something he had in common with Hitler.



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