

Best films of 2017, and other matters

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Filmed drama, whether viewed in a theater or at home, has the potential to be one of the most powerful means of getting at the truth about modern life. However, given the present economic and cultural realities, the old proverb, “There’s many a slip ‘twixt the cup and the lip,” barely rises to the level of understatement.

Capitalism in terminal decay corrupts and defiles every significant aspect of social life and culture. In regard to the content of the latter, a malignant social inequality, the domination of a handful of predatory conglomerates, the vast self-absorption of the majority of the “creative” class and their indifference to the conditions of the broad mass of the population, the general decline in historical and social knowledge, all these phenomena and other related ones make themselves felt very strongly at present.

Countless media commentaries, with varying degrees of regret or glee, have documented the trends that are leading to the “death of Hollywood” as a center for the production of works that have a meaningful impact on large numbers of people. People currently “go to the movies” in the US out of inertia probably more than at any other time in the history of the medium. The ten top-grossing films worldwide this year were all cartoons, sequels of empty-headed action works, movies based on comic books, etc.

For the working class in America and globally, 2017 meant relentless attacks on jobs, benefits, democratic rights, the rise of fascistic forces and the threat of horrifying new wars.

For the upper echelons of the film industry, as *Variety* recently explained, this past year was dominated by “Moguls and movie stars engulfed in an ever-widening sexual harassment scandal, the likely end of the hegemony of the big six studios, the worst summer box office results in decades, and a widespread loss of confidence by Wall Street in the future of the theatrical distribution business.”

From the point of view of important sections of the American financial oligarchy, gorged on the stock market, Hollywood carries less and less weight. As *Vanity Fair*

pointed out earlier this year, “Movie-theater attendance is down to a 19-year low, with revenues hovering slightly above \$10 billion—or about what Amazon’s, Facebook’s, or Apple’s stock might move in a single day. ... Between 2007 and 2011, overall profits for the big-five movie studios—Twentieth Century Fox, Warner Bros., Paramount Pictures, Universal Pictures, and Disney—fell by 40 percent. Studios now account for less than 10 percent of their parent companies’ profits. By 2020, according to some forecasts, that share will fall to around 5 percent.” The article noted the dismissive remark of one prominent venture capitalist “that a nominal investment in a somewhat successful tech company could generate more money than Hollywood’s top-grossing movies.”

Of course, there is the matter too of the heft of big studio production and distribution in terms of their ideological and propaganda value. As a cheerleader for war and nationalism, Hollywood is still indispensable. It remains an influential and, in many ways, popularly alluring institution that the American authorities are not likely to dispense with unthinkingly.

In any event, virtually every one of the smug or desperate commentaries on the state of American filmmaking adopt the viewpoint of business interests, the studios themselves, their top-level management or, at best, film industry professionals. But what of the hard-pressed moviegoer, the man or woman who wants to see something amusing, something new and improbable, something that strikes the imagination? What is he or she to do?

It is generally recognized that Netflix, Amazon, HBO, Showtime and other such platforms offer more intriguing material at this point. Series such as *The Crown*, *The Last Tycoon* (abruptly cancelled by Amazon), *House of Cards*, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Mr. Robot*, *Black Mirror* and others unquestionably offered more in terms of social and historical substance than Hollywood studio productions. However, it is also possible to be too swayed by some of these efforts. While undoubtedly more subtle, nimble, engaging, socially acute and at times socially critical, the

various series are not the final word in the exploration of contemporary life.

There is a very long way to go, and viewers famished for substantive material may be a little too impressed by some of the series. Overcoming the contemporary cultural problems will not be solved so easily, without the eruption of important social movements from below and a resulting, significant shift in the moods of the artistically inclined that will sharpen and deepen their socio-aesthetic approach.

The current obsession with sexual harassment, which may not go too deeply but certainly enralls a layer in the entertainment industry, is an indicator of some of the problems. It is a morally obscene social fact that at a time when 21 million people in Yemen, for example, thanks to the US-backed Saudi war effort, or 82 percent of the population, are in need of humanitarian assistance and 8 million of those are on the brink of outright starvation, the American media presents multi-millionaires such as Ashley Judd, Rose McGowan and Taylor Swift as victims of terrible oppression.

Moreover, the sexual misconduct scandals have already undoubtedly served to purge film and television of some of its more colorful and complex figures, including Kevin Spacey, Louis C.K. and Jeffrey Tambor. Richard Dreyfuss, Dustin Hoffman, Oliver Stone, Ben and Casey Affleck and others have also been named, if not driven out of the film world yet. A smear campaign is currently under way against Matt Damon for his limited criticisms of the sexual witch hunt. The general thrust of this right-wing drive is toward repression and conformism. It has the blessing of influential sections of the American political and media establishment, especially those associated with the Democratic Party, for good reason. Nothing positive will come out of this, not for female or gay performers, or anyone else.

That being said, a few movies emerged from the US commercial filmmaking world that were worth seeing. There were some valuable films from other parts of the world that we saw at film festivals or that played briefly in North American movie theaters in 2017. We have again divided the films into three lists.

1. New films released in 2017 in the US

The Florida Project (Sean Baker)

War Machine (David Michôd)

Roman J. Israel, Esq. (Dan Gilroy)

Downsizing (Alexander Payne)

The Zookeeper's Wife (Niki Caro)

In the current identity politics environment, *Mudbound*

(Dee Rees) should be noted as an exception, but it is not an artistically satisfying work. *Loving Vincent* (Dorota Kobiela & Hugh Welchman) deserves some attention for its technical achievements. *Loveless* (Andrey Zvyagintsev) has a few scenes depicting the corrupt, social-climbing petty bourgeois layers in Russia, although much of the film misfires.

2. 2016 films released this year in the US

Sami Blood (Amanda Kernell)

Lady Macbeth (William Oldroyd)

Past Life (Avi Nesher)

Radio Dreams (Babak Jalali)

I Called Him Morgan (Kasper Collin)

The Salesman (Asghar Farhadi)

A Quiet Passion (Terence Davies), *Chasing Trane: The John Coltrane Documentary* (John Scheinfeld) and *The Unknown Girl* (Jean-Pierre & Luc Dardenne) are worth seeing too, although each has serious flaws.

3. Films viewed at festivals this year and not yet released in the US

Directions (Stephan Komandarev)

Muhi: Generally Temporary (Rina Castelnuovo-Hollander, Tamir Elterman)

A Season in France (Mahamat-Saleh Haroun)

A Drowning Man (short film, Mahdi Fleifel)

Catch the Wind (Gaël Morel)

Disappearance (Ali Asgari)

The Stopover (Delphine and Muriel Coulin)

Marie Curie (Marie Noelle)

Arrhythmia (Boris Khlebnikov)

Sighted Eyes/Feeling Heart (Tracy Heather Strain)

The Legend of the Ugly King (Hüseyin Tabak)

Sweet Country (Warwick Thornton)



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