

Tully, A Quiet Place, You Were Never Really Here: Every poor film is poor in its own way

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Tully, directed by Jason Reitman, screenplay by Diablo Cody; A Quiet Place, directed by John Krasinski, screenplay by Krasinski, Bryan Woods and Scott Beck; You Were Never Really Here, written and directed by Lynne Ramsay

Our headline arrives with apologies to Leo Tolstoy, who famously began his novel *Anna Karenina* with the comment that “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” It’s not clear that good movies resemble one another, but recent history certainly suggests there are many different ways in which films can be weak. The current cinema, unhappily, is mostly a living illustration of this truth.

Tully

Tully directed by Jason Reitman concerns itself with the tribulations and crises of motherhood.

As far as a description of *Tully* goes, one might simply stop there, which is not all that much.

It is undeniable that pregnancy and giving birth is a demanding and fatiguing process. This is something of a truism. A great Marxist once noted that “the boldest revolution,” like even the most powerful bourgeois institution, cannot divide equally between men and women “the burden of pregnancy, birth, nursing, and the rearing of children.”

However, meaningful filmmaking does not merely remind the viewer of truisms or elementary biological facts. It looks, above all, at the personal, social and historical circumstances in which those facts are operating. *Tully* prefers to remain at the level of paying tribute to women for their physical and psychic hardships, and, in that regard, frankly, reeks a little of self-pity at this appalling #MeToo moment.

As a whole, *Tully* is a mildly pleasant and amiable film (with “mildly” being an important word here), featuring Charlize Theron as Marlo, a pregnant mother of two children who is at the end of her exhausting parenting rope. A likeable video game addict, husband Drew (Ron Livingston) provides the inadequate paycheck and allows Marlo to take on most of the

burden of raising their young daughter and emotionally difficult son.

For the forthcoming third child, Tully’s wealthy brother, Craig (Mark Duplass), and his insufferable wife suggest a “night nanny”—or newborn specialist, i.e., someone who helps parents with “night time feeds, bedtime routine, breastfeeding and any sleep issues.” (As one website understatedly notes, “the cost of hiring a night nanny can run into the thousands and is a luxury for many families.”) The idea is abhorrent to Marlo. But after the birth of a daughter, Tully (Mackenzie Davis)—just such a nanny—arrives (presumably paid for by Craig) and magically helps transform Marlo into a super-mom.

Reitman’s generally pedestrian movie does benefit from a few amusing moments and Theron’s performance. Davis’ Tully is a catalog of truisms, such as “You can’t be a good mother if you don’t practice self-care.” In fact, Marlo describes Tully as a repository of “fun facts for unpopular fourth graders.”

It doesn’t help the film that Marlo is a series of clichés: overwhelmed, depressed, overweight, eating junk food and watching semi-porn reality shows. Both she and Drew could have jumped out of the pages of a woman’s magazine or self-help guide.

The story of Tully’s arrival and disappearance, including a surprise ending, doesn’t really cohere. The screenwriter (Diablo Cody) apparently turned out the script in a few weeks’ time, based on a feeling she had in her “gut,” and the end result reflects that.

Reitman (*Thank You for Smoking, Juno, Up in the Air*) is a competent filmmaker, but he continues to work the “audacious” and “unique” edges of the most conventional possible territory, in movies that tend to conclude that the characters’ various challenges are all a state of mind.

A Quiet Place

Actor/filmmaker John Krasinski’s horror film *A Quiet Place* opened in theaters to critical acclaim.

Perhaps its unexpected box office success can be attributed in part to the popular reaction against an entertainment industry whose laser-like concentration is on big-budget franchise and sequel films. While the noisy, vacuous blockbusters follow a template, *A Quiet Place* is a near-silent film that reveals a more individual and unusual approach. In the end, however, it is just as much a place-holder and time-killer as its more expensive rivals.

Shot last year in 36 days in New York State's Hudson Valley, the movie is set in 2020, when most of the Earth's population have been wiped out by giant, sightless monsters equipped with tremendously acute hearing. A cross between slavering, long-toothed dinosaurs and rapid, spring-legged insects, the species demolishes anything that makes a sound. How such primitive beings could have dispatched the human race is never explained.

The audience is dropped instead into the midst of the terror of one family—Krasinski as Lee Abbott, Krasinski's real-life wife Emily Blunt as Evelyn Abbott, their son Marcus (Noah Jupe), hearing-impaired daughter Regan (Millicent Simmonds) and the youngest child, a boy, who is brutally snatched by the aliens soon after the film opens.

A Quiet Place creates its own set of pointless peculiarities. Regardless of the season, for example, everyone must walk barefoot (what about slippers?) and communicate through sign language.

The self-serious work clearly aspires to be different from the typical crass, bloody horror movie. But implausibilities abound. A large nail protrudes from a staircase that leads down to the (shoeless!) family's underground bunker. What follows of course is a scene in which Evelyn's agony nearly lands her in the clutches of one of the creatures.

In general, the many improbabilities undermine the viewer's experience. Within its own framework, a horror or science fiction film should make some sense (or at least offer something compelling in exchange).

For example, it's not long before Evelyn becomes pregnant, which, under the circumstance, may not have been the best life decision! Though she manages to survive the labor and delivery without monster interference, the baby must be silenced—the poor thing is stuffed into a soundproof box with an oxygen mask strapped to its head. And, naturally, Lee is not around for the newborn's arrival, having taken the opportunity of an impending birth to go on a father-son bonding excursion with Marcus. Excellent choice!

Despite the talents of its performers, *A Quiet Place* is a sleep-inducing movie that strains credulity. Family is the be-all-and-end-all, and love of family is the cure-all. A Krasinski/Blunt parenting lesson?

As a final note, it could be argued that the movie's distinct paranoia is in fact a bleeding in from outside realities.

On the one hand, *A Quiet Place* may be an unconscious response to a situation in which global spy agencies listen in to

everyone and everything, intent on silencing those who make "sounds" critical of the existing set-up. However, if Krasinski's film is such a response, as an unconscious and confused one it does not treat these conditions helpfully, merely turning them into the basis for a murky fantasy.

On the other hand, the image of America "invaded" also suggests external influence in this time of unprecedented global tension and the unrelenting propaganda of the US establishment, from the Trump White House on down, to the effect that America is besieged by "aliens."

You Were Never Really Here

The most unpleasant and disoriented of the three films, *You Were Never Really Here*, comes from Scottish-born filmmaker Lynne Ramsay (*Ratcatcher*, *We Need to Talk About Kevin*), based on the book of the same title by Jonathan Ames.

Joaquin Phoenix plays the protagonist Joe, a hit man, whose calling card is dispatching his victims with hammer. But that's fine, because Joe is good to his elderly mother (Judith Roberts), with whom he lives in New York City, and undergoes a great deal of angst and internal conflict about his profession.

Flashbacks cryptically indicate that he suffered child abuse, has suicidal tendencies and is a combat veteran with posttraumatic stress disorder, although nothing is made of his time in the war in Afghanistan.

Joe and his partner are hired by a New York State Senator to rescue the latter's adolescent daughter Nina (Ekaterina Samsonov), who has been abducted by sex traffickers. After Joe has left a trail of dead bodies behind him, it is revealed that Nina is the "favorite" of the state's pedophilic governor. Nina learns from Joe that sadism and violence come in handy in life. With any luck, however, she won't pick up Joe's irritating tendency to mumble.

This is a terrible, marketably violent film that sheds no light whatsoever on its ostensible subject matter or characters. Ramsay already made it clear, in the dreadful *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, that she was too lazy or too indifferent to explain psychotic states of mind. Here she confirms her lack of interest or hostility to the coherent examination of social life.

Ramsay seems to be offering herself—backed by a universally admiring media—as a female candidate for the Scorsese-Tarantino school of perverse, gratuitous and inexplicable brutality. A worthy goal.



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