Some Films of 2011

The Tree of Life

I wish, now, that I'd seen *The Tree of Life* in the theater. On the other hand, after a winter of rabid movie-going, it's a thrill to see a film that has so much going for it that it clearly stands out from the pack.

The Tree of Life is a rendering of childhood in the 1950s, in Waco, Texas. It's also a visual history of the universe. Through much of the film three brother shout, torture frogs, wrestle in the weeds (Can't you hear the crickets chirping?), hang out with their deviant friends, play the guitar, obey their domineering father (Brad Pitt), fall in love with their charming mother (Jessica Chastain), go to church, go down to the creek, challenge and test one another, climb trees. Most of the time their conversation consists of murmurs and mumbles. Much of the time it seems we're hearing what they're thinking, rather than what they're actually saying. There is also quite a bit of whispered voice-over.

To add to the mesmeric effect of experienced childhood (rather than narrative, plot-driven stories about childhood), in *The Tree of Life,* director Terrence Malick brings the jump cut to the level of fine art. (A "jump-cut," I ought to mention, is a cut between two shots of the same character or scene that have almost, but not quite, the same angle, rather than a reverse angle or a cut to a distinctly different scene or character. This technique, in effect, reminds us of the presence of the camera, but also seems to convey the fluid yet stop-and-go nature of life and memory. After a while you cease to notice it and a dream-like atmosphere develops. It's the Cubism of cinema.)

Malick frames this central focus on childhood experience between two specific events, one small, the other large. The "small" event is that one of the brothers dies. (We don't see it and we never learn how, and the event comes so early in the film that I don't mind mentioning it here.)

The "large" event is actually a sequence of events—the creation of the universe and the development of life on the planet Earth. There is extended footage in the first half of the film of cosmic events—nebulae expanding, volcanoes erupting, micro-organisms developing—with ethereal religious music sounding in the background. It all seems a bit like a cross between that BBC series *Planet Earth* and Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

It's interesting to note that for the "creation" sequences Malick turned to Douglas Trumbull, who created the spectacular effects in *2001*, but hadn't worked on a film since *Blade Runner.* Avoiding computer-generated effects, they mixed liquids of varying viscosity in a tank and filmed the reactions, arriving at an effect that resembles the images sent back from NASA's exploratory spacecraft.

But astronomer Volker Bromm, associate professor in the Department of Astronomy at the University of Texas at Austin, also played an important role. He commented later:

> *When I had the first meeting with Terry Malick he said that he wanted to get it right… he didn't want to just make up stuff—say you have visual effects in Star Trek or Star Wars—he wanted to do the real thing. The closest we can come is a computer simulation of the universe because at this point we cannot directly observe it; therefore, having a computer simulation is the closest thing to how it really was at that time. He wanted to tell the history of the universe with as much realism as possible. Then we translated our simulation into a visualization. The question was always—Does it look right? Does it catch the scientific idea behind it? The visual effects people were very accommodating in trying to get it right and to make me happy.*

The Tree of Life is better than *2001*, perhaps, because it remains rooted in organic development rather than the esoteria of space travel and super-human computers.

Well, no need to compare. It's a different sort of film altogether. What *2001* and *The Tree of Life* have in common is metaphysical ambition. (In fact,

due to the presence of Brad Pitt in the cast, some theaters felt it prudent to post disclaimers warning viewers that they were about to enter a philosophical experience and not to demand their money back if they didn't like it.)

Kubrick may be asking where life is going, but Malick is asking us to consider what life is really like. Why are men and women so different? Why do kids act out? And most importantly, why is God so unjust?

Music plays a large role in the film. Brad Pitt, in the role of Mr. O'Brien, is a largely unsympathetic character, and the fact that he finds solace and inspiration in playing and listening to music seems to make his authoritarian insensitivity that much harder to take.

On the other hand, his middle son plays the guitar angelically. (Malick's own younger brother studied classical guitar with Segovia in Spain, later willfully broke both his hands and then committed suicide.)

The soundtrack is loaded with classical gems that sometimes border on cornball, from Smetana's The Moldau to Górecki's Third Symphony, along with Mozart, Brahms, Couperin, Berlioz, and an assortment of obscure and atmospheric tone-poems that establish an indelible atmosphere of mystery bordering on awe.

Sean Penn seems like a duck out of water in his role as one of the grown-up brothers, and cynics may chuckle at the Hallmark Greeting Card nature of some of the imagery, especially of the final celestial scenes on the beach. I bought the whole package. I was raised in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, which might be worth mentioning. But the estimable Roger Ebert remarked, "I don't know when a film has connected more immediately with my own personal experience. In uncanny ways, the central events of *The Tree of Life* reflect a time and place I lived in, and the boys in it are me."

So, is this a film about boys, and *for* boys? When the movie was over, my wife Hilary, who was raised in Minnetonka, Minnesota, said, "That's my childhood."

Poetry

This South Korean film has an unlikely heroine—a 66-year-old woman named Yang who's on the threshold of the world of memory loss. She's a kindly, gentle woman who earns money taking care of an elderly man who's suffered a stroke, and is also helping out her daughter by raising the woman's self-centered teenaged son. The bright spot in her life of service and sacrifice is the poetry class she's taking. Though quite sure she has no talent, she scribbles her passing feelings in a notebook and attempts to describe various sights that impress her.

Yang's life takes a turn for the worse when she learns that her grandson and a few friends are suspected of involvement in a local girl's suicide. The fathers of the boys have begun meeting in hopes of devising a plan to assuage the mother of the deceased teen by paying her off, thus avoiding a full police investigation. Yang is not in sympathy with these plans, and feels entirely out of place in the company of these seemingly callous men from a younger generation, though as guardian of one of the boys involved, she's expected to come up with her share of the payoff.

The film moves from one sphere to another adroitly—the poetry class, the home of the old man Yang nurses, the meetings of the fathers, her jarring life at home with her grandson. Yang's daughter pays her a visit at one point, and Yang decides, on her own initiative, to head out into the countryside to visit the mother of the young woman who killed herself. All the while, she's recording impressions in her little notebook with artless precision and insight.

Poetry received the Best Screenplay Award at the 2010 Cannes Film Festival, but it's the presence of Yoon Jeong-hee, in the role of Yang, that holds the film together. Yoon has appeared in nearly 200 films since her debut in 1967, though she came out of retirement to do this one, and won a Best Actress award from the L.A. Film Critics Association for her troubles. Her opaque visage, slow reaction times, cheery nature and simple-minded responses to unusual situations are both endearing and fascinating to watch. I can't recall ever seeing another character quite like her on the big screen.

Certified Copy

As the film opens a small group of Italians has gathered to hear a British author talk about his recent book, *Certified Copy*. He assures them he isn't an art "critic," and exudes a modest arrogance in his assertion that the issue of authenticity in the art world is overblown. After all, most originals are renderings of something else, he points out—a landscape, a face—while a reproduction can be considered an "original" in its own right. This brief lecture sets the stage for the subsequent conversations between the scholar and a French antiques dealer (Juliette Binoche) who owns a shop in town, about art, life, and other things.

Binoche had arrived at the last minute and left early to buy her difficult 11-year-old son a hamburger, but she arranges to have the author come to her shop the next morning to sign the books she's bought. Her son later teases her for falling in love with the man, though she's admitted she doesn't like his book. When the author (played by opera singer William Shimell, in his first film role) arrives the next morning, it's pretty clear he doesn't like her shop much, either, and they decide to go for a drive while he signs the books. During the drive the conversation gets more personal as Shimell learns more about Binoche's sister and her stammering husband. Binoche looks on them as an ideal couple, simple people who have found contentment with one another and their lot in life.

"There's nothing simple about being simple," is Shimell's caustic reply.

They go to a small-town museum, then a café, then a historical building that's become a popular wedding chapel. More talk about art and relationships, including Binoche's difficult relationship with her son. One of the more interesting conversations is between Binoche and the woman running the café, who thinks the two are man and wife. He's stepped out into the courtyard to take a call and Binoche plays along with the woman's error. "It would be stupid to ruin our lives for an ideal," is how the barista sums up her views about husbands and married life.

That's the film: Old World ambiance and cultured talk, sullied by the frustrations of being a single mother in a world where men can deliver lines such as, "Ultimately people must live their lives for themselves." It contains one or two further important wrinkles that I'll leave it viewers to discover for themselves. Suffice it to say that with *Certified Copy*, Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami has created a work that bears comparison with Roberto Rossellini's *Viaggio in Italia* or Antonioni's *La Notte*, though it may be better than either of these post-war classics. (For a contemporary equivalent, I might describe it as an *Until Sunrise* for adults.) It's beautifully shot and rich in chiaroscuro. Even the reflections in the windshield of the car are gorgeous. So is Juliette Binoche, who won a well-deserved Best Actress award in Cannes for her quirky, mercurial performance. William Shimell has been criticized for his wooden performance, but it seems to me he also does a good job, hesitating for a split-second before speaking, careful to balance truth and tact.

My Week with Marilyn

The idea of filming a story with Marilyn Monroe as a central character seems risky. By all accounts Marilyn's appeal went a good deal beyond her impressive anatomy and glamorously seductive sheen. But Michelle Williams pulls it off, fusing the insecurity, the vulnerability, and also the surprising wit into an engaging and believable character. So much so, that at the end of the film, the huge headshots that fill the screen behind the final credits force us to stop and say: Wait a minute! That's not Marilyn, that's Michelle Williams.

The rest of the cast is equally fine, though they have less difficult parts to play. Kenneth Branaugh fumes as an aging Olivier trying to direct the insecure and temperamental young star; Judy Dench and Derek Jacobi also appear.

The story is based on a book by Colin Clark, the younger son of the famous art historian Kenneth Clark, about a job he took at the age of 23 as a third assistant director during the filming of *The Princess and the Showgirl*. Evidently Monroe took a liking to his honesty, natural charm, and inexperience, and recruited him as an ally during the filming. In time he's drawn more deeply into the politics on the set,

where people expect him to get Marilyn to work on time while resenting his presumed intimacy with her. The story is further complicated by Marilyn's intrusive acting coach and the presence of her husband Arthur Miller, with whom she's been married only a few weeks. If the tale is part drama and part idyll, chalk it up to the charms of the English countryside, the allure of the film-making profession…and to the presence of Marilyn herself.

Margin Call

Margin Call takes us inside the offices of a hedge fund on the eve of the market meltdown in 2008. Half of the staff has just been fired, but one of the departing "risk managers" (Stanley Tucci) has crunched enough numbers to see that far worse news lies ahead.

The film takes place during a single late-night panic during which young employees, board members, and honchos arriving in helicopters attempt to make the best of a terrible situation, and "get out" before everything goes south. Sales manager Kevin Spacy seems to have a bit more conscience than some of his colleagues, though his emotional life is largely consumed by the health needs of his dying dog. Several sharks (including top dog Jeremy Irons) are given the opportunity to deliver fairly accurate speeches about the willing collusion between fund managers and their clients.

Never having owned a piece of a hedge fund or visited a brokerage of any kind myself, I couldn't say how accurate any of this is, but it's a vivid, exciting, and thought-provoking film.

The Artist

This black-and-white film has a rich soundtrack and a predictable plot, but it's a charming vehicle for the stars, who spend a fair amount of time merely grinning at one another.

An actor unknown to me, Jean Dujardin, plays the silent-screen idol George Valentin, and a second new-comer, Bérénice Bejo, is equally winsome as the enthusiastic fan who slowly creeps into his life. Both actors indulge in plenty of the "hamming" that takes the place of talk in silent pictures, but they're very good at it, and the story itself is awfully sweet.

Young Adult

On the other hand, *Young Adult* is bittersweet at best. Charlize Theron plays an attractive divorcee who writes young adult novels from her high-rise apartment in Minneapolis and drinks Coke from a 2-liter bottle in her pajamas every morning. She's pushing forty, though she looks to be twenty-five, and her life is a mess. Receiving an almost random baby-announcement email from her high school boyfriend, she decides to return to her home town and "rescue" him from what she presumes to be a boring, claustrophobic life.

Theron does an excellent job of making herself continually watchable but never likable. At the same time, director Jason Reisman succeeds in fleshing out the limited horizons of small-town life without undue condescension. Patrick Wilson plays the new father with aplomb—obviously happy with his domestic situation, though also guilelessly concerned to make his unexpected visitor feel at home. Added ballast is provided by Matt Freeholf (Patton Oswalt) who was the victim of a hate crime in high school and now paints model super-heroes and distills whiskey in his garage.

Considered all-in-all, *Young Adult* is better than any brief description could convey. I might almost describe it as haunting.

Of Men and Gods

The film follows the daily routine of a group of Christian monks living in the mountains of Algeria, in the midst of a largely-Muslim population that benefits in many ways from their presence. It opens with a quote from one of the Psalms: "I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High. But ye shall die like men, and fall like one of the princes."

Their difficult but purposeful lives become more tenuous as a group of Islamic fundamentalists begin to terrorize the region. The civil authorities offer protection, but the monks have always deemed them corrupt and they're undecided what to do.

Their situation is further complicated when some of the fundamentalists break into their compound and demand medical treatment and supplies. The monks refuse.

Shot in an abandoned monastery in Azrou, Morrocco, and the surrounding hills and towns, the film is rich in both landscapes and personalities, and moral issues abound. The monks display a variety of responses in the face of unyielding fanaticism, though the film would be engaging if it showed us nothing more than daily village life in the Atlas Mountains.

The Human Resources Manager

Director Eran Riklis's previous outing, *Lemon Tree*, was a big hit. His current film is more complicated and also better, though less overtly emotional.

In fact, the title is the worst thing about it. It deals with the irritable HR man of a prominent industrial bakery in Jerusalem, who finds himself in a jam when one of his employees (a foreigner whom he's never met) dies in a suicide bombing. A variety of complications ensue, but the upshot is that the HR man must return the body to Romania, accompanied by an annoying tabloid journalist who's writing an exposé on the insensitivity of the bakery to its employees.

He's estranged from his wife and eager to return home in time to take his daughter on a field trip, but the unexpected challenges he runs into in Romania threaten to turn the film into an absurdist shaggy dog story. Yet by imperceptible degrees, our hero's desire to dump the body and get back to Israel is subsumed by a new and stronger desire to "do right" to the employee he never knew, and also to the odd-ball family she left behind when she emigrated to Israel. He meets the former husband, the angry son, and finally, after a perilous cross-country journey in a military vehicle, the woman's peasant mother. Every turn of the path is unexpected, and there are personal details littered here and there along the way that leave us with a hundred things to think about.

Mysteries of Lisbon

What a strange four-and-a-half hour film! It resembles Dickens, but without the flamboyant, larger-than-life characters; Austen, but without the wit or the good cheer; Proust, in its labyrinthine regressions into memory; Charlotte Bronte in its depiction of doleful and imprisoned women; and Galdos, Pio Baroja, or any other nineteenth-century Spanish novelist with its priests, pirates, and gypsies.

In fact, the film's director, Raúl Ruiz, hails from Chile, and the tale on which the film is based is by a Portuguese novelist, Camilo Ferreira Botelho Castelo-Branco,1st Viscount de Correia Botelho, who died in 1890. Branco is said to have written more than 260 books during his career. One critic has observed that Branco's writing combines "the dramatic and sentimental spirit of Romanticism with … a highly personal combination of sarcasm, bitterness and dark humor."

Indeed, an atmosphere of gloom and dread, reckless passion and world-weary piety hangs over the action of *The Mysteries of Lisbon*, which amounts largely to people visiting one another in their gorgeous and rundown country estates or their elegant urban parlors to swap hitherto untold stories about the deep past, stir the cinders of spent passion, or plan routes of escape from their diabolical spouses, invariably male.

At the center of the drama is a boy of fifteen, João, who has no stories. He doesn't know who his parents are, or where he came from.

The camera movement is fluid and the lighting and shot composition are exquisite. In fact, I suspect the film has many technical virtues that lie beyond my capacity to notice, much less articulate. One enthusiast refers to its "next-to infinite regression, with re-framings in all but a handful of examples accomplished within rather than without the camera and figure movement universally recapitulated in the visual field through its tight figural identification…and aggressively planar, baroque compositions, at times inorganic and at others not…"

Well, I suppose so. But I think the film would have been better had Ruiz paid more attention

to fewer characters, allowing us to get to know them better. Still, *The Mysteries of Lisbon* has an atmosphere like that of no other film I've seen, though it did remind me of another six-part TV show, *The Charterhouse of Parma* (1982), set during the same era, that I really ought to see again.

Midnight in Paris

Many of us Baby Boomers grew up with Woody Allen. I thought *Bananas* (1971) was so funny I dragged my parents—and my baby sister—to see it, and was somewhat embarrassed during the bogus under-the-sheets sex scene narrated by Howard Cosell. From that film I also remember a few of the pronouncements of the Latin American dictator. "From now on, Swedish will the national language." "From now on, everyone must wear their underwear on the outside!" A few jokes about leprosy. Memory fades.

When *Annie Hall* was advertised as Woody's "breakthrough" movie, I knew there was trouble ahead. The maker of *Sleeper* and *Love and Death* really didn't need to "break through" to anything. He had already arrived.

But we can leave the long historical overview to another time. *Midnight in Paris* is a delightful film, bringing Woody's strengths into play while minimizing his (dare I say it) somewhat puerile take on human relationships.

Woody's two great strengths are his shtick and his nostalgic romanticism. His two weaknesses are his plot-lines—typically driven by the most commonplace romantic situations—and his propensity to have everyone in his films talk like he talks. (Mia Farrow was the worst.)

In *Midnight in Paris*, the focus is on a novelist named Gill (Owen Wilson), and his affection for the era during which Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Stein, and all the rest were living the life of *artistes* in Paris. By a strange quirk of fate, he ends up traveling to that time period. (This is the imaginative element that had been lost from Woody's films for so long. Remember the giant strawberries in *Sleeper*?)

It's true that Gill talks just like Woody talks. But it would spoil the effect if Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Stein also talked like Woody. The charm lies in the fact that these characters are comic parodies of themselves, while also seeming exactly like themselves. Thus Hemingway is ridiculously blunt and forthright, Fitzgerald is suave and obliging, Zelda is pleasantly scatterbrained and direly suicidal, etc. We're approaching the brilliant realm of *Love and Death*, with its ridiculous glosses on Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. "I never want to get married. I only want to get a divorce."

Adrian Brody, in the role of Salvador Dali, is probably the best of the lot. And Gill's late-night café conversation with Dali, Bunuel, and Man Ray might well be the best scene in the film. (Yes, but where, I ask you, is Ford Maddox Ford?)

And then we have Marion Cotillard in the role of Picasso's mistress Adriada, who hits it off quite well with Gill. She has a remarkable screen presence—which may explain why she is one of only two actresses to have won a "best actress" Academy Award for a film shot in a foreign language. (The other was Sophia Loren.)

She isn't classically beautiful but is infinitely intriguing. (She was also good in the under-rated Ridley Scott film, also set in France, *A Good Year*, playing opposite Russell Crowe.)

Meanwhile, the modern-day sequences with Gill, his fiancé (Rachael McAdams), and her parents, are lame and predictable—though there are quite a few good son-in-law one-liners scattered here and there to keep us amused. Similarly, Woody gives us no reason to believe that Gill ever wrote anything, or that he and his fiancé ever liked each other much, though this allows him one of his classic Allen-esque falling-off remarks. Gill is trying to explain the relationship to the mysterious Adriana: "We agree on most things, on the big things…Actually, we agree on the little things. We both like Indian food…Well, not all Indian food…we both like pita bread."

It's easy to imagine Woody Allen saying that. And Owen Wilson does a good job of delivering those lines, too. Plot and character development are being thrown out the window here in the interest of the comic sketch. But that, after all, is what Woody Allen does best. Why not settle back and enjoy it? And while we're at it, why not give a round of applause to someone who obviously loves Europe

and "old-fashioned" literature in which romance and heroism command the spotlight, with touches of Surrealism here and there around the edges.

A Separation

A Separation is an unsavory gruel of overheated conversations, long-standing resentments, deep familial affections, hopes for a better life, unshakeable religious faith, and economic desperation. The plot thunders on like an express train that's jumped the rails, and though the violence, in the end, amounts to little more than a few slaps and shoves, every frame carries an uneasy current. The two-hour film, shot with natural light in apartments and on the streets of Tehran, goes by in a flash. It's Iranian, but as we leave the theater we're likely to have Aristotle's theory of poetic *catharsis* running through our heads: a sense of purification after the release of pent-up or horrific emotions.

As the film opens, eighteen months have passed since the Iranian couple at the center of the action applied for a visa to leave the country. The visa has now, finally, come through, but Nader is unwilling to leave without his father, who's suffering from Alzheimer's and dementia. His wife, Simin, considers it imperative to leave Iran for the sake of their daughter, Termeh, a bright and seemingly docile adolescent who's obviously taking in every angry work exchanged in the apartment. However, Simin doesn't want her father-in-law to come along. Though it's never mentioned, this is probably another reason she's so eager to leave Iran: she's the one who takes care of him, morning, noon, and night, though he doesn't recognize anyone and seldom speaks.

It's a tough situation, and it becomes tougher when Simin leaves the apartment to move back in with her parents. Most of the film deals with troubles that ensue when Nader is forced to hire a stranger—a very orthodox working-class woman with a hot-headed husband—to take care of his father in Simin's absence.

Having emphasized the crackling energy and relentless distress of *A Separation*, let me add that in many ways it resembles any number of quiet, talky films by the Swiss auteur Eric Rohmer. In the first place, two children are near the center of the plot. And much of the second half of the film focuses on whether or not people are telling the truth—one of Rohmer's favorite themes. (Remember *Pauline at the Beach*?) We in the audience are not quite sure who's on the level as a court inquiry into an incident at the apartment mushrooms out of control, but Termeh also wants to know if her parents are lying, and if so, why? An even younger girl, the daughter of the family's newly-hired female attendant, also stirs the pot by guilelessly offering a few timely revelations, without giving it much thought.

Whether *A Separation* is a "great" film we can leave for others to decide. It's certainly a griping one, though largely devoid of humor or romance. It's a drama of bad communication and bad luck, pride and desperation. Anyone who cared to could easily find parallels to the current political situation between Iran and the United States. But the film also carries a simpler message: for better or worse, Iranians are in many ways just like us.

The Descendants

A complicated mish mash of adolescent angst, single-parenting, sleuthing, grieving, infidelity, environmentalism, real estate deals, and Hawaiian shirts, Alexander Payne's latest offering is rich but overly ambitious and more than slightly offkilter. Parts of the film are genuinely moving, other parts are genuinely funny; it suffers from the fact that one of its protagonists is in a coma for most of the film, while the other has a few too many things to worry about. George Clooney, in the film's central role, isn't allowed to bear down on any specific aspect of his mixed-up life for any length of time, and lacks the gravity, in any case, the make his character entirely convincing. Rather than exploring the roots of his unhealthy (but far from unusual) family situation, Payne chooses to go the easy route of following Clooney in his efforts to locate his wife's former lover. The theme of indigenous Hawaiian culture (from which the film gets its title) isn't really given its proper due. Even a single scene of Clooney's wife camping with her daughters on the ancestral property would have added immensely to the film's impact.

As in Payne's previous film, *About Schmidt*, the peripheral characters save the day, from Clooney's daughter's stoner boyfriend to his crotchety father-in-law to his wife's former lover's wife.

The Way Back

Director Peter Weir likes to pull out all the stops, and the results are usually worth the effort. From *Witness* (1985) to *Green Card* (1990) to *Master and Commander* (2003), he scored a string of big-budget successes; and with *The Way Back*, he's once again filled a large canvas convincingly.

Shot in Bulgaria, Morocco and India, it follows the adventures of seven men who escape from a Soviet prison camp. Their plan is to walk south past Lake Baikal and across the Gobi Desert to India; it's an absurdly long way. Ed Harris and Colin Farrell are among the company, along with several tall dark Slavic types whom I found it difficult to tell apart—a priest, a chef, a journalist? The opening scenes in the camp set the scene for the escape and give the men involved one or two marks of character. The film gains added dimension when, a few days south of the gulag, a young Polish woman (played by Irish actress Saoirse Ronan) joins the party, claiming she escaped from a nearby collective farm.

The story is based on *The Long Walk: The True Story of a Trek to Freedom*, by Slawomir Rawicz, and also by numerous interviews Weir and his crew conducted in the region. Rawitz's book sold half a million copies, but is now widely regarded as fiction. No matter. *The Way Back* was nominated for an Academy Award for best make-up, which will give you some idea of how parched and shriveled this motley troupe becomes in its overland quest for freedom—that is, before the frostbite of the Himalaya sets in. Yes, *The Way Back* is a grueling tale in some respects, but Weir makes the most of both the location shooting and the incidental drama of the long, long march. Perfect Saturday night fare.

The Adventures of Tintin

Although this animated feature is a little short on character development, the plot is plenty thick, and the colorful settings are marvelously rendered. The sea battle between flaming vessels is particularly vivid, and the film gets more interesting when our detective-hero and his companion, Captain Haddock, arrive in a storybook North African city to retrieve the model ship that carries the third and final clue to the location of the buried treasure.

Fans of the comic book character have had a good time pointing out all the ways that the movie fails to live up to the superb genius of the original material. Those of us who come to the film without expectations can sit back and enjoy the ride.

Meek's Cutoff

Meek's Cutoff follows three wagon-loads of settlers heading west together along the trail under the guidance of a trapper named Stephen Meeks, who's very full of himself and claims to know a "short-cut." By the time the film opens, he's lost most of his moxie, though he's keeping up appearances. The trek is largely devoid of camaraderie, however, and much of it seems to be happening just beyond earshot. The men hold conclaves in the distance, the women shout and mumble.

Director Kelly Reichardt does a good job of sustaining a mood of isolation and bewilderment, bordering on terror, but we never get to know the couples very well, and I couldn't help thinking that the minute these folks got to Portland they'd all be rushing out to IKEA to buy some furniture. The empty expanses of the high desert are well represented but somehow lacking in grandeur. These people are at the mercy of fate, whether in the form of Meek himself or the unnamed Indian they capture, who might or might not be leading them to water. Why they chose to leave the pack in the first place in not made clear. Therein lies the untold story that would, perhaps, have made all the rest worthwhile.

The Help

The story of black maids in pre-Civil Rights Jackson, Mississippi, and of a young white woman who tries to tell their story, this powerful film offers a peek inside a part of America most of

us have never seen. It also happens to be a lively and entertaining exposé of white country club life. Love 'em or hate 'em, the characters are sharply drawn and the period atmosphere is convincing.

Inside Job

A documentary about the world of high finance—sounds boring. Not so. This is a glitzy exposé of hedge fund managers, government officials, investment bankers, and Ivy League professors who struck it rich (or endorsed the theories of those who did) while common folk were losing their shirts during the meltdown of 2008. It won a well-deserved Academy Award last year for best documentary. Fun to watch.

Buck

I'm not a horse person. This only means that I didn't grow up around them, never much cared to ride them, had an unpleasant experience with a Taos Indian guide once, was ridiculed by some Navahos in Canyon de Chelly, and generally speaking, just don't see the point. You might as well walk.

But horses are sort of like people, and films like *Secretariat*, *Sea Biscuit*, and *The Electric Horseman* are fun to watch. *Buck* falls into that category. It's the story of a horse-trainer who had a tough childhood. Knows about fear and shyness and the lingering effects of abuse first-hand. Knows how the horses feel.

Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame

Director Tsui Hark, who received a Lifetime Achievement Award at the New York Asian Film Festival last summer, has put together a medium-weight martial-arts fantasy set in seventh-century China. The fights are too fast to follow and not a drop of blood is ever shed; computer-generated graphics abound, but some of the characters are also intriguing in themselves, and the plot is so opaque we're likely to let all but a few broad outlines drift over our heads as we settle back to enjoy the twists and turns of the ride.

At the center of it all is Detective Dee (not to be confused with the far more magisterial Judge Dee) who is released from a long prison term by the soon-to-be crowned Empress to investigate a series of bizarre and smoky deaths associated with a colossal statue of the Buddha she's constructing for her coronation ceremony. Dee is aided in his investigation by the Empress's favorite, Jing'er (played by the lovely Li Bing-bing) and several other court functionaries whose loyalties are questionable at best. There is plenty of dashing here and there down into the underworld and back, and at least a thousand arrows (usually appearing out of nowhere) miss their mark, before Dee and Jing'er begin to unravel the connection between the amulets on the base of the statue, a species of fire beetles that were thought to be extinct, and… but I don't want to give away too much of the plot. It's all in good fun.

Queen to Play

A French housecleaner who followed her husband to the island of Corsica takes a fancy to the game of chess, almost in spite of herself. She turns out to be pretty good. It's a simple tale, but it holds our interest, with the help of Kevin Kline as the misanthropic American who guides her development.

The Way

Landscape and characters dominate *The Way*, Emilio Estevez's homage to personal exploration. The plot is simplicity itself. Martin Sheen plays an ophthalmologist who's set in his ways and disappointed that his son, nearly forty, has decided to abandon his pursuit of a doctorate and see the world. A few weeks later Sheen gets a phone call while on the golf course: his son has been killed in the Pyrenees while hiking the Compostela Trail. He flies to Europe, grief-stricken and bitter, to retrieve the body. Learning that his son had just embarked on a month-long journey on foot when he met his end, Sheen decides, with a sort of grumpy determination, to complete the hike himself.

Sheen eventually falls in with three other hikers: a good-natured Dutchman who's trying to lose weight, though he can't stop eating and seems to be well-equipped with stimulants of all kinds; an attractive but deeply cynical Canadian woman who mistakes Sheen for a stereotypical materialist American working on his bucket-list; and an outspoken Irish travel writer suffering from writer's block.

At first no one knows why Sheen is so grumpy, though his companions prove, in time, to have stories of their own to tell. Meanwhile, the gorgeous countryside moves by and the locals exhibit their eccentricity and *joi de vivre*. A great deal of food gets eaten and even more wine gets drunk. We warm to the group as they warm to one another—it's the way things sometimes happen for those with the time to let it. By the end of the film Estevez has imparted that simple message to us.

Cave of Forgotten Dreams

Among the strange places Werner Herzog has taken us to over the years, the caves of Chauvet, in the Ardeche region of southern France, do not rank near the top. Nevertheless, we're glad he visited them and took us along.

First, a few cold, hard facts. The walls of the caves contain paintings that are 32,000 years old. Discovered as recently as 1995, they're the oldest works of art we know of by a good ten thousand years. They offer representations of a number of large mammals that haven't walked the earth for quite some time. It's impressive.

These caves are not open to the public, and very few film-makers with lights have been granted access. Therefore, even if the film itself was a piece of monotonous documentary fluff—which it isn't—every man, woman, and child should be rushing to see it, or at least put it on the Netflix cue.

Why? Because these paintings were created by our ancestors at a time when "the world" and "the out-of-doors" were synonymous. Today we debate whether to install Wifi among the trees at state park campgrounds. In those days, other large mammals outnumbered humans by maybe 100 to 1, and nomadic bands hunted beasts, gathered roots, played music, built fires. In short, their lives were like our hobbies.

The sight of a string of horses sketched in charcoal on the wall of a cave forces us to re-ask the question: "What is an image? What is its relation to "reality"? Such images drag us beyond mysticism and metaphysics to a realm of awe and stupor, which is only intensified by the fact that we will never know any of the answers.

I have been to a few such caves myself. Hilary and I visited Faut-de-Gaume in the Dordogne region of France in 1978 (Lescaux had already been closed), walking down narrow tunnels and slithering over sills before arriving in those small dark chambers covered with polychrome images of bison and mammoths and who knows what.

We paid a visit to the Ariege region of the Pyrenees in 1999 to investigate the cave paintings at Niaux and Bedeilhac. The woman selling tickets at Bedeilac was tipsy and the tour was entirely in French, but the caves were massive and the images were superb. Later that day I made an attempt to master the art of throwing a spear with an atlatl at the Parc de la Prehistoire at Tarascon-sur-Ariege. (It isn't as easy as it looks.)

A few years later we toured a cave in Andalusia holding gas lanterns given to us by the "tour guide"—the local farmer who owned the cave. There were images of fish scratched into the walls and a series of slashes that looked like a primitive version of a scorecard you'd create if you'd forgotten the cribbage board at home.

Staring at such primitive slashes forces us to reconsider how much time we spend keeping track of things. Did I fill out the time card correctly? When do I take the recycling out? Did I send the estimated tax payment on time?

Herzog intermixes his cave footage with interviews, focusing on smiling, long-haired French experts who are hippies in disguise. (One was formerly a circus performer.) Their comments reinforce our impression that our guess is as good as theirs regarding the meaning of it all.

Music plays a prominent role in the film, and some reviewers have found it intrusive. At certain points it becomes a little "churchy" and overblown, yet it also contributes to an atmosphere of awe that would be difficult to sustain through imagery alone. After all, a cave is a font of echoes. And singing came before talking.

There is a long segment near the end of the film during which the camera pans repeatedly across a marvelous grouping of horses and bison while the music blares. Some viewers may find it monotonous, but I found it mesmerizing. The problem with visiting the caves is that you soon grow tired of looking at these astounding images in spite of yourself, and begin to think about the Coke machine back at the visitor's center, and whether you should camp out tonight or

find a cheap hotel. Here we are forced to look…and keep looking.

Let it Rain

The film follows a few weeks in the life of feminist writer (played by the film's director and screenwriter, Agnès Jaoui) who has just taken the plunge into political life. It's a chilly plunge, because she's been entered by her party in a race in her home town in rural Southwestern France where she has no chance of winning. Her boyfriend tags along, though he doesn't like his "role" and is perturbed by the lack of substance in their "liberated" relationship—no ring, no kids.

Jaoui's younger sister, Florence, still lives in the family chateau where the two grew up. Their mother has recently died, and they hope to settle the estate during the course of Jaoui's whirlwind campaign. Jaoui has also agreed to participate in a political documentary as a favor to Karim, the son of the Algerian woman who's been the housekeeper at the chateau for decades. Karim is no feminist, and neither is his mother. The situation is rife with cross-currents of discord between siblings and also across ethnic, gender, and generational divides. The *New York Times* observed that Jaoui conveys an "astonishing awareness of the subtexts of every nervous remark," and that her "minutely observed characters tend to be thin-skinned, competitive egotists invested in their status in the world of ideas."

In fact, Jaoui offers a far wider array of "types" than that, and sets them all in a vaguely sympathetic light. The tone of *Let It Rain* is largely comic and the dialogue is sprightly. Give credit to Jaoui for once again (as in *Look at Me*) making a film in which intelligent people from several walks of life work through a complicated plot with complete naturalness, exposing the foibles and endearments of one and all in the classic French tradition.

Moneyball

It might almost be considered a documentary, except that Brad Pitt plays the lead. Call it a docu-drama, then, about how baseball organizations operate, and how statistics have helped teams with tight budgets find undervalued players that can help them win. At the center of the tale is Billie Beane, general manager of the Oakland Athletics. As the film opens, his team has just lost their three stars to big-market rivals. Beane hires a statistician to help him find some low-budget replacements. It's an absorbing story, with some nice bits of sports drama thrown in…and it happens to be true.

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What many folks love about journalism is the combination of brilliance, skepticism, competition, and pomp that comes off as a kind of moral rigor. This film throws us into the middle of that glorious mess. It's subtext is the arrival of the internet and the concomitant departure of advertising revenue. Then we have WikiLeaks. Then we have Judith Miller erroneously affirming the existence of WMD. Then we have a young hot-shot reporter heading off to Baghdad. A tough assignment, a noble cause.

A good deal of the film is spent at media conferences, during which internet geeks scoff at print journalists, who return the compliment. Yes, the universe of information management is changing, but it's really nothing to be afraid of. And it's great fun to watch as it unfolds.

Hugo

Set in a Paris train station between the wars, *Hugo* tells two sad and charming stories: of an orphan who keeps the station clocks running, and of a silent-film director who became embittered when the cimema world passed him by. It's a children's film, which may explain why it lacks subtelty and every scene goes on too long. But the 3-D recreations of hand-tinted silent films are fun to watch, and as the two stories come together *Hugo* arrives at a touching conclusion that makes it all worthwhile.