

FILMS OF THE YEAR, 2008

JAMES NAREMORE MAKES HIS SELECTION OF THE YEAR'S BEST U.S. RELEASES (INCLUDING ONE FROM THE ARCHIVE)

For readers who missed the 2007 installment of “Films of the Year,” let me briefly restate a few caveats. Best-film lists are inherently problematic because nobody can possibly see all the feature-length films released during a given year. In my case, I’ve had limited access to DVD “screeners” and a few significant films had such late release dates and boutique exhibitions that I couldn’t view them in time for this piece. Given the various media formats and policies for distribution, there’s also a problem of assigning dates to films. I’ve tried to confine myself to full-length theatrical pictures that had their first U.S. exhibitions during 2008, but in one instance I chose a film that was made in 1961 and not given a commercial run until last year. Finally, and perhaps this goes without saying, my judgments are personal and unlikely to be exactly the same as yours.

By coincidence, the three films that most interested me during the past year were quasi-documentaries about cities. As many theorists have noted, the cinema itself is a product of urban modernity, offering a mechanically reproduced *flânerie* that shapes and is shaped by our experience of public space. The best-known city documentaries of 1920s modernism (*Manhatta*, 1921; *Berlin: Symphony of a City*, 1927; *Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929; *São Paulo, a Metropolitan Symphony*, 1929; and so forth) were utopian celebrations of speed, metropolitan energy, and cinematic montage; their flip side was the fictional, paranoid city of *M* (1931), although the utopian and dystopian tendencies sometimes mingled, as in *Sunrise* (1927) and *The Crowd* (1928). Postmodernism supposedly swept all this away, rejecting “master narratives” of utopia, dystopia, and even history, giving us the blankly alienated cityscapes of Antonioni, the future-is-now of *Alphaville* (1965), the decentered sprawl of *To Live and Die in L.A.* (1985), and the globalized, late-capitalist architecture of *The Dark Knight*, in which Chicago and Hong Kong are

NAREMORE'S FILMS OF 2008

1. *24 City* (Jia Zhang-ke)
 2. *My Winnipeg* (Guy Maddin)
 3. *Of Time and the City* (Terence Davies)
 4. *The Exiles* (Kent Mackenzie, 1961)
 5. *Wendy and Lucy* (Kelly Reichardt)
 6. *Happy-Go-Lucky* (Mike Leigh)
 7. *Let the Right One In* (Tomas Alfredson)
 8. *The Duchess of Langeais* (Jacques Rivette)
 9. *Flight of the Red Balloon* (Hou Hsiao-hsien)
 10. *The Band's Visit* (Eran Kolirin)
- Honorable mention (alphabetically by title): *Che: Part One*, *Che: Part Two* (Steven Soderbergh), *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan), *The Edge of Heaven* (Fatih Akin), *Elite Squad* (José Padilha), *Gran Torino* (Clint Eastwood), *The Last Mistress* (Catherine Breillat), *Mad Detective* (Johnnie To and Ka-Fai Wai), *Milk* (Gus Van Sant), *My Mexican Shiva* (Alejandro Springall), *Native Dancer* (Gulshat Omarova), *Nights and Weekends* (Joe Swanberg), *The Order of Myths* (Margaret Brown), *Profit Motive and the Whispering Wind* (John Gianvito), *A Secret* (Claude Miller), *Trouble the Water* (Carl Deal and Tia Lessin), *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (Woody Allen), *The Visitor* (Thomas McCarthy), *WALL-E* (Andrew Stanton).

virtually interchangeable, not only with each other but also with cityscapes one could find in Dallas, downtown L.A., or the Santa Fe area of Mexico City.

In contrast, the three city films of 2008 discussed here are quite specific about local details and eccentricities of place, and can't be neatly described with the usual period terminology. Each deals with a provincial capital rather than a world-class “cinematic city,” each is suffused with ironic nostalgia and a strong sense of history (sometimes mixed with fiction and myth), and each is critical of both past and



Jia Zhang-ke and Joan Chen

24 City. Courtesy The Cinema Guild.

present. Most important, each maps the city not with an omniscient or panoptic gaze, but with personal memory and the individual body.

1. 24 CITY

In recent years, director Jia Zhang-ke has been making part fictional, part documentary films about China's turbulent transition from a planned to a market economy. He prefers HDV for these pictures, he says, because changes to the nation are so rapid they require flexible, relatively lightweight equipment to record them. His latest film, *24 City*, is micro-cosmic in approach, focusing entirely on the demolition of a factory in Chengdu, the ancient capital of Sichuan province—a city which in the past two decades has become best known for its digital communications industry and research institute for the study of pandas. (*24 City* was shot before the 2008 earthquake on the outskirts of Chengdu and before the crisis of global capitalism.) Established in 1958, Factory 420 was a semi-secret government facility employing nearly 30,000 workers for the manufacture and repair of military aircraft engines. After the Vietnam War, demand for its product

diminished. It was downsized and retooled to make refrigerators and other consumer products, and then a few years ago its land was sold to a private company for a real-estate development called "24 City." The name of the development sounds appropriate for a science-fiction movie, but actually comes from an ancient Chinese poem: "The cherished hibiscus of 24 city in full bloom / Chengdu shone and prospered."

Brecht once said that you can't understand a factory (and by extension a city) by taking its picture. In *24 City*, which has unusual formal properties, Jia gives us many stunning pictures of the rusted factory being torn down to make room for high-rise condominiums and a five-star hotel. Near the beginning we see a wave of blue-uniformed workers exiting the factory gates—an allusion to *Leaving the Lumière Factory* (1895)—followed by beautiful color HDV images photographed by Yu Lik-wai and Wang Yu, showing the remaining laborers on the factory floor using tongs and hammers to manipulate fired, glowing steel ingots. The film documents the factory's subsequent demolition and takes us through the immediate environs—dormitories, streets, and recreation halls where the workers live and play. Occasionally



Demolition and transformation

24 City, Courtesy The Cinema Guild.

it gives us nearly still compositions from within the empty buildings (a butterfly on a windowsill, rain dripping on a broken pane of glass), inserts of historical artifacts (an identity card from the 1960s, an old food-ration coupon), and workers looking straight at the camera as if posing for a Walker Evans photo (these last images play on the effect of stillness vs. motion: a woman poses near a fan that blows her hair; a worker stands with his arm around a pal's shoulder, looking somber, and then lifts his hand to tickle his pal's ear). But despite the mesmerizing beauty of the imagery and the absence of narration, *24 City* gains much of its dramatic force, historical depth, and analytic complexity from words—sometimes from quoted poetry, more often from the oral testimony of individual workers who share their memories of the factory.

The poetry has an ironic and poignant effect. At one point, for example, the words of W. B. Yeats's "The Coming of Wisdom with Time" are shown against a black screen: "Though leaves are many, the root is one; / Through all the lying days of my youth / I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun; / Now I may wither into the truth." Fade into a group of barren trees against the sky; then the camera cranes up to reveal that the trees have been painted on a wall, on the other side of which is the demolished factory. Most of the oral testimonies are also poignant. Jia interviewed over 130 workers or

their descendants and distilled their testimony down to filmed interviews with nine people representing five generations. Almost half of these are played by actors—a strategy the film jokes about when Joan Chen's character Little Flower says that in her youth the men at the factory thought she resembled Joan Chen. Some of the interview subjects are shown in dramatized scenes at home or during social encounters, but the interviews themselves, punctuated with intermittent fades to black, tend to be conducted in static long takes against intriguing, deep-focus backgrounds, with the subjects speaking to an off-screen, barely heard questioner (there are no shot/reverse shots in Jia's cinema). Nearly all the interviews have carefully composed, minimalist settings, and they usually lead to weeping disclosures that are crafted like dramatic monologues or short stories (the film was co-written by Jia and Zhai Youngming, a celebrated female poet who specializes in confessional verse).

It would be wrong to conclude from all this that *24 City* is a metafilm designed to comment on the paradoxical relation between documentary and fiction. Its larger purpose is to maintain documentary authenticity while using words, performance signs, and narrative structure to give meaning to fifty years of history. We meet an array of characters, beginning with a machinist who recalls how workers once made their own tools and passed them down to the next generation:

“This small thing,” said his mentor, “has come into our hands through those of many others. It can still be used.” A woman remembers leaving the countryside to work in the factory for fourteen years, then being laid off. “I’d never come late,” she says, “and always did my best,” but at the age of forty-one, with a child in school, she was reduced to selling flowers in the street. Another woman tells of a boat journey she and her family took to join the factory, during which she briefly went ashore and lost her child in a crowd; out of patriotic fervor and the need to keep solidarity with her co-workers, she re-boarded the boat and left the child behind. The tone here and throughout seems more resigned, sad, or acquiescent than angry.

In the course of the interviews we learn that Factory 420 was once a privileged enclave containing shops, a cinema, and recreational facilities; its workers were fed better than other residents of Chengdu and even had their own bottling plant for soft drinks. When the economy changed, they became poor and marginalized. The culture is now different: a snippet of Chinese opera and a mass singing of “The Internationale” give way to the disco beat of “The World Outside,” a pop hit of 1990. A young television announcer, representative of the rising bourgeoisie, tells us that he once tried to work in Factory 420 but the job was so alienating that “something snaps in your mind.” The film ends when a “personal shopper” (Zhao Tao, one of Jia’s favorite actors) stands high atop the 24 City project and tells us that as a child she wasn’t studious and disliked Factory 420; she feels guilty about following a path different from her family and is tearful over their present condition. She’s purchased a shiny new car “for credibility” and hopes to make lots of money so that she can give her parents an apartment in 24 City. “I can do it,” she says. “I’m the daughter of a worker.” At these words, the camera pans away from her and looks out across the immense city of Chengdu, population over eleven million, which we see for the first time, looking grey, amazingly dense, and shrouded in smog. The film has completed its movement from an age of industrialization and mass conformity to an age of individualism and consumerism. Both periods have been treated with tenderness and a sharply critical eye.

2. MY WINNIPEG

Winnipeg, Canada, the capital of Manitoba, is located near the junction of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers (also known as the Forks National Historic Site), at the approximate longitudinal center of North America—almost the heart of the heart of the continent. The city takes its name from the Cree Indian words for “muddy water” and was originally a home for herds of bison. It developed into a major center of rail traf-



Unreal city

My Winnipeg. © 2007 Puddlewheel Productions Inc./February Pictures Inc. DVD: Soda Pictures (U.K.).

fic and a home for champion ice skaters, hockey players, and the Royal Winnipeg Ballet. The over 600,000 inhabitants are no doubt a hearty folk, because from November through April it snows and is going to snow in Winnipeg.

These facts you can obtain from a website, but Guy Maddin’s *My Winnipeg*, a “docu-fantasia” about the place where he has lived most of his life, provides a more haunting and amusing guide. The film resembles much of Maddin’s recent work (see *Cowards Bend the Knee*, 2003, and *Brand upon the Brain!*, 2006) in being autobiographical, filled with erotic childhood memories, surreal episodes from family life, and playfully scary evocations of incestuous desire and sexual confusion. In this case, autobiographical fantasy is grounded in documentary evidence from family albums, home movies, old recordings, and newsreels. Maddin also gives us animated sequences and reenactments of supposedly true events, so that geography, history, and

local legend mingle with primal domestic scenes, creating a psychological world.

As usual, Maddin's style involves pastiche of silent or decayed black-and-white movies. His staging and decoupage are modern but almost everything is mediated by a dreamlike archeology of intertitles, old-fashioned opticals, gauzy or impressionist photography, and scratched or damaged prints that skip and jitter through the projector. The film's nearly stream-of-consciousness narration (spoken by Maddin) ostensibly emanates from a compartment in a ghostly railroad train, symbolic of movies, where Maddin (played by Darcy Fehr) rubs smudge from a cracked window, squints at the glare from a snowy night, and struggles to remain awake among a group of sleeping passengers. The giant, ghostly head of his mother peers into the window from outside, as if looking into a toy train, and Maddin imagines an aerial view of Winnipeg resembling a woman's genitals. "The Forks, the lap, the Forks, the lap," he repeats to the rhythm of the train, "the lap of my mother, the wooly, furry, frosty lap . . . stay awake, stay awake." He's "stupefied by nostalgia" and wants to leave town, but how to escape? His answer is to film his way out by assembling a cast of actors to play his family, so that he can investigate his origins.

Maddin tells interviewers that he shot *My Winnipeg* on HDV, then projected it onto a refrigerator door and re-shot it. I'm not sure whether to believe this, because in his role as narrator he takes obvious delight in tall tales. He declares that he has rented out his childhood home, which was once located above his mother's beauty parlor (at his mother's request, his father's body has supposedly been disinterred and placed under the living room carpet), and is using it as a set. One of his biggest whoppers is his claim that his mother plays herself; actually, he deserves our gratitude for locating the eighty-six-year-old Ann Savage, the immortal star of *Detour* (1945), and casting her in what would be her last film. (Savage died in her sleep at an L.A. nursing home on Christmas day, 2008.) Many other statements are dubious. According to Maddin, he was born in the hockey rink where his father worked, and his mother was a fan of *LedgeMan*, a Winnipeg-produced TV soap opera about a sensitive young man who, in each episode, threatens to jump from a building ledge and has to be coaxed back inside. He says that Winnipeg has ten times the sleepwalking rate of any city in the world and that Arthur Conan Doyle called it the world's most spirit-haunted city. He also says that there are two taxi companies, one for the main streets and one for the back streets, and that the homeless are required to remain out of sight by camping on rooftops of high buildings. Sometimes provable statements seem to mingle with urban legend.

There was indeed a 1919 general strike in Winnipeg, but did armed groups of the local bourgeoisie guard the St. Mary's Academy for Girls in order to keep potential Lolitas from developing a yen for striking Bolsheviks? There was also a fire that caused a herd of racehorses to stampede into a freezing river and become locked in the ice, but did the heads of the dead horses jut surreally from the frozen river all winter long, becoming a romantic gathering place for young lovers?

One of Maddin's aims is to give the city a mythology such as other capitals have, so that it takes on a heightened (if self-deprecating) aura. He also develops a motif of things hidden or repressed beneath surfaces or layers of the city: the buried relics of Indian culture; a snowy hill covering a dangerous garbage mound; the sounds and scents rising up through an air vent from the beauty salon beneath his childhood living room; and a public bathhouse containing three swimming pools atop one another—the bottom pool, according to Maddin, reserved for pubescent boys who run around with hairless boners. In a few instances he drops the mythology altogether and becomes satiric about the attempted erasure of "layers of time beneath asphalt and snow." He's nostalgic for Eaton's department store, which was demolished in the 1990s, and furious with the local politicians and corporate capitalists who tore down a major hockey arena and replaced it with the MTS Centre (Maddin shows the building with a light on its sign burned out, so it reads "MT Centre"), which is too small for a major-league hockey club and looks like "a zombie in a cheap new suit." Such remarks indicate the serious purpose behind his chicanery. He knows that cities, like human subjects, gain their identity from things they build and myths they create about themselves. He also knows that human habitats rest on the sediments of history and that psychoanalysis has been compared to an archeological dig. His cinematic excavation of Winnipeg brilliantly synthesizes public space and private psychology, making the city inseparable from a state of mind.

3. OF TIME AND THE CITY

Eight years have passed since Terence Davies's last picture, an excellent adaptation of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (2000), and his welcome return to cinema, *Of Time and the City*, is also a return to his roots. He began his career by making fiction films based on his memories of growing up among a large working-class Catholic family in Liverpool, England; the two best-known of these, *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (1988) and *The Long Day Closes* (1992), are different in tone (the first deals with an abusive father, the second with pleasures of ordinary life and popular culture) but equally striking in their use of color, 1950s Hollywood music, and



Age of innocence?

Of Time and the City, © 2008 Hurricane City Limited/Digital Departures. DVD: BFI (U.K.).

descriptive montage. *Of Time and the City* has similar properties. A discursive or essay film, it was partly commissioned by the city of Liverpool, which celebrated its 800th anniversary in 2007 and was named a “European Capital of Culture” in the following year; but Davies’s approach is personal and far from the civic boosterism implicit in the occasion.

Most U.S. citizens associate Liverpool, a metropolitan borough of roughly 800,000, with the Beatles and the “Mersey beat” of the early 1960s. It had greater importance from the eighteenth century until the 1970s as an industrial seaport. It became a site for grandiose late-Victorian architecture (its skyline is still dominated by the twin spires of the Royal Liver Building, which we see in Davies’s film) and a home for Irish immigrant laborers. Beginning in the 1920s, the British government constructed council housing for its working class—row upon row of attached brick homes along narrow paved streets, each with a single step outside the doorway. Heavy bombing in World War II destroyed some of these, but post-war waves of urban renewal destroyed more, replacing them with deeply unpopular, high-rise monoliths. By the second half of the twentieth century, Liverpool’s importance as a seaport had greatly declined and its physical character had changed; it nevertheless became a tourist attraction and the second most filmed city in the U.K.

Davies concentrates on the period between 1947, the year of his birth (also the year of the royal wedding between Elizabeth and Philip) and 1973, when he left Liverpool for good. Eighty percent of his film is made up of eloquent archival footage and still photos, some gathered from private collections, mostly concerning municipal architecture and daily life among the working class in the years after World War II: a father shaving and a mother making breakfast while a child rises from bed; women doing laundry by hand at communal wash basins and then carrying bales of it home on their heads; men handling heavy industrial metal on the docks; children at play in the streets; and crowds enjoying sporting events, holidays, and seaside outings. All this gives way to more recent images of a blighted, graffiti-covered wasteland, then to a hopeful montage of wind turbines and crowds of contemporary Liverpoolians, and finally to a touching shot of a little girl in a pale blue dress dancing in the street.

The film is edited by Davies and Liza Ryan-Carter with beautiful sensitivity to shifts between black-and-white and color, and to movement back and forth in time. Davies says in interviews that he wanted to follow the model of Humphrey Jennings and Stewart McAlister’s great wartime documentary, *Listen to Britain* (1942), which has a similarly detached but reverent respect for working people and an

unusual, poetic mode of address. A great deal of the narration Davies speaks in the film is in fact poetry—quotations from Housman, Shelley, Joyce, Whitman, Eliot and others, together with his own verses. The soundtrack also emphasizes music, ranging from sublime uses of classical composers such as Brahms and Mahler to an ironic appropriation of Peggy Lee singing Kern and Hammerstein’s “The Folks who Live on the Hill,” which is played against images of ugly housing developments.

As the last example may suggest, *Of Time and the City* is both lyrical and critical. Davies gives a scathing account of the British royal family, heaping scorn on “Betty and Phil” and their “thousand flunkies,” who spent obscene amounts on a wedding while “the rest of the nation survived on rationing in some of the worst slums in Europe,” and he rages against the “*anus mundi*” of post-war housing projects. He has equally angry things to say about his Catholic upbringing, which conflicted with a dawning awareness of his homosexuality. (Perhaps inadvertently echoing Luis Buñuel, he describes himself as “a born-again atheist, thank God.”) But he also has sweet memories, mostly about popular culture. At age seven, he saw *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952) and became infatuated with classic Hollywood: “My love was as muscular as my Catholicism, but without any of the drawbacks.” As he grew older, Dirk Bogarde and the Liverpool wrestling matches made him aware of his sexual inclinations, and on Sunday afternoons, “long before the repeal of the Sexual Offenses Act,” he enjoyed the campy double-entendre of *Round the Horne* on the radio.

At times, Davies’s plummy, Gielgud-like enunciation is at odds with his affectionate imagery of the working class, and one can hear similar contradictions in some of his attitudes. He rejects religion but is mildly put out when an old Liverpool church becomes a restaurant where “the congregation can have cocktails in the sight of God.” He fondly remembers the “love and cellophane” of childhood Christmases, especially his family’s “annual exotic pomegranate,” but derides most aspects of ordinary life after the 1950s. He prefers the time when “sports men and women knew how to win and lose with grace, and never to punch the air with victory,” and he laments the arrival of the Beatles, who resembled “a firm of provincial solicitors” and made “the witty lyric, the well-crafted love song” seem as antiquated as “antimacassars or curling tongs.” His film seems to move back and forth between a repressive but sweetly civilized past and a degraded present, only to close with an unearned gesture of solidarity with the new generation. But this pattern isn’t necessarily disabling. Davies has a laudatory willingness to reveal himself as an aging artist/intellectual with divided feelings

about his past—a man who has escaped an oppressive environment and who now takes comfort in Bruckner and Eliot. His film’s greatest virtue is the way it treats time and the city in complex fashion, weaving together intimate memories and public history, nostalgia and anger, making us aware of the persistence of the past in the present, the movement from birth to death, the change of seasons, the diurnal round of light, the radical shifts in the narrator’s attitude as he grows older, and the chronology of events that influenced his and other lives.

4. THE EXILES

Kent Mackenzie’s *The Exiles*, a city film of a different sort than the previous three, was shot in 1958, screened at the Venice film festival in 1961, and not given a commercial release until this past year. Its revival is probably due to Thom Andersen’s essay film of 2003, *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, which uses footage from *The Exiles* to illustrate L.A.’s Bunker Hill area. Once associated with immigrant workers, dilapidated Victorian houses, and the Angels’ Flight funicular, Bunker Hill was memorably described by novelists John Fante and Raymond Chandler, and used effectively in film noirs such as *Criss Cross* (1949) and *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955). It was eventually destroyed to make way for urban renewal and to move what the city regarded as a class of undesirables away from downtown. *The Exiles* provides the best evidence we have of a life that once existed there, and has additional significance because it concentrates on a subculture of Native Americans who had been transplanted to Bunker Hill from Southwestern reservations. As Andersen puts it, the film reveals a city “where reality is opaque, where different social orders exist in the same space without touching each other.”

The Exiles tells a simple story, written partly by the actors, of less than twenty-four hours in the lives of three sharply delineated characters who each speak in voiceover. Yvonne Williams, pregnant with the child of Homer Nish, has always wanted a stable married life but has given up hope. Homer, who looks a bit like a chubby Elvis, is alienated from the city and always on the edge of violence. He lolls around the house with his pals, eats pork chops cooked by Yvonne, then goes out for the night to get drunk and start fights. One of his companions is Tommy Reynolds, a seducer and manipulator who mooches money from women, treats them roughly, and blithely admits that he will soon do prison time. These two visit crowded bars and roam neon-lit streets where cops beat up troublemakers. After a wild joy ride in a convertible they end up with a party of Indians on Hill X, near the spot in Chavez Ravine where today the Los Angeles Dodgers have their ballpark. The party becomes increasingly rowdy and



Bunker Hill congeniality

The Exiles. Courtesy Milestone Film and Video.

breaks into a tribal dance, as if liquor had momentarily obliterated the modern world. Finally the two men and a woman they've picked up go back to Bunker Hill in the grey light of dawn.

Mackenzie, who lived to make only one other film, became interested in the Bunker Hill Indians when he was a student at the University of Southern California. He spent a good deal of time earning their confidence, and eventually invited them to play themselves and collaborate in writing their individual stories. Working with friends, he shot much of the film on "short ends," or leftovers from 35mm stock discarded by Hollywood studios. Restored by UCLA preservationist Ross Lipman, the black-and-white photography has a deeply clear, high-contrast beauty that rivals any movie of the period. An open-air market, a gas station, a bar on Central Avenue and various other locations are shown in exhilarating detail and filled with crowds of raw, compelling faces; and the soundtrack is enlivened by the authentic 1950s rock'n'roll of Anthony Hilder and the Revels. The film's greatest virtue, however, is its uncompromised toughness and willingness to let its subjects act "themselves" without too much moral or political preachment by the director. There are two unfortu-

nate exceptions to the rule: at the beginning we see a montage of Edward S. Curtis photographs and hear voiceover lamenting that "the American Indian once lived in the ordered freedom of his own culture," and later we cut away from the Los Angeles locales to a pastoral scene on the reservation. Otherwise *The Exiles* is a fiction film that can be compared with John Cassavetes's *Shadows* (1959) or Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (1977—Burnett is one of the producers of this restoration). Like those films, it doesn't try to ingratiate itself with the mainstream audience or make an unfamiliar culture seem acceptable to liberals. Even by today's standards, it seems almost shockingly honest and close to the bone.

5. WENDY AND LUCY

The most popular 2008 picture about a dog and its owner was *Marley and Me*, but Kelly Reichardt's *Wendy and Lucy*, a \$300,000 wonder in an age when the average Hollywood release costs over \$10 million, is better by many miles. If, like me, you think any story involving a homeless waif and her missing pet is bound to be manipulative and cloying, you're wrong; this one avoids emotional pitfalls by virtue of restraint, simplicity, and a rigorous avoidance of melodrama. It's one of the most tense and moving treatments of the thin line between poverty and chaos since *The Bicycle Thief* (1948), which it resembles in some ways.

Wendy Carroll (Michelle Williams) and her dog Lucy arrive at the outskirts of Portland, Oregon after traveling cross-country in Wendy's 1988 Honda. Wendy has \$525 in cash and a vague plan to find work in Alaska. She brushes her teeth and changes her underwear in a gas-station restroom, and she and Lucy sleep in the car; but the next morning the car breaks down, Wendy is arrested for shoplifting a bagel and two cans of dog food from a local grocery store, and Lucy goes missing. The rest of the film is a desperate search for the dog, during which money leaks away: a fifty-dollar fine for the arrest, thirty dollars to have the unrepairable car towed, bus fare back and forth to the dog pound, a payphone call for help to an unloving and perhaps broke sister in Indiana, Xeroxing of flyers to announce that Lucy is missing, and so forth. Wendy has no shelter, there are no jobs in the town, and even if there were she couldn't get one without a telephone number and proof of address. But she won't leave until she finds Lucy.

One of the strengths of the screenplay, adapted by Reichardt and Jon Raymond from a story by Raymond, is that it brings Wendy into contact with a larger community in poverty or barely scraping by—teenage drifters, addicts, derelicts, and a variety of low-level service or managerial workers. (The



Elfin distress

Wendy and Lucy. © 2008 Oscilloscope Laboratories.

film was produced in the wake of the Katrina disaster and before the recent economic meltdown.) Most of these characters help Wendy to the extent of their limited powers. The leader of a pack of teenaged “gutter punks” (Will Oldham) gives her a tip about an Alaskan fishery; a tough garage mechanic (Will Patton) charges her less than his usual rate for towing (this after giving free technical advice to another customer on the telephone); and a Walgreen drugstore guard (folk musician Walter Dalton) provides her with encouragement, advice, his cell-phone number in case the dog pound needs to call, and six hard-earned dollars. The only exception to the rule is a sanctimonious supermarket stock boy with a cross around his neck (John Robinson), who badgers his reluctant boss into having Wendy arrested.

I was skeptical of the casting of elfin beauty Michelle Williams and I continue to wonder if the film would be better with a plain-looking actor, but Williams gives a poignant and convincing performance. In a helmet of dark hair, a hoodie, and cutoff jeans, she seems frail but also stoic and resilient—although how Wendy will survive in Alaska with such paltry clothing, assuming she ever gets to Alaska, is anybody’s guess. (Lucy, a brown-gold mutt with floppy ears and a sweet disposition, nicely plays herself—she’s Kelly Reichardt’s dog.) The film’s relative lack of dialogue makes Williams’s work all the more important, and the sound design by Leslie

Shatz and Eric Offin is unobtrusively effective, consisting of nothing more than Wendy’s isolated humming (at one point orchestrated as supermarket musak) and cleverly mixed traffic and railroad noises. Photographer Sam Levy, working with available light, makes fine use of Oregon’s verdant woods and clear air, and the film also benefits from Reichardt’s early experience as a still photographer. In an interview with *The New York Times*, she has acknowledged indebtedness to the school of Stephen Shore, Robert Adams, and Joe Deal, who photograph “man-altered landscapes.” Her images of the built environment—a gas station, a rail yard, a wall with graffiti—have an unassuming but museum-worthy power and beauty thoroughly in keeping with the humane realism of the film as a whole.

6. HAPPY-GO-LUCKY

The first words spoken by Poppy, the North London elementary school teacher played by Sally Hawkins in Mike Leigh’s latest film, are in a bookstore where she spots a volume called *Road to Reality*. “I don’t want to be going there!” she gurgles, popping it back on the shelf. She prefers browsing in the children’s section. As she exits, she looks back at the surly and suspicious clerk, and gyrates as if shoplifter alarm bells were going off. Outside, she discovers her bicycle has been stolen and sighs, “We didn’t even get to say goodbye.”

Judging from a minority of reviews, some people are annoyed by this apparently daffy young woman, who, after injuring her back from jumping on a trampoline, laughs as she winces with pain. To me she's charismatic, almost a secular saint, though admittedly saints can be wearing over time. Despite her bubbly enthusiasm and smiley face, Poppy is no airheaded Pollyanna. She's instinctively kind and perceptive, much more knowledgeable and intelligent than she first appears (early in the film, during a drunken night out with her girlfriends, she makes farting sounds with her mouth and mimes a telephone conversation with one of her falsies), and there are depths to her personality—shadings and forms of humor, moments when her smile fades or drops to reveal an awareness of existential dark.

A bookend to *Naked* (1993), Leigh's very dark film about an equally charismatic but almost sociopathic character, *Happy-Go-Lucky* takes place mostly in sunlight and is often quite funny. Its thirty-year-old heroine wistfully hopes to find a man, and sure enough she develops a sweet and sexy relationship with a tall, easygoing social worker (Samuel Roukin). Nevertheless, the open-ended story isn't quite a comedy and one feels it could easily swerve into sadness or catastrophe. It was created in Leigh's usual fashion, through lengthy work with actors who built their characters through improvisation. The ostensibly aimless plot (originally about three hours long) is structured by themes of friendship and teaching, linked together when Poppy tells a troubled student that she wants to help him because "that's what mates do." Poppy's driving instructor, Scott (Eddie Marsan), is the sort of person

this student might otherwise grow into—a paranoid bully, probably abused in childhood, who rages against blacks and teaches through intimidation and proto-Nazi discipline. The scenes between him and Poppy, some of them shot with long takes in which the actors control the rhythm, create an uneasy laughter from a wildly mismatched couple, and are nicely calibrated to reveal how Poppy uses humor to cope with Scott's anger and her own nervousness; she gradually blunts his rage and challenges his ideas, but he's a frightening character, beyond redemption.

Elsewhere, Poppy is a loving companion to her potentially depressive flat mate (Alexis Zegerman) and a supportive voice for her two sisters (Kate O'Flynn and Caroline Martin), one of whom is sulky, the other jealous. The only false note in the film is a scene in an urban wasteland after dark, where Poppy encounters a homeless schizophrenic (Stanley Townsend) and listens empathetically as he talks. (Contrast the scene in *Wendy and Lucy* when Wendy encounters a schizophrenic in the woods.) But this flaw is more than redeemed by the broader arc of Hawkins's performance, which is almost Chaplinesque in its emotional sensitivity, timing, and comic eccentricity: see, for example, her birdlike stance, stomping feet, and goofy grin when she takes Flamenco lessons from a haughty, emotionally overwrought Spaniard. According to actor Donald Wolfelt, death is easy and comedy hard. Hawkins's work in *Happy-Go-Lucky* might be harder still—she creates an unsentimental, endearing, and believably good character whose kindness and optimism ameliorate the disappointment, cruelty, and danger of ordinary life.



A secular saint

Happy-Go-Lucky. © 2007 Untitled '06 Distribution Limited/Channel 4 Television Corporation/UK Film Council. DVD: Momentum Pictures Home Entertainment (U.K.).

7. LET THE RIGHT ONE IN

According to vampire lore, those frightening, blood-sucking creatures can't invade your home but must be invited in; hence they tend to be seductive or hypnotic, and their horror is usually sexual, sometimes even romantic. Early vampire films use this myth for ideologically conservative ends; in the Bram Stoker adaptations, for example, the vampire is a decadent, aristocratic, but alien figure representing ambiguous sexuality and whatever else the society might fear, and is destroyed by the forces of Christian patriarchy. In more recent times, a liberal or radical version of the myth dominates and the values are reversed: Dracula becomes a rebellious lover in a Puritan world (Maddin's *Dracula: Pages from a Virgin's Diary*, 2002) or an alien in a sick society (the tortured adolescent in George A. Romero's 1977 *Martin*, or the female philosophy student in Abel Ferrara's *The Addiction*, 1995).

Swedish director Tomas Alfredson's melancholy, creepy, emotionally touching *Let the Right One In*, adapted by John Ajvide Lindqvist from his own novel, belongs in the second category but offers some clever new twists. The title derives from a song by British rock star Morrissey, whose suggestive lyrics speak of the need to leave an unsatisfactory world behind and "let the right one slip in." In this case, the "right one" is a dark, sickly girl (Lina Leandersson) who moves next door to a pale, androgynous boy (Kåre Hedebrant) of twelve. "I've been twelve a long time," she tells him, and she certainly has. When we first see the boy, he's standing in the window of his apartment on a winter night, wearing nothing but his undershorts, holding a knife and quietly calling for

"Piggy." The girl next door has unwashed hair, big eyes, and a growling stomach. She doesn't wear winter clothes, and she lives with a strange older man who might be her father and who commits an awful murder in order to bring her a bag of blood.

I won't reveal more of the well-constructed and surprising plot, except to say that it involves a presexual relationship between two lonely outsiders, and results in both a horror film and a potentially tragic love story. Where horror is concerned, there are plenty of well-timed, frightening, and blackly humorous moments, and I've never seen more spooky and effective use of CGI effects. Director Alfredson and his photographer Hoyte van Hoytema also make excellent use of the Swedish locales (especially a concrete housing project with an eerie, erotic advertising poster covering one of the windows), creating an atmosphere of cold, clear silence where bloody murder occasionally erupts. The most unusual aspect of the film has to do with the bond that develops between the boy and girl. Their prepubescent, slightly indeterminate gender makes their interaction at once sexual and weirdly Platonic. "Will you be my girlfriend?" the boy asks. She agrees, even though she's an older woman and tells him that she has an odd-looking body. He needs her friendship to survive a disturbing life at home and at school, and she needs his loving assistance. Unfortunately, he lives in a world of time and she will be undead forever.

I'm sorry to report that Hollywood plans to remake this small, perfect film under the supervision of Matt Reeves (*Cloverfield*).



Survival skills

Let the Right One In. © 2008 EFTI. DVD: Magnolia Home Entertainment.

8. THE DUCHESS OF LANGEAIS

Jacques Rivette's film deserves analysis not only for its dramatic power but also for its specific virtues as a costume picture adapted from a nineteenth-century novella by Balzac (an author Rivette has adapted before, in *La Belle noiseuse*, 1991). Set largely in Restoration Paris and told in flashback, the film concerns a frustrated love affair between a Napoleonic-era military officer, General Armand de Montriveau (Guillaume Depardieu, who died in 2008), and a flirtatious aristocrat, the Duchess of Langeais (Jeanne Balibar). The general is a leonine, scowling romantic with a wooden leg (Depardieu was an actual amputee) and the duchess a raven-haired, ultramontane Catholic with the seductive body of a dancer. Rivette, who has long been interested in the relation between theater and cinema, emphasizes the theatrical nature of their affair. The duchess invites the general to a series of private meetings in her home (her husband is permanently absent) and subjects him to *The Big Tease*, carefully controlling her costume, hair, lighting, and *mise-en-scène*, ultimately turning him into her "orderly." Five years later, after spurning him, then falling truly in love with him, and then being rejected by him in return, she has joined an order of barefoot Carmelites in Spain. When he finds her at the nunnery, a scarlet curtain drops to reveal her standing on an empty stage, where she has been singing a mournful song of parting ("River Tage," by J. H. Demeun and B. Pollet).

The film is especially interesting for the way it respects what Lionel Trilling, in an essay entitled "The Sense of the Past," calls "historicity." Many older works of literature, Trilling points out, are acceptable only when they are understood to have been written in the past; indeed their pastness is inseparable from their positive aesthetic effect. In adapting Balzac, Rivette avoids pastiche but is sensitive to the nineteenth century's historically available expressive conventions. He achieves suspense, an air of estrangement, and sometimes a comic irony from the conflict between highly formalized manners and impulsive romanticism, and he makes good use of intertitles to convey the rather arch tone of Balzac's narration. His approach is quite different from Catherine Breillat's overtly sexy *The Last Mistress*, which is an adaptation of a nineteenth-century novel about a similar milieu, and in some ways closer to the austere historicism of Rossellini's *The Taking of Power by Louis XIV* (1966—available this year on a fine DVD from Criterion). Like Rossellini, Rivette appreciates the value of dramatic pauses, long takes, and real duration. *The Duchess of Langeais* is a leisurely film (two hours and seventeen minutes), confined mostly to interiors, directed in a style that



Amour fou

The Duchess of Langeais. © 2006 Pierre Grise Productions/Arte France Cinéma/Cinemoundici.
DVD: Artificial Eye (U.K.).

provides a correlative to Balzac's leisurely fiction. Some of its best dramatic effects are the moments when the general silently waits for the duchess, or when his wooden leg clomps across the floorboards of a society ballroom and the marble stones of a church. Rivette makes no attempt to be completely "faithful" to his source, but he intelligently adapts Balzac and in the process creates a detached yet quietly intense dramatization of *amour fou*.

9. THE FLIGHT OF THE RED BALLOON

Speaking of long takes, there are some beauties in Hou Hsiao-hsien's homage to Albert Lamorisse's *The Red Balloon* (1956); and fittingly so, since the Lamorisse short is best known among cinephiles as the subject of one of André Bazin's most influential essays in defense of single-shot aesthetics, "The Virtues and Limitations of Montage." Hou's picture is set in Paris, where a slightly anthropomorphic red balloon drifts through picturesque sights, occasionally floating near a little boy (Simon Iteanu). A film student from China (Fang Song) takes a job as the boy's nanny and eventually decides to make a video about him and a red balloon (she's a surrogate for Hou, and we see a bit of her film within his). The only fully developed character is the boy's neurotic but loving mother (Juliette Binoche), who works as a voice artist in a puppet show specializing in classic Asian stories.



Meandering life

The Flight of the Red Balloon. © HHH Productions/Margo Films/Les Films du Lendemain/ARTE France Cinéma. DVD: Network (U.K.).

(One of Hou's most admired films is *The Puppet Master*, 1993, about classic Chinese puppet shows.) She lives a scattered life, trying to cope with a deadbeat ex-husband, a daughter in Brussels who doesn't want to come home, and a downstairs tenant who won't pay the rent.

As David Bordwell has pointed out, one mark of Hou's style is that he doesn't provide strong causal links between scenes. *Flight of the Red Balloon* gives us a string of loosely related incidents, most of them occurring in the boy and his mother's cluttered, semi-bohemian apartment, where we see the nanny making crepes or working at a computer, the boy at his PlayStation, the mother bursting in from outside, and

an occasional workman or visitor on an errand. Through the device of the nanny we gradually learn revealing things about the boy and mother, but the film requires us to reorient ourselves with each new sequence and has no clear-cut narrative goal. As a result, space takes precedence over plot, and Hou's fascinating long takes are among the chief sources of interest. He typically sets the camera at one end of the apartment, framing bodies in doorways, staging occasional entrances and exits, now and then panning from one spot to another. One of the more crowded shots, lasting over eight minutes, involves the boy, the nanny, a blind piano tuner, and a mildly violent confrontation between the mother and the angry downstairs tenant. Here and elsewhere, the film supports Bazin's notion that "essential cinema" is found in "straight-forward photographic respect for the unity of space." It also has a charmingly calm, meandering rhythm perfectly suited to a free-floating balloon. Near the end we visit the Musée d'Orsay, where a teacher shows the boy and his schoolmates Félix Vallotton's 1899 painting, *Le Ballon*. Their discussion offers us a way of looking at the film itself: we see a child, a red balloon, and a couple of adults in a large, variegated space where the eye can wander from one interesting point to another; it's a lovely, mysterious picture, and, as one of the children says, it seems both happy and sad.

10. THE BAND'S VISIT

Most of the films I've been discussing are about cities; but my last choice, the charmingly funny *The Band's Visit*, is a film about what one of its characters calls "bloody nowhere." It tells the story of an eight-piece Egyptian military band in ceremonial garb, the Alexandria Ceremonial Orchestra, which is scheduled to give a concert at the Arab Cultural Center of an Israeli town called Petah Tikva. Unable to pronounce Hebrew, the band takes the wrong bus and winds up in Bet Hatikvah. The place looks like nothing but a few multi-level buildings sticking out of a flat desert. "No culture," a resident explains. "Not Israeli culture, not Arab, no culture at all." A couple of locals make room for the stranded band to spend the night, and smalltown boredom prompts halting communication with broken English and bits of music. The earthy and sexy owner of a roadside café (Ronit Elkabetz) is attracted to the stolid, somewhat mournful band leader (Sasson Gabai); the band's painfully insecure second-in-command (Khalifa Natour) finds an audience for his unfinished "overture for a concerto"; and the band's youngest member (Saleh Bakri), a restless ladies' man, visits a roller rink and gives advice to a shy teenager about how to woo a woman.



Curiosity and discomfort

The Band's Visit. © 2007 The Band's Visit Limited Partnership. DVD: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment (U.K.).

The setting, a barren no-place, makes the pleasant fantasy of communion between Egyptians and Israelis seem plausible, and enables writer-director Eran Kolirin to create a slow-paced comedy of surreal or strangely offbeat situations—as when the band stands silently on an empty roadside in their powder-blue uniforms, or when the young lothario makes a pass at a girl who sells bus tickets: “You have eyes! Very beautiful eyes! Do you like Chet Baker?” He sings a couple of bars of “My Funny Valentine” and slyly announces, “I play violin in orchestra, but I also play trumpet.” Kolirin understands that the space of film comedy is usually flat rather than deep, and takes advantage of the minimalist environment to line up objects or people parallel to the picture plane—in the first shot, for example, the driver of a parked white van with its side to the camera gets out, removes a big yellow ball from the rear door, takes it to the front, climbs in, and drives off to reveal the band standing in a row along the curb; after a few beats of silence, a woman pushing a luggage cart walks right to left directly across the screen in front of them, ignoring them completely.

The film makes equally good comic uses of the Kuleshov Effect: see the reaction shot of two band members when the café owner slices aggressively into a watermelon;

see also the deadpan close-ups of the two when she sits down and props a bare, ankle-braceleted foot on a table. One of the best pieces of editing is a scene involving seven people—three band members with two local citizens and their wives—crowded together at small dinner table. The Egyptians are intensely uncomfortable and the wives hostile (it’s a birthday for one of them), but the male hosts try to make conversation about music. The laughs derive from nicely timed close-ups of silent reactions, plus a wide shot of an angry wife clearing dishes from the table as the men join in an awkward singing of “Summertime.” In the end, all this humor ultimately gives way to bittersweet sentiment as the café owner and the band leader get to know one another—a shift of tone that the director and actors subtly prepare for and accomplish with grace.

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ABSTRACT Prefaced by remarks about methodology, the article presents the author’s selection of the best films released in the U.S., 2008 (including one archival reissue). The top three are all city films: Jia Zhang-ke’s *24 City*, Guy Maddin’s *My Winnipeg*, and Terence Davies’s *Of Time and the City*.

KEYWORDS Jia Zhang-ke, Guy Maddin, Terence Davies, evaluation, best films of 2008