

BESTS OF 2000

By Michael Ventura
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Great cinema, like great painting, teaches that seeing is a grace we take for granted and instructs us how to see afresh. You can go through years of Top 10 lists without watching a film that can do that. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (opening next week in Austin on January 12) is such a film. It entralls, invigorates, but more than anything opens the eyes, allowing you to watch what you've only glimpsed and half-remembered in dreams. Director Ang Lee's artistry is less in his movie's pyrotechnics than in how lovingly, how unflinchingly, he centers his film in the humanity of its faces: the expressions of Chow Yun Fat, Michelle Yeoh, Zhang Ziyi, and Chang Chen are like intimate portraits painted on the scale of landscapes. No director alive *trusts* the human face as Lee does in this film. Thus he makes the legendary feasible and brings it within reach. The depth of these faces makes no action unimaginable -- so when the film leaps into the fantastic we leap with it, connected to the action not through trickery but through the eyes of these people.

Yet I left this film with a sadness not inherent to the picture but adjacent to it: the knowledge that, for the most part, the American audiences and critics who welcome *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* would not accept the same content and acting if it were set in their own culture. Such scope and depth is embraced as long as it is alien, foreign; but we are embarrassed, and turn snide, when faced with the same qualities in each other, and in American art. In that vein, Philip Kaufman's bravura masterpiece *Quills* must be set in another country and 200 years ago to achieve its effects; to explore the relations between transgression and liberty, madness and art in modern America ... well, where would we even set such a film? A campus? A prison would be the only possibility, and no one's about to make that picture. For the most part *Quills'* issues are dormant in our culture. And in our movies we don't want to look at ourselves unless we're laughing or shooting at each other, or unless we pile on so many special effects (as in *The Matrix*) that the human face no longer matters much. (*A Perfect Storm* transmitted magnificent visions of the sea, but its characters were cut-outs snipped from mediocre TV.)

American Beauty and *Boys Don't Cry* were exceptions in 1999, and an even more telling exception is, interestingly, not American in style or culture: M. Night Shyamalan. Last year's *The Sixth Sense* and this year's *Unbreakable* tell contemporary, dream-like tales with virtually no "effects" but believable behavior and the human face. To take as unremarkable a canvas as the face of Bruce Willis, and paint such intricate things upon it -- allowing that actor room to approach a modest mastery in these performances -- is another kind of movie magic. It is not only the originality of Shyamalan's (delicately non-violent) stories that enthrall; managing somehow to be both unobtrusive and astounding at the same time, he places a camera where no one else does, and where no one ever has -- as though, in a room, it's the furniture that's watching and even telling the tale. He's the only American-based director today who seems to be creating a tradition as he goes along.

The year 2000 also brought us a kind of New York trilogy, three "small films" by three directors who are alike only in the intensity with which they love a city and seek to reveal it through its common lives: Darren Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream* (from a

novel and script by the great Hubert Selby Jr., with frightening acting by Ellen Burstyn); Laurence Fishburne's *Once in the Life* (his script from his play, featuring indelible performances by him and Titus Welliver); and Stanley Tucci's lesser but still effective *Joe Gould's Secret* (script by Howard A. Rodman, and a lovely turn by Sir Ian Holm). Whatever one feels about New York, it is still a place that manages to get its stories told with more consistent honesty than anywhere else in America.

All these very different films almost helplessly share one ploy to engage an audience: characters who, for the most part, generate their own extreme behavior. It's a convention we so take for granted that we forget it's a convention. Fiction in general wasn't quite so in the thrall of this practice until the theatre and the novel had to compete with film. Even, say, in Dostoevsky and Melville and Dickens, extreme individual behavior has its ground in conventional behavior, and is portrayed and judged in relation to conventional behavior; in Shakespeare and the Greek tragedians, by contrast, extreme individual behavior was most often portrayed as the result of, or the response to, collective, historical forces -- as, in fact, it usually is in most lives. Today our societal boundaries and limits are constantly in flux, constantly in a simultaneous state of collapse and re-construction, so individual extremes are more evident in ordinary lives; thus what *seem* to be individually generated extremes are in fact a response to a collective, societal collapse of boundaries. I say all that to preface this: There is nothing more rare in cinema than to *consciously* show how individual lives are catapulted into extreme situations by collective historical forces.

I saw two films in the year 2000 that attempted this. Istavan Szabo's *Sunshine*, depicting one Hungarian Jewish family across the span of the 20th century, in which Ralph Fiennes and Jennifer Ehle articulate that point in family life where history shapes personality; and, with far more delicacy and detail, the Spaniard Jose Luis Cuerda's *The Butterfly*. Written by Rafael Azcona, from the short stories of Manuel Rivas, and with a heart-rending portrayal by Fernando Fernan Gomez, *The Butterfly* will live in my memory with *Quills* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, from the year 2000, as what cinema can attain at its highest levels. *The Butterfly* is a deceptively simple story: An old teacher, about to retire, attempts to transmit his most valued knowledge to a little boy, while their village is on the verge of drastic change brought about by the Spanish Civil War in 1936. Here you see how the usual can turn into the monstrous, and how despair may turn into a heroism that no one will notice but oneself or God, if there is a God. The final shots are as devastating, and in a strange way as inspiring, as any I've ever seen.

So much for the big screen. Much of the action in America 2000 was on the small screen. The ghosts of Frank Capra and Howard Hawks haunt *The West Wing*, and that's all to the good. We distrust doctors, so we watch *ER* and its clones; we hate lawyers, so *The Practice*, *Ally McBeal*, and *Law & Order* are hits; we fear cops, so *NYPD Blue* and all the others arrest (and lock up) our imaginations; we despise politicians, so *The West Wing*'s a hit. These shows thrive by portraying our essential institutions as we wish them to be. I'm bored and/or infuriated by all of them, except *The West Wing* -- which says more about me than the show. I want a White House I can respect, laugh with not at, and openly admire. For an hour a week I can imagine a presidency I'd be proud of, with William Carlos Williams' line drumming somewhere in the background: "Either I exist or I do not exist, and no amount of pap which I happen to be lapping can dull me to the loss."

More to the point is *Xena: Warrior Princess*, in its sixth and last year. A Jungian in-joke, this show plays outrageously with mythologies and archetypes, shifting and

sifting gender-values, and achieving a vaudevillian poetry that puts the viewer on the spot: to take *Xena*'s spiritual slapstick and philosophical pratfalls as seriously as they deserve, you have to give up a few notches of self-importance, because high art has never stooped lower -- certainly never with so much raucous relish. And *Buffy the Vampyre Slayer* is almost as audacious, knowing that in any collapsing society the "hell-mouth" is always around the corner, and are you willing to befriend a demon to achieve your humanity? If not, why not? *La Femme Nikita*'s final episode did something unheard of: Taking its sexy nihilism to the nth degree, it revealed its star (Peta Wilson) as the ultimate villain -- she'd betrayed *everybody*. Anybody identifying and/or sympathizing with her had been duped. When has a TV show denied every last possibility of love even to its most sympathetic characters? The new *Dark Angel* is still shaky on its feet, but its star, Jennifer Alba, has the makings of a major actress if her beauty doesn't ruin her. (I said the same thing about Jessica Lange in her first high-visibility role, *King Kong* in 1976, and nobody believed me then either.)

Meanwhile *Babylon 5*, the best and most complex series of the last decade, has become the first TV show to be shown on widescreen format; it's now in re-runs on the SciFi channel. J. Michael Straczynski's novel-for-television is an inflammatory combination of the political and the metaphysical, and it has yet to receive the recognition it warrants. But it'll run on SciFi forever so you have time to catch up.

We will never have an honest cinema about the way we live because we don't want it. But sometimes, on the big and small screen, there are honest explorations of the way we dream, and for that the year 2000 gave us some exceptionally fine works.

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