

FILM TRAC*

Winter 2023-24

*teen reviewers
and critics



REVIEWS

Shayda

(2023, dir. Noori Niasari)

Shayda, directed by Noori Niasari, encapsulates a mother and daughter's Persian spring, and the joys and sacrifices of motherhood amidst change.

Shayda and her daughter Mona have recently moved to a women's shelter in Australia. Shayda tries her best to provide for her daughter and keep their culture prominent; however, the trauma she suffered from her husband prevents her from fully expressing herself.

We see her character arc represented as the Persian spring. The first day of spring is a time of rebirth and growth, and Shayda's character begins a new life in a new country. Spring is beautifully captured by shots filmed in the backyard of the women's shelter of Shayda and Mona playing together: handheld camerawork shows the playfulness of the scene with lots of natural movement, lens flares convey a sunny early spring day. Most scenes like this are in a montage that create a sense of nostalgia. Niasari shoots these scenes on film and with a fuzzy filter to give the picture a grainy and dreamy look, like a memory from childhood. This makes many costumes and set designs look desaturated, alluding to a fading memory, with a character or set piece's vibrant color cleverly attracting the viewer's eye. Subtle details like these are what make *Shayda* so great.

Shayda is shot in a 4:3 aspect ratio, focusing the eye on the subject in the frame. This creates intimacy and claustrophobia, and, the viewer being closer, you can admire more of the film. The use of close-ups accentuates this intimacy, along with the discomfort of the more stressful scenes in the film.

For instance, the actress who plays Shayda, Zar Amir Ebrahimi, has such striking and gorgeous features. Her subtle

panicked acting, amplified by close-ups, is effective in the more stressful aspects of the film, like when her husband has a custody visit and returns Mona to Shayda later than the agreed time. This scene felt extremely tense because of jump-cuts, fast and jittery camera movement, and the overall panic shown by her physical expressions. Scenes like this put the audience into Shayda's anxious situation. The viewer sees characters from Shayda's perspective: Mona, her daughter, is always seen as a pure and sweet little girl.

Even through all the adversity she has to go through in the film to give her daughter a better life, we see Shayda grow from that and bloom into a stronger woman who isn't afraid to express her individuality.

This type of filmmaking feels lost in the oversaturated market of blockbusters and jumbled peculiar plots that are meant to be less straightforward and more subjective or ambiguous. The lack of overproduction and complexity of the story are what make *Shayda* so unique.

All in all, *Shayda* feels like a first breath of Spring that is motherly and emotional. The atmosphere of this film is like a childhood recorded on home videos, a heartfelt story that is magnified by creative filmmaking and rich culture.

Erlinda Z

■

Swallow

(2020, dir. Carlo Mirabella-Davis)

From first-time director Carlo Mirabella-Davis, *Swallow* is an extremely charming, nuanced, and introspective debut.

Hunter, a soft-spoken housewife, enjoys the solitude and forlornness of sitting alone in her big house. She relies on her husband for almost everything, and relishes every moment of being a trophy wife: she loves cleaning, making bland food, and governing small design choices, like



curtains and rugs, within their intensely modern house.

As this quiet life persists, Hunter becomes more and more aware of her husband's disregard for her feelings, her acts of love, her design choices, and realizes that, no matter what, she will never have complete control over her life.

At this point, Hunter begins to feel urges to eat inanimate objects. She glances at a glass marble on a countertop: suddenly, the marble appears more glossy, more colorful, the field of view expanding, putting this marble at the center of the universe. The camera cuts to Hunter, she licks her lips as both the viewer and her crave the marble.

As Hunter's cravings worsen, all aspects of *Swallow* change. The story takes a turn when Hunter is revealed to be pregnant, momentarily recapturing her husband's attention. The visuals of the film begin to change as well, the majority of beige and off-white color palettes are suddenly intercepted by intense blood reds and piercing, primary blues.

Hunter begins to embrace her condition; she ingests more intense, sharper objects. In this, she is caught after she swallows a mini screwdriver and begins to choke. In

a horrifying yet transfixing scene, Hunter undergoes surgery, in which random objects are removed from her like a game of *Operation*. After this, she does not receive the attention that she wants from her husband, and instead is monitored by a caretaker. Hunter begins to hate her whole life, and, as her condition worsens, she creates a ploy to escape.

The strongest points of the movie were the beautiful costume and art design from Liene Dobraja, a stellar, poignant performance from Haley Bennett, and a cohesive new way of showing obsession through the mental disorder pica. The first and second acts of the movie work immensely well together; the first act of the movie establishes the "signature look" of Hunter as a character, her perfect bob haircut, her light, coquettish wardrobe, and her doe-eyed stare. The second act of the movie flawlessly crescendos, showing pica's toll on Hunter.

Hunter is aware of this toll too: she begins to become more visually unstable, her bob out of place, and her clothing choices more lazy and relaxed. In a scene where everything boils over, Hunter eats a handful of soil in her garden. In a moment

of both pleasure and sickness, Hunter rubs her dirty hands in her hair, all over her clothes, and all over her face.

Gus PZ



Poor Things

(2023, dir. Yorgos Lanthimos)

A colorful expression of sexuality and the nuanced layers that go along with it, *Poor Things* follows Bella, a pregnant woman who tried to kill herself and was found washed up by the water by scientist Dr. Godwin Baxter. Baxter finds that the brain of the baby inside her is still alive, so he replaces Bella's brain with her baby's, creating a middle aged woman with the brain of a small child.

Throughout the movie we see Bella learning new things about herself, eventually leading her to discover sexual pleasure. Shortly after she experiences her first time with Duncan Wedderburn, the movie goes from black and white to full vibrant beautiful colors, symbolizing this newfound brightness and happiness found from within.

Once Bella escapes from being under the control of men (notably Dr. Baxter and Duncan), she begins to yet again find herself, sexually, by getting a job working as a prostitute alongside other empowered women at a brothel, where a new friend,

Toinette, helps guide her through life and introduces her to socialism. Bella starts going to socialist protests and finds herself and her independence.

Set in Victorian London, this campy feast of colorful scenery is a joy to the eyes, from its cinematography, as you watch the characters walk through a cotton candy world with a darker more psychological center; to its fashion, twisting your mind with its interesting melding together of mini skirts and traditional Victorian tops.

The movie is piercing, with a meaning deeper than its eye catching sets and kaleidoscopic cinema. And it poses many difficult questions; for instance, whether Bella, with such a young brain, was being taken advantage of by these older men throughout. However, due to the phrasing of the movie, I couldn't help but look past that when seeing her intelligence and power in these scenes, it was clear she wasn't being taken advantage of, but instead quite the opposite.

Poor Things, directed by Yorgos Lanthimos, is a neo-feminist dream to watch on the screen, from its emotionally-driven yet simply comedic acting, to its realistic approach of depicting the sexuality of a woman in a way no other film I've ever seen has.

Nathaniel P

REVIEWS, cont.

Anatomy of a Fall

(2023, dir. Justine Triet)

Anatomy of a Fall is a masterclass in audience manipulation. The film follows the story of Sandra Voyter, a celebrated writer who is put on trial for murder after her husband's fatal fall from their attic window. As the sole witness, the couple's blind son, Daniel, faces a moral dilemma. As the story unfolds, family secrets and tensions are revealed in this cerebral courtroom drama. As Sandra's husband's death is replayed and dissected by cruelly surgical prosecutors, each twist left me questioning my own judgments.

The film is defined by a sense of iciness and isolation as the story unfolds against the stark backdrop of the French Alps.



Incorporating two maddeningly repetitive musical themes—a steel-drum cover of 50 Cent's "P.I.M.P." and a classical Spanish song—the score sets the tone of this tense and captivating drama.

Although it lasts a full 152 minutes, *Anatomy of a Fall* was one of the most engaging films of the year. Despite its technical prowess, however, the film falls short in its exploration of themes brought

up by the central case.

In a masterfully shot scene that irrevocably shifts viewers' perceptions of Sandra, Triet begins to ask meaningful questions about gender, marriage, and power. Yet the film's ambiguous ending prevents viewers from coming to any significant or nuanced conclusions about these ideas. While this ending makes sense in the context of Triet's artful screenplay, it feels frustrating as a conclusion to the twisted, dark story of Sandra and her husband's marriage. Though perhaps we were intended to leave the theater questioning our perspectives on what a marriage should look like or the gendered role that success plays within relationships, the lack of any real end to the story feels like a cop-out.

Olive E

Lars and the Real Girl

(2007, dir. Craig Gillespie)

Directed by Craig Gillespie, *Lars and the Real Girl* tells the story of Lars Lindstrom, a very shy man who struggles with making friends or meeting girls. Lars's brother and sister-in-law worry about him and invite him to stay with them so that they can keep an eye on him.

Lars soon finds a girlfriend, Bianca, making his family very excited, until they learn that his girlfriend is a life-size doll Lars ordered online. A psychologist recommends his family and neighbors keep up the delusion and we see everyone in town go out of their way to create this reality for Lars in which Bianca is human.

The film was very sincere. and the story was very heartfelt. It felt very homey because of the costumes and the warm lighting. The acting was really good and a big part of Ryan Gosling's character is that he's a seemingly normal man and that he doesn't think he's delusional or crazy and it's supposed to come across that his relationship with this doll is totally real.

Lola C

■

Lost in Translation (2003, dir. Sofia Coppola)

Lost in Translation follows a middle-aged Hollywood star named Bob Harris who travels to Tokyo to promote a Japanese whiskey. During his stay at a luxurious hotel, he meets Charlotte, a young woman in her 20s. Both lonely specimens in their current situation, Bob and Charlotte spark a friendship in the most unlikely of places.

There are a lot of problems with the film. *Lost in Translation* tries to convey the melancholic feeling of being alienated in a foreign country and the comfort of finding kinship in it, but instead conveys two white people sulking over each other's miserable loneliness.

The Japanese are used as a plot device in the film to motivate the two characters down a rabbit hole of loneliness where they



are forced to form a relationship. In other words, it disrespects a whole culture to have a cute, artsy, and moody movie.

The cinematography reflects this aspect of the film by using distance and barriers between the main characters and Japanese extras. Murray does a fantastic job of embodying an American movie star well out of his prime, aloof to those around him; an unlikable white guy who makes fun of the Japanese speaking broken English. In an elevator, Bob is standing near the back but sticks out like a sore thumb amongst the Japanese businessmen who are all shorter than him. This shows simplicity in the message of the shot but also emphasizes Bill Murray's performance, which is constantly irritated, lonely, and mostly despondent.

Charlotte is mostly if not always seen alone in the film curiously wandering around the Japanese countryside exploring temples and gardens. She always shows her appreciation for the culture at a distance knowing that she is simply an outsider. She is shown wearing headphones in the hotel bathtub gazing out a window that overlooks the cityscape of Tokyo.

Scarlett Johansson's Charlotte captures a lot of common feelings young women have after graduating college. An existential black hole leaves women deeply worried about their place in the world. This type of representation is what we need to see in more movies by female

directors.

The writing and dialogue of the film are very candid and convey the complex feelings the characters share about their current situations and future: Bob is in a midlife crisis, and his wife Lydia only calls him on this trip to ask about carpeting for his study back home; Charlotte is unsure of what she wants to pursue after graduating college and is worried that she's wasting her youth, and her potential to be a writer or photographer.

Both characters are in a dormant state of their lives, full of questioning and existentialism, and that mood is well achieved with the coloring of the film and how it was shot. *Lost in Translation* captures a feeling. To construct a narrative and solid storyline from that can be difficult if not thoroughly crafted.

I cannot deny that this film is relatable to people who feel like Bob or Charlotte, but the film wallows in sorrow helplessly. It's definitely the right watch if you feel like there's nothing to do about your life so you might as well mysteriously look out a window.

The film is written and written by Sofia Coppola, an iconic director for her portrayal of teenage girls; or at least the types of teenage girls she is familiar with, which are often privileged, beautiful, but troubled women. She certainly achieved conveying alienation and two lost souls finding each other in this sea of neon signs



and busy crowds. How she shot the film was brilliant and beguiling, along with the use of perspectives from a foreigner.

Even so, *Lost in Translation* is slow and pretentiously sorry for itself, and the white tone-deaf characters represent that in a way that is undeniably selfish and stereotypical.

Erinda Z

■

The Boy and the Heron (2023, dir. Hayao Miyazaki)

Following the sudden death of his mother, 12-year-old Mahito leaves Tokyo and moves in with his aunt, who is also his new stepmother. He struggles to adjust but finds comfort in the tranquil beauty of her rural estate. The appearance of a talking heron, who informs Mahito that his mother is still alive, sends him on a quest to another world.

At age 87, Hayao Miyazaki cements his legacy as one of the greatest directors with *The Boy and the Heron*. The film explores mortality through the eyes of young Mahito as he journeys through a dizzying, sprawling universe brimming with vitality and chaos. Mahito's odyssey introduces us to an eclectic assortment of otherworldly characters and communities.

Some, like the warawara—new tiny, adorable additions to the extensive Miyazaki-verse—who represent young souls soon to be born into the “real” world, are charming and thought-provoking. Others, like a fascist nation of parakeets, feel unnecessarily specific and limited in their exploration of life and the human condition. Yet, by the end of the film, each fantastical element comes together in a way that leaves viewers pondering ideas of life, mortality, humanity, artistry, and control.

In Mahito's life in the “real” world, however, Miyazaki leaves many loose ends unexplored: Mahito's character arc, and his complex relationship with his



father and aunt-turned-stepmother, are unfortunately left without conclusion.

This messy but poignant film, while not as technically masterful as other works like *Spirited Away* and *Princess Mononoke*, serves as a delightful reflection on life as Miyazaki's prolific auteur career comes to a close.

Olive E

■

Zone of Interest

(2023, dir. Jonathan Glazer)

A pointless, horrifying film that captures and achieves too much and too little at the same time, *Zone of Interest*, directed by Jonathan Glazer, follows a Nazi SS family who live adjacent to a Holocaust concentration camp.

The dad of the family, Rudolf Höss, is the commandant of Auschwitz, and he intends to keep it that way. When the threat of him being moved to a different camp is brought up by his higher-ups, the family begins to fall apart, as no one wants to leave the beautiful, lush garden of Eden that is the Höss estate.

Others might have expected this movie to be somewhat upsetting, but what I found internally after watching it was much worse. *Zone of Interest* inflicts lunacy throughout the entire movie. From the never-ending backing track of blaring screams and rampant gunfire to the intense, bass-filled moments where the theater shook with deafening white noise, the film has a lack of disturbing imagery but still inflicts through the ignorance of the characters as they choose to ignore the horrors around their perfect estate. This ignorance displayed by



the characters is distasteful towards the legacy of those killed in the Holocaust and this ignorance ends up being disturbing past the movie screen, leaving a sour feeling washing over me whenever a character groans with pique at the sight of smoke flowing through the chimney of a crematorium and dramatically flings the drapes closed.

My main gripe with *Zone of Interest* is that I don't see an active point in this movie. The overarching story of the family feels irrelevant and boring (being purposeful or not, it's not endearing in any way). With every single movie I've ever watched, a point is identifiable: a story could be endearing, the filmic quality could be banter and fun, or it could be spreading awareness or sharing an important story. *Zone of Interest* checks none of these boxes and more; the film tells a story no one should ever want to see, with bland, monotonous cinematography, writing, acting, and directing. Additionally, *Zone of Interest* spreads no awareness and gives no positive message; it rips open the still-healing wound that is the Holocaust and rubs dirt all over it, muddying and infecting that wound, which in turn reminds the world of a pain that no longer needs to be shown with this much horror and grotesqueness.

Gus PZ

■

REVIEWS, cont.

Monster

(2023, dir. Hirokazu Kore-eda)

In *Monster*, fifth-grader Minato's mother grows suspicious of his unusual behavior.

After Minato tells her that his teacher Mr. Hori is bullying him, she implores the school administration for solutions and is met with bureaucratic insensitivity.

Unexpected truths are revealed over the course of three acts, which tell the same story from the perspective of Minato's mother, Mr. Hori, and finally, Minato.

Monster is a powerful film that expertly toys with the viewer's heartstrings. The film starts slowly, and hints at sci-fi elements, but by the second act, we come to understand that *Monster* is really a tender film about loneliness and love.

Kore-eda's humanistic writing style shines particularly in the third act. Near the end of the film, one poignant scene between Minato and the school principal exemplifies the nuance that defines *Monster*: the principal, who borders on villainous earlier in the story, offers Minato advice that alters the course of the movie.

Each character, presented as one-dimensional in the first act—a conniving bureaucrat, a disturbed child, an abusive teacher—is treated with depth and nuance by the end of the film. Most impressively,



Monster manages to manipulate audience expectations without feeling solely technical—there is a clear and effective thematic purpose in each twist and turn.

By the end of the film, the audience is left with an unsettling sense of culpability for the societal expectations that are forced upon Minato.

Olive E



Training Day

(2001, dir. Antoine Fuqua)

Jake, a cop trying to enter the narcotics unit, has to go through a training day to see if he is eligible for the unit. Alonzo will be overseeing Jake on his training day, showing him the ropes.

Alonzo doesn't appear to be the standup cop you presume: not welcoming and quite disrespectful, he has a charm and charisma to him that make Jake feel slightly at ease.

During one of their first interactions of the day Alonzo rolls up on kids buying drugs, telling Jake that he has a snitch to help him. When they close in he tells Jake to not notify dispatch. As the story progresses, Alonzo commits more crimes and morally questionable acts that make Jake trust him less and less.

The narrative throughout the movie is mentioned by the characters themselves, *smiles and cries*. Whatever makes you smile or cry should continue regardless

of who is behind the action. Meaning that a citizen committing crimes should make you feel the same way if a cop has committed it. It shouldn't matter the position of power you are in, what is right is right and what is wrong is wrong. As you see the spiral and dysfunction of the narcotics unit, it locks you into the story.

This is a great action flick that could bring interest to anyone. Incredible acting from Denzel Washington and Ethan Hawke makes this a great film for anyone to watch.

Tahj G

■

Fall

(2022, dirs. Scott Mann and Jonathan Frank)

Distraught after her husband's accidental death, Becky, a climber, descends into drugs and alcohol to cope with her grief. Hoping to snap her out of her depressive life, her friend Hunter invites Becky to climb a 2000ft-tall structure—the B-67 Tower—to spread her husband's ashes. A lot of character development occurs as the women climb to the top, and the underlying issues and strengths of their friendship are portrayed. Once they reach this top, their feeling of accomplishment is short-lived when they find themselves trapped.

Released in 2022, *Fall* makes for one epic thriller. Every emotion seen and experienced in the movie has an effect on you, which makes the movie feel very realistic, despite being based on an incredibly unrealistic plot.

While watching *Fall* for the first time I struggled to sit still. I felt so connected even considering how unlikely the situation was. When rewatching the movie only a week later I still felt the same nervous fear for the characters.

The actors were able to strongly contribute, represent, and build off of the

already incredible plot and storyline. At some moments, I loved a character, and at others I hated them, which gave me a rush of emotion that is so rare that in the days after watching this movie I had to tell all my close friends and family, I couldn't stop thinking about this crazy story and adventure, I became obsessed with the facts and details of *Fall*.

With a combination of quality performances from the actors, rich plot and story, visually captivating cinematic effects, and its use of theatrical elements such as makeup, costume and sound, *Fall* quickly became an unexpected favorite movie

Zack L

■





American Fiction, 2023, dir. Cord Jefferson

Thelonious, a writer who looks down on book writers that make books reinforcing stereotypes about Black people, hears about a writer who has made an incredibly popular book based in those same black stereotypes that's winning awards everywhere, and, in a heated spurt of frustration, jokingly releases his own, similar book.

Nathaniel P

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