

Film and Television Reviews

The Incredible Turk. The Twentieth Century. Prod. Burton Benjamin. Narr. Walter Cronkite. CBS. 15 Feb. 1959. *YouTube*. Web. 15 Nov. 2012.

During the 1950's, America and Turkey, although still allies, found their relationship becoming somewhat strained. As Ali Güngör Işıklar writes in *An Analysis of Turkish American Relations: Improvement or Deterioration*, with the Lebanon crisis coming to a head in 1958, Lebanon urgently needed help, and the United States was willing to provide "rapid support from Incirlik Air Base in Turkey. Although the Democratic Party demonstrated no objection to this, it resulted in a negative perception by the Turkish public," because the Turkish authorities were only "notified" and not "consulted" (36). The Cold War started to get colder, leaving no room for underlying friction or outright hostility amongst "friends"; thus, several measures had to be taken. "The Incredible Turk," a thirty minute episode of *The Twentieth Century* (CBS), aired on 15 February 1959, and was, in a subtle way, one of those measures.

Hosted by Walter Cronkite and sponsored by The Prudential Insurance Company of America (the corporation, according to its 1959 annual report, "continued to contribute to public information and understanding" by sponsoring *The Twentieth Century*) (13), the program offers a truncated biography of Mustafa Kamal Atatürk—"The Father of the Turks." Deftly edited by Aram Boyajian, magnificently scored by Alan Hovhanness (himself Turkish), and carefully written by Lael Wertebaker, *The Incredible Turk* presents a story very much like that of Charles Foster Kane's: a grandiose public figure who embraced his burgeoning power to the point of becoming, as the film states, "adored, also respected, also hated and feared and ruthless in dealing with those who oppose him." Atatürk is portrayed as a pillar of strength and a natural-born leader, even before his tenure as Turkey's dictator (1923-1938); during World War I, he becomes recognized for his "brilliant strategy and ferocious personal leadership" which "changed the course of [...] the campaign and the war." His prowess was recognized at a time when the Turkish people were experiencing the sufferings of an Ottoman regime that kept them poor, hungry, illiterate, and unsafe; his reputation, ultimately, earned him the right to take over the country, which he achieved without much opposition and with a great deal of fanfare. According to Cronkite, this "fantastic dream [was] not of empire or conquest, but of creating a democratic Turkey, a new kind of Turk in his lifetime." The viewer learns of Atatürk's separation of church and state; his abolishment of the fez (according to the program, a symbol of Oriental "fatalism and ignorance") and preference for the bowler hat; the substitution of the Arabic language for Latin script; his compulsory schooling mandate; and, his "unveiling" of Turkish women. We are made aware of Atatürk's admiration for Western culture, industrialization, and ideals, which makes the American television viewer more comfortable with Turkey as our ally.

The Incredible Turk is filmed in a style strongly reminiscent of Frank Capra's World War II *Why We Fight* films. As Erik Barnouw writes in *Documentary: a History of the Non-Fiction Film*: "In form, the films were emotionalized history lessons-word-dominated, like many war films. The illustrative footage was largely culled from existing material, from a great variety of sources" (158). Included in these films were animated maps, a "style of commentary" that "was muscular and down-to-earth" (159), and stories that were "simplistic in interpretation" (160). *The Incredible Turk* contains all of these elements (the footage coming from The Library of the President of Turkey and photographer Julien Bryan, as stated in the acknowledgements), along with a firm belief that the Turkish population is equally as proud and patriotic as its Western allies, based on Atatürk's steady leadership; in this case, however, these elements are presented in televisual form, designed for a much larger American audience.

Nonetheless we must not overlook the program's propagandistic purposes – as, for example, at the end of the episode when we are told of the aging Atatürk's monetary generosity and his quiet lifestyle with "his six adopted daughters." We even get to see him swimming with a child (presumably one of his own), and then getting out of the water to sunbathe; he is seemingly comfortable and happy living a life of pure, well-deserved contentment until his death on November 10th, 1938, a tragic day for the weeping Turkish people. By this point, *The Incredible Turk*

sufficiently proves its thesis (that Atatürk is a natural leader, upholding Western values); however, the episode is certainly not enough to heal the Turkish-American alliance, an alliance that showed “impressive permanence and strength,” but was “vitaly affected” by “significant” and dubious “changes” during the Cold War years (Harris 3), like the secrecy associated with the ratification of the Cooperation agreement, the ineffectiveness of the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), and Turkey’s eventual decline in financial stability (Harris 68-74).

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The Incredible Turk is a 25-minute news documentary produced in 1958 by the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) as part of “Twentieth Century” series and claimed to be the first filmed biography of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. It was written by Lael Wertenbaker, a well-known journalist and writer at the time. The documentary was published on YouTube in 2011.

The program introduces the legacy of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk to an American television audience and reflects the prevailing Cold War mentality. It comes as no coincidence to find that the documentary begins with footage of a Russian soldier on the Turkish-Soviet border. In the wake of the Second World War, with the Truman Doctrine (1947) and the Marshall Plan (1948) the US government decided to back Turkey and Greece financially and militarily against Soviet expansion. Turkey’s new president, Celal Bayar, and a newly elected government led by Adnan Menderes’ Democratic Party gave up its policy of war-time neutrality and became an ambitious ally of the Western Bloc by 1950. Turkey sent soldiers to fight in the Korean War (1950-1953), and was accepted as a NATO member in 1952 with American support.

The documentary portrays Atatürk as an “Incredible Turk,” who led his country “out of the Middle Ages into the twentieth century.” It explains how the disagreements among the European powers saved the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century; the inevitable end came with the First World War, which sealed the fate of the Empire but at the same time put an unknown Ottoman Officer, Mustafa Kemal, on the spot. For the British, he was “the most terrible of the terrible Turks.” The documentary avoids contentious historical episodes like the fate of the Armenians in 1915 which poisoned the Turkish-American relations during the First World War. It is ironic that the editor of the documentary is an Armenian-American, Aram Boyajian.

The Turkish War of Independence in Anatolia, led by Mustafa Kemal at the expense of the “weak and corrupt” Ottoman Sultan in İstanbul, is presented as a war with the invading Greek armies. The 1922 great fire of Izmir (Smyrna) is described without blaming exclusively either Greeks or Turks. Interestingly, in the 1950s the US government got caught between the same two nations’ claims to Cyprus. The significance of the moral and material support by the Bolsheviks in the victory of the Kemalists is not mentioned.

The rest of the documentary concentrates on Atatürk’s efforts to modernize Turkey, which is sharply contrasted with the “archaic” Ottoman past. The secular reforms such the hat law, alphabet revolution, and equal rights to Turkish women are praised. Tractors, Sunday farms, mills, factories,

and dams, compared to “temples,” appear as symbols of economic modernization. Moreover, standing next to the American ambassador, Atatürk is seen addressing the American public.

The documentary is not without its critiques: Atatürk’s authoritarian tendencies and practices are criticized, and some details of his personal life are exposed. Yet, he is praised as a father figure leading his people to the right path.

The 1950s were the heyday of Turkish-American relations. Turkey was ruled by a stable democratic government, trying to modernize its economy to be a part of the global market, and supporting the Western coalition against communist expansion. At the end, Turkey is praised for welcoming “not only foreign products, but foreign bases and men on her soil to help defend her way of life at her NATO alliance” and for “guarding the gates to the east.” However, Turkey is warned against dependence on Western aid and problems of democracy. In fact, the Turkish army, described as “a democratic-minded member of the NATO,” would use the latter as a pretext to topple the government in May 1960.

Overall, *The Incredible Turk* is a great means to understand the American view of Turkey and of Atatürk in the context of the 1950s. Now available online, it will be an important source for the students and scholars dealing with Turkish-American relations.

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Hugo. Dir. Martin Scorsese. Perf. Ben Kingsley, Sacha Baron Cohen, Asa Butterfield. Paramount Pictures/ GK Films, 2011. Film.

When it comes to American film culture, there is no one as passionate and outspoken about its preservation amongst Hollywood celebrities than Martin Scorsese. As the founder and chair of the Film Foundation,ⁱ Scorsese tirelessly rallies other filmmakers to join the cause of protecting and preserving motion picture history. In line with his deep love of film, Scorsese’s latest multi-million dollar extravaganza *Hugo* (2011) is at heart a love letter to cinema and a plea for support in guarding our collective film heritage.

Scorsese’s much-celebrated CGI wonder tells the story of a young orphan Hugo (Asa Butterfield), who lives in and operates the clock tower of Montparnasse station in Paris. In his spare time, he works on repairing an automaton his deceased father has left him. One day he angers the station’s toy merchant, who then confiscates Hugo’s notepad containing mechanical drawings. Through a series of events, he figures out that the grumpy toy merchant is none other than the famed early film director Georges Méliès.

Along with Papa Georges’ niece Isabelle, young Hugo sets out to bring back the passion into Méliès’ life. The film is set in a fictional Paris, one that resembles a storybook version of France in the thirties instead of the reality of its time. Although the intent is to add a layer of movie magic and fantasy aesthetic to the story, the set design misses the mark many a time, and creates some confusion. For example, Papa Georges (Ben Kingsley) is a man of limited means, but lives in what looks like a mansion, rather than the modest home of a near-destitute train station employee. Starting with these kinds of mixed visual cues, Scorsese’s film is a decidedly uneven and at times frustrating film.

Among the most obvious problems in the film is the lack of dramatic unity and clear character motivation. Sacha Baron Cohen plays the un-named character of the Station Inspector in such an exaggerated manner that it renders him out of sync with the other, more “naturalistic” actors in his scenes, like Emily Mortimer, playing his love interest Lisette and Ben Kingsley playing Georges Méliès. In a nod to French cinema, Cohen’s character is modeled on the physical comedy of the famous sixties French actor/director Jacques Tati.ⁱⁱ But where Tati’s acting relied on controlled movements and smart physical precision, Cohen works mainly with his face and makes a caricature out of his character.

What the casting of Cohen attempts to do for the film is bring together the past and present of film comedy. However, requiring Cohen to embody the past does not work. His brand of comedy

relies on satire and irony whereas Tati's commentary on modern life from the standpoint of a befuddled older man uses subtle techniques.

The meeting of past and present is perhaps one of the main themes of the film. Screened nation-wide in 3D, Scorsese presents cinema's present and future through a story of its past and cinema's beginning. And here Scorsese does manage to push the medium of 3D to show off its full power with some impressive visuals. However, it also touches the nerve of the current debate on 3D: what constitutes an appropriate usage of the technology, and is it undeniably the future of cinema even if the script does not necessitate it?

For all its unevenness, in the second half, the film shifts to a worthwhile payoff that counterpoints the film's frustrating opening half. Here, Hugo turns into a masterful forty-five minute exploration of early cinema, complete with original clips, interesting facts, and beautiful re-creations. Scorsese's own passion and love translates clearly in these scenes. If nothing else, Hugo is worth watching for the power it exerts in re-creating the wonder of those early films, such as *A Train Arriving at Ciotat* (1895).

Furthermore, like the educational series *The Story of Movies*,ⁱⁱⁱ which Scorsese's Film Foundation uses as an education tool to introduce students to classic cinema and the cultural, historical and artistic significance of film, Hugo is a good primer on film history, with its focus on one of cinema's early silent masters. Using ample historically accurate information, it provides some insight into early cinema's practitioners, like Méliès, for those unfamiliar with the European roots of America's favorite contemporary form of entertainment.

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Midnight in Paris. Dir. Woody Allen. Perf. Owen Wilson, Rachel McAdams, Kathy Bates. Gravier Productions/ MediaPro, 2011. Film.

"Gertrude Stein said it was a good picture but not a great one. I said it could be a fine picture. We laughed over it. Hemingway punched me in the mouth ("Recorded Live")

In the mid-1960s, an American stand-up comedian portrayed himself as being among the Lost Generation expat writers living in Paris during the 1920s. In his account, Paris was a timeless City of Light, haunted by Hemingway, Fitzgerald and Stein, with never-ending balls and arty exchanges. The fact that comedian Woody Allen had never lived during that period probably added extra luster to his perception of Paris. Such a portrayal is nonetheless an atavistic romance: when falling in love with the past, one happily ignores the lapse of time and lets fantasy overtake reality.

Allen's fascination persists. A short routine from his stand-up years has evolved into a feature film, *Midnight in Paris* (2011). The filmmaker's craze for the city is evident in the four-minute-long opening sequence which lavishly showcases major landmarks of Paris: the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe, the banks of the Seine, to name but a few. These gorgeous images are woven together by jazz music from the 1950s, the result being an audiovisual feast. Here, we are invited to find a parallel to the monumental opening of *Manhattan* (1979) with its black-and-white shots of New York City accompanied by George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue." In both films, highly romanticized views of the cities compensate the protagonists for their current dissatisfactions with life.

Nevertheless, there are distinct differences between these opening sequences. The representation of Paris in *Midnight in Paris* is restricted to postcard images of well-known tourist attractions and fashionable quarters. We see neither street hawkers pestering sightseers nor demonstrators marching through the streets. This selectivity remains consistent throughout the film: we see the well-appointed hotel suite rather than cramped apartment rooms, and gaze upon Versailles and Claude Monet's garden in Giverny rather than witness racial violence in the suburbs. By contrast, the opening of *Manhattan* forefronts the everyday life of New Yorkers: no world-famous tourist icons

such as the Statue of Liberty and Times Square, but instead roadmen at work, garbage piled up on the street, and other not-so-glamorous views of the city. This difference suggests that the love for Paris felt by Gil (Owen Wilson), the protagonist of *Midnight in Paris*, is not rooted in any lived experience, but rather is steeped in a commercialized, tourist fantasy. Gil does not belong to Paris; he idolizes the city precisely because he is alien to it.

Similarly, the Paris of the 1920s, into which Gil slips for an unexplained reason, is depicted as an enchanting yet extremely cliché-ridden city. The writers and artists whom Gil meets during his time-travel remain one-dimensional: with the exception of the fictional heroine Adriana (Marion Cotillard), they behave and speak as if they had been cut out from *A Moveable Feast* by Hemingway or from any other memoir about 1920s Paris. The most notable example is the quirky impersonation of Salvador Dalí by Adrien Brody, whose exaggerated Spanish accent, gesticulations, and oversized ego conform to the well-known, eccentric public personality of Dalí. Adorned with the caricatures of literary and artistic celebrities, the period of the 1920s is not meant to be a realistic time, but rather a fictionalized space of nostalgia where the worn-out American yuppie from 2010 can find refuge.

However, the film exposes that such a romance with the past is nothing but an illusion. At a dance party thrown by Fitzgerald, Adriana takes Gil to a merry-go-round and passionately tells him of her love for the Belle Époque of the 1890s. There is an endlessly recessive quality to their atavistic romance, as if Gil and Adriana were on a merry-go-round, forever pursuing what is out of reach, convinced that the old days must have been better than the times they live in. So, when they travel from the 1920s to the 1890s, they artists as Paul Gauguin (Olivier Rabourdin) and Edgar Degas (François Rostain) complaining about their time and yearning for the time of the Renaissance. Gil arrives at an insight: “If you stay here though, and this becomes your present, then pretty soon you’ll start imagining another time was really [...] the golden time. Yeah, that’s what the present is. It’s a little unsatisfying because life’s a little unsatisfying.”

Since the glossy past depicted in the film is illusory, one might be tempted to interpret Gil’s time travel as a hallucination, but that is not possible. Would-be psychoanalysts are confounded by the scene where, having returned to 2010, Gil finds an old copy of Adriana’s memoir at a riverside bookstall. With the help of a museum guide (Carla Bruni) who translates for him, Gil discovers a passage about himself. It is evident that the past has been changed by Gil’s time travel, and in return the past invades the present to change Gil’s actions. The crossovers between the real and fictional worlds — or in the case of this film, between the present and the illusory past — are a theme that Allen had explored not only in such films as *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985) but also in his O. Henry Award winning short story “The Kugelmass Episode” (1977). Whether it is Gil in *Midnight in Paris* or Madame Bovary in “The Kugelmass Episode,” Allen’s characters hop across different worlds with little difficulty and bring to both worlds changes that result in comic disorder.

By having the main characters jump back and forth between multiple time periods, *Midnight in Paris* throws the audience onto a merry-go-round of chaos, enticing the viewer into falling in love with an idealized past and ending up being lost among the Lost Generation. It’s a love story, sort of.

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Ruby Sparks. Dir. Jonathan Dayton, Valerie Faris. Perf. Paul Dano, Zoe Kazan, Annette Bening. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2012. Film.

Calvin (Paul Dano) is young, wealthy, and successful. Or, at least, he has been successful. Ten years previously he had written a hit novel, which is still remembered with fondness by readers and critics alike. Today, however, is very different. Calvin is first shown in his minimalist decorated home, with white walls, and stares at an equally white page, sitting in front of an old-fashion typing machine. Like many others before him, and like French poet Mallarmé has brilliantly visualized, Calvin is afraid of the proverbial blank page.

Distraught he goes to a psychologist, who advises him to start writing something simple. Has Calvin met anyone recently? Maybe this person has paid a compliment to his dog? That night, Calvin dreams of a beautiful girl, who seems to like Scottie (the dog), and does not mind having a chat with his owner, either. Night after night, Calvin dreams of this girl (Zoe Kazan), and during the day, he writes about her. He gives her a name, Ruby, and makes up a story about her, about her tastes, her moods, until one morning she is standing in the kitchen, making breakfast.

Terrified, Calvin hides in his room, hoping that she will have disappeared once he comes out. But Ruby is still there, and hiding under a table will not make her go away. Paul Dano's expressivity and body language during this scene is very effective, and by this point the audience is convinced that the girl is a figment of his imagination. One day, Calvin sneaks out of the house, and, in search of some normality, has a date with a fan in a café; yet Ruby finds him. Calvin's demeanor tells us that he is afraid that his 'problem' may be discovered. However, to Calvin and the audience's surprise, the girl in the café can see Ruby as well. She is real, and she is here to stay.

The meeting between an author and his creation is not a new idea. To give a few examples, at the beginning of the 19th century it was skillfully portrayed by Italian dramatist Luigi Pirandello in *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1922); in a special episode of British television series of *Red Dwarf* (1988 – 2012), the crew of the titular spaceship find out that they are nothing more than, well, characters in a television series, and trace their creator begging him not to end the show. In the film *Stranger than Fiction* (2006), Emma Thompson plays a writer that has decided to kill off her main character, only for the character to unexpectedly find out and rebel against. Ruby Sparks manages to give a new lease of life to an old idea.

It is the second feature-length film directed by husband and wife Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris after the very successful *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), also starring Paul Dano. Like their previous feature this is a comedy, but, unlike *Miss Sunshine*, the film has some dark moments. Calvin realizes soon that he has total control over Ruby; he can make her do whatever he wants. After the few instances where he uses his power for fun, Calvin decides to stop writing the novel. Ruby is free to express herself as she pleases, to do what she wants.

However Calvin and Ruby's relationship turns sour. Ruby is confined at home, and the couple does not have a social life. Ruby's only friends are Calvin's mother Gertrude (Annette Bening) and stepfather Mort (a very amusing Antonio Banderas), who lead a hippy-style life in the Californian countryside. The scenes set in Calvin's parents alternative home are very witty and provide some of the most light-hearted moments in the film, thanks to very entertaining performances by Bening and Banderas, who puts on a full Spanish accent.

Back home, Ruby is increasingly unhappy, and decides to spend one night per week in her apartment. Calvin does not like the arrangement, and goes back to his book; he will make her homesick. As a result, Ruby develops an unhealthy attachment to Calvin, who once more intervenes; he will let her freely express her feelings. Free from her creator's intervention, Ruby becomes too independent for Calvin's liking, and, in the darkest moment of the feature, Calvin uses all his power. At first, he prevents Ruby from leaving his study, then he makes her speak French, and finally he makes her incessantly proclaim, while dancing, that he is a genius.

Ruby is played by the granddaughter of the late director Elia Kazan, Zoe, who is also the author of the script. As film critic Mark Kermode has recently pointed out, this fact provides an extra layer of complexity to the film ("Mark Kermode and Simon Mayo Film Reviews.") Usually a film should be watched without preconceptions, "but in the case of Ruby Sparks, the fact that it is written by its lead actress is central to the enjoyment of the film" ("Film Reviews.") Kazan's performance is very refreshing, and she successfully gives life, on the screen as well as on the page, to a fictional character that has, effectively, two authors.

In *Ruby Sparks*, Dano delivers his best and more all-round performance to date. The actor had shown his darker side in his double role in *There Will be Blood* (2007), while his latest appearance in *Looper* (2012) was little more than a cameo. Dano had already shown some promise as a younger actor in *Little Miss Sunshine*, where he played the (rather clichéd) part of a rebellious teenager (still managing to deliver the best line, or rather, word, of the whole film). In *Ruby Sparks*, Dano's performance is mature and witty and, without necessarily making the audience to identify with his character, he brings the spectator to his side. The only downside is his rather young appearance, and he is not entirely believable as a character whose previous success is already ten years old.

Ruby Sparks is a very enjoyable film that captures attention from the beginning and is able to keep it till the end.

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The Hunger Games. Dir. Gary Ross. Perf. Jennifer Lawrence, Josh Hutcherson. Lionsgate, 2012. Film.

Since Huxley's *Brave New World*, dystopia has been developed as a genre that, as utopia, focuses on the future. But instead of the utopian dream to be realized, dystopias show a nightmare marked, in general, by a post-apocalyptic scenario in which the suppression of freedoms, the numbness of the masses and the use of force by the established political regime are the order of the day.

The Hunger Games is part of this tradition and seeks in our reality the origins of a bleak future, inviting us to a reflection on the present. Brought to the screen in 2012 by director Gary Ross, Suzanne Collins's story appeals to the empathy of viewers immersed in the modern entertainment world. Situated in an undetermined point in the future, after wars and natural disasters that led almost to the extinction of the human race, Panem, the scenario of this saga, is what remains of North America. Its founding myth is closely linked to US history: whereas the latter was formed from 13 colonies, Panem was formed of 13 districts. From the original districts, only 12 remain. The 13th was obliterated by the Capitol, Panem's seat of power, during the civil war which nearly destroyed the nation and became known as "The Black Days." And if the allegory of the 13 colonies works as a starting point for this nation building, "The Black Days" constitute the justification for the social order and, alongside the thirteen districts, the founding myth for the new era of Panem: the crushed rebellion against the Capitol must be kept alive in memories to never happen again.

It is by controlling the means of production, the fear, the terror, the police and propaganda that President Snow (Donald Sutherland), the ruler of Panem, can perpetuate his control over areas essential to the survival of the social order. But not only through these clearly coercive practices. The very name of the nation reveals the author's inspiration: *Panem et circenses*, bread and circuses, the Ancient Roman policy to entertain the masses and keep them busy – and alienated. The Hunger Games are the main event of this circus: each district must annually provide a boy and a girl as a symbol of its submission in order to appease the capital's rage.

These elements, coupled with the passivity of the citizens of Panem until the 74th Games, carry an atmosphere very similar to the one portrayed by Hannah Arendt, the German American political theorist, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). The Capitol is the center of a totalitarian government that, in its onion-shaped structure pointed by the German philosopher, has more influence

over the districts that are closer: districts 1, 2 and 4 do not just suffer the oppression on a smaller scale, but also absorb the logic created and dedicate themselves to preparing the next champions of the games. District 12, the coal supplier, is on the outskirts of Panem: it is the farthest district, and one of the poorest. Its electric fences are no longer on, which allows the protagonist, Katniss (Jennifer Lawrence), to hunt and feed her family, while the peacekeepers turn a blind eye to the black market.

The inhabitants of the districts are distinctly different from those of the capital, even in their appearance and manners. They are not exactly seen as the same human species. Before the public presentation, the teenagers “reaped” for the games need to be bathed and scrubbed to be “presentable.” But this is only part of the show: the dehumanization starts over again when the games begin and 24 children start killing one another, until the last one remains. The citizens of Panem not only watch the games; several of them, notably the ones from the Capitol (which does not send their children to the games), eagerly wait for the high point of the annual calendar. We watch the pure implementation of the concept of *Schadenfreude*, developed by Schopenhauer and Kant to express pleasure in seeing others suffer.

And *Schadenfreude* is the right word to explain the furor surrounding the event. The film criticizes the futile Capitol citizens who enjoy the barbarism of the games: they cheer for their favorites, complain when a day ends with no deaths, like the bloody deaths better than deaths from exposure or hunger, and yearn for the final strike. But this criticism can also be extended to us, enjoying a movie depicting such an alienated society. In our age, where celebrities have their daily lapses exposed on websites and in newspapers, in an era of reality shows, insensitivity seems to be the normal state.

In Panem, the offering of tributes to the Hunger Games is a ritual sacrifice for peacekeeping. The logic of fear persists as, even in greater number, districts do not rise up against the capital. In these circumstances, Katniss turns into a new Theseus, fighting a monster whose sphere of action goes far beyond a maze. Her sacrifice is magnified by the characteristics of the heroine: it is not the desire to achieve fame or to inspire a riot that drives her, but her protective character. Katniss is driven by the instinct to protect those she loves, or those who find themselves in an unfair position, such as Rue (Amandla Stenberg) and Peeta (Josh Hutcherson). When Katniss takes her sister Prim's place in the “Reaping” or when she is willing to die instead of killing Peeta (even though she thinks there are good chances of the organizers sparing them), it is her self-sacrifice that provokes the empathy of viewers.

In Panem, an Orwellian version of the future, technological domination is essential to maintain the social order. Consequently, the development of mass media reaches unprecedented proportions: the death is taken as a sport and the masses are immersed in entertainment. With a totalitarian structure working for the alienation, *The Hunger Games* can be seen as 1984 in the age of reality shows.

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The Perks of Being a Wallflower. Dir. Stephen Chbosky. Perf. Logan Lerman, Emma Watson. Summit Entertainment, 2012. Film.

The Perks of Being a Wallflower treads some pretty well worn coming-of-age paths but manages to do so in a riveting and heartfelt manner. The film has the unusual distinction of being written for the screen and directed by the author of the novel on which it is based, Stephen Chbosky. The story is clearly close to Chbosky and he, along with a superb cast, handles the themes with great honesty and respect, never letting melodrama or over sentimentality creep in.

The film centers on Charlie (Logan Lerman), a painfully introverted budding novelist growing up in early '90s Pittsburgh. He has difficulty making the transition into high school and makes no friends. That is, of course, until he is taken under the wing of a bunch of energetic and lovable misfits, including Sam (Emma Watson) and her openly gay step-brother Patrick (Ezra Miller), who drag Charlie into life with their appetite for the world. Along the way Charlie learns how to belong, discovers sex and eventually finds love. So far so clichéd and, along with many other coming of age stories, the film can occasionally seem intent on playing out the wish-fulfillment fantasies of the introverted young writer. Chbosky, however, makes the narrative fresh by never looking down on the material and also by focusing on the psychology that underpins every character's actions in aching emotional honesty. Every character struggles to find a way of dealing with the cruel realities of clique mentality both in high school and in the world at large. As the film goes on we begin to discover and sort through the immense emotional baggage of the characters and rarely are we given simple solutions to eradicate the memory of past traumas. The film does not believe that simply "talking about it" will ease the pain of traumatic memories. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, however, keeps up an almost relentless positivity in spite of the darkness at the core of its tale. It is entirely uncynical, perhaps to the point of being naïve, but with such breathless commitment from the cast it is difficult not to be attracted to it.

Emma Watson's entirely plausible American accent is the least of her achievements in the film. Watson's Sam is infectiously lively, engaging and welcoming. It is clear why she has such an impact on Charlie. She embodies the spirit of a young girl who thinks she's more experienced than she is and, although Sam has been through a lot, her wide-eyed disbelief when she sees the real-world reactions to her step-brother's sexuality betrays her. Ezra Miller's portrayal of Patrick is similarly pitch-perfect, resisting all temptation to caricature the character's sexuality and injecting a dose of humor into the film as an intriguing and likable foil for Charlie – light years away from Miller's turn in Lynne Ramsay's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011). Lastly of our main trio, Logan Lerman as Charlie is a magnetic presence in the film, almost ironic as he portrays the wallflower of the film's title. His awkwardness never comes across as forced and in the rare occasions where Charlie lets loose his emotions they seem to pour from Lerman, and we cannot help becoming caught up in his crisis. Paul Rudd delivers a solid performance as Charlie's supportive English teacher and we even get a welcome cameo from Joan Cusack at exactly the point in the film where we need her quiet warmth and soft-smiling energy.

I have only a few minor issues with *Perks*. I had a slight hesitation in buying into the presentation of Patrick and Sam as relatively unpopular oddballs. After all, they are funny, smart, and not so straight-laced that they won't get drunk or high once in a while. They are also good looking – not just easy on the eye but spectacularly attractive. It is hard to believe that this would not affect their social standing in an American high school. I do understand that Patrick's being openly gay might be ostracizing in Pittsburgh in the early 1990s, but this does not explain Sam's unpopularity. When one of the driving factors of the film is the eminent likeability of these two overtly attractive characters, it is difficult to understand why they belong to the misfit tribe. Another issue is that the film never seems to acknowledge that the group the central characters create for themselves is just as much of a clique as the jocks and the bullies which the film is so understandably critical of. I know it is better to be part of a group that does not hurt and humiliate others, but at certain points in the film the group of misfits themselves seems uncomfortably exclusionary.

I had a more major issue with the movie's apparent message that introversion must be attributed to a deep-rooted psychological scar from one's past. That introversion can only be understood as a kind of post-traumatic symptom. I realize that every character in the movie has a scar of this sort, but Charlie's are far more numerous and severe. They are also presented much more as the root of all of his social problems. I am almost certain this was not the intended message, but at points the film seems to say: "You can be introverted only if there is something seriously wrong with you." It seems unable to believe that some people are simply quieter than others.

Taking the bad with the good though, the film's main message is that everyone, in their own way, has a rough time in life, but good friends can help you get through the darkest moments. It is a simple statement and one that we have heard from this genre before, but when it is as touching and well put together as *Perks* I do not think we mind being reminded one more time.

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ⁱ See the foundation's website at www.film-foundation.org.

ⁱⁱ See Tati's Monsieur Hulot series, including *Traffic* (1971), *Playtime* (1967) and *Mon Oncle* (1958).

ⁱⁱⁱ Scorsese's film *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese through American Movies* (1995) is part of this series and explores the history and themes of American cinema from the beginning of cinema, including the work of D.W.Griffith, to 1969, the year Scorsese himself began his career as a director and thus he chose not to comment on himself nor his contemporaries.