

THE MOTION PICTURE GUIDE



1996 ANNUAL (THE FILMS OF 1995)

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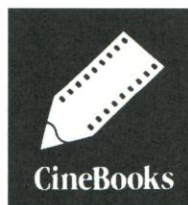
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Todd Haynes, whose chilling satire of recovery culture, *Safe*, was inspired by disease-of-the-week telefilms like *The Boy in the Plastic Bubble*. The story of a woman who becomes allergic to life itself, *Safe* brilliantly politicized the personal, rendering a miniature portrait of a society in crisis that was far more persuasive than many avowedly “political” films—e.g., the ambitious, wildly flawed *Strange Days* or the ploddingly liberal *Dead Man Walking*.

Of course, viewers with a taste for political cinema have long since learned not to expect much from Hollywood; in 1995, as usual, they were far better served by foreign-language films. Milcho Manchevski’s *Before the Rain*, billed as the first feature made in Macedonia, was a glossy, mystical, ultimately pessimistic take on the worldwide ripples caused by Balkan genocide. Less elliptical but even more haunting was Gianni Amelio’s *Lamerica*, a sprawling, passionately realized canvas of Albania in the wake of Communist collapse and capitalist “reform.” Even André Téchiné’s exquisite coming-of-age story, *Wild Reeds*, was not the nostalgic reverie many viewers anticipated. This small-scale melodrama, set in the France of 1962, was chiefly concerned with charting the effects of extraordinary events—foreign wars, imperialist adventures, ideological crises—on ordinary lives.

To many, discovering the extraordinary essence of ordinary things—seeing the world in a grain of sand, as Blake famously put it—is still the hallmark, and indeed the very purpose, of artistic endeavor. If this sort of insight was getting hard to find on US screens in 1995, it would have been much rarer but for the nationwide rerelease of nine of Satyajit Ray’s finest films. This, perhaps, was the year’s most important cinematic event. To a generation of movie-lovers who discovered *Pather Panchali*, *Charulata*, and *The Music Room* for the first time, the Ray series was stark testimony to the revelatory potential and sheer sensual beauty of cinema at its best—quite literally, though in a very different sense, the kind of movies they don’t make anymore.

Jacob Levich
New York City
May 1996

BEFORE THE RAIN

SUNRISE feels like an American Eric Rohmer movie (imagine both the best and the worst that implies), defined by intimate yet heated conversations about life, art, love, religion, sex and politics.

BEFORE SUNRISE leans heavily on the appeal of its leads, who are in virtually every shot and helped develop the dialogue during the improvisational rehearsal period. Ethan Hawke rises to the occasion, delivering a relaxed, engaging performance as Jesse. Julie Delpy (of KILLING ZOE and THREE COLORS: WHITE) is a revelation as Celine. She even devised one of the film's best scenes: while sitting in a bar, Celine and Jesse talk about each other in imaginary phone calls to their best friends. Another charming scene is set in a record shop, where Jesse and Celine try to look at each other without being caught.

The film's only real flaw is its failure to address the viewer's nagging feeling that in real life, the sweetly grave Celine would quickly tire of the rather callow Jesse, whose immaturity shows in his angry reaction to the fortune teller's comments, cheery recounting of a friend's cruel practical joke on a homeless man and various other telling scenes. Still, it's encouraging to see a major Hollywood studio—Columbia Pictures—release a film that allows these characters to take center stage and keep it. (*Sexual situations, profanity.*) — E.M.

d, Richard Linklater; p, Anne Walker-McBay; exec p, John Sloss; assoc p, Gregory Jacobs; co-p, Ellen Winn Wendl, Gernot Schaffler, Wolfgang Ramml; w, Richard Linklater, Kim Krizan; ph, Lee Daniel; ed, Sandra Adair; prod d, Florian Reichmann; sound, Thomas Szabolcs (mixer); casting, Judy Henderson, Alycia Aumuller; cos, Florentina Welley; makeup, Karen Dunst

Romance/Comedy/Drama

(PR: C MPAA: R)

BEFORE THE RAIN

★★★★

(Macedonia/U.K./France) 115m Vardar Film; Aim Productions; Noe Productions ~ Gramercy c (PO DEZJU)

Katrin Cartlidge (*Anne*); Rade Serbedzija (*Aleksandar*); Gregoire Colin (*Kiril*); Labina Mitevska (*Zamira*); Jay Villiers (*Nick*); Silvija Stojanovska (*Hana*); Phyllida Law (*Anne's Mother*); Josif Josifovski (*Father Marko*); Boris Delcevski (*Petre*); Dejan Velkov (*Mate*); Kiril Ristoski (*Father Danijan*); Mladen Krstevski (*Trifun*); Dzemail Maksut (*Kuzman*); Milica Stojanova (*Aunt Cveta*); Mile Jovanovski (*Priest Singing at Funeral*); Petar Mircevski (*Zdrave*); Ljupco Bresliski (*Mitre*); Igor Madzirov (*Stojan*); Metodi Psaltirov (*Tome*); Ilko Stefanovski (*Bojan*); Blagoja Spirkovski-Dzumerko (*Gang Leader*); Sando Monev (*Blagoj*); Suzana Kirandziska (*Neda*); Katerina Kocavska (*Kate*); Vladimir Endrovski (*Traje*); Abdurahman Salja (*Zekir*); Vladimir Jacev (*Alija*); Arben Kastrati (*Ramiz*); Danny Newman (*Ian*); Gabrielle Hamilton (*Woman in Cab*); Moni Damevski (*George*); Ljupco Todorovski (*Kizo*); Peter Needham (*Maitre d'*); Melissa Wilkes (*Retarded Child*); Joe Gould (*Redhead Waiter*); Rod Woodruff (*Waiter in Fight*); Aleksander Mikic (*Atanas*); Meto Jovanovski (*Dr. Saso*); Cvetko Mareski (*Boy with Gun*); Goran (*Goran*); Nino Levi (*Mailman*); Lence Delova; Jordan Vitanov (*Policeman*)

The first film made in the newly declared republic of Macedonia (part of the former Yugoslavia), BEFORE THE RAIN won the Golden Lion (Best Picture) award at the 1994 Venice Film Festival and was nominated for that year's best foreign-language film Oscar. Released theatrically in the US in 1995, it enjoyed wide critical acclaim and was sometimes compared to another Oscar nominee, PULP FICTION, which employed a similarly unconventional structure.

BEFORE THE RAIN focuses on the volatile political climate in the Balkan states, particularly Macedonia, where tense relations between Orthodox Macedonians and Albanian Moslems threaten to erupt into civil war. At the time of the film's release, Macedonia remained peaceful. BEFORE THE RAIN is not a documentary, but an impassioned outcry for peace. Through this grim picture of his homeland's present and possible future, Macedonian screenwriter/director Milcho Manchevski sends a powerful message to both sides in the crisis.

Manchevski tells his story in three parts, each focusing on an individual facing a life-altering decision. "Words" is set in a Macedonian monastery, where Kiril (Gregoire Colin), a young monk, has taken a vow of silence. Returning to his cell one evening, he discovers that a frightened Albanian girl, Zamira (Labina Mitevska), has taken refuge there. Though his first instinct is to turn her in, Kiril is drawn to the girl and shelters her. The monastery is soon searched by gunmen who claim that Zamira killed their brother. Kiril escapes with Zamira, but the young couple is soon intercepted by Zamira's family. Her brother shoots and kills Zamira to prevent her from running off with a Christian.

The second tale, "Faces," is set in London. Photo editor Anne (Katrin Cartlidge) discovers she is pregnant. The baby's father is not her staid husband, Nick (Jay Villiers), but her glamorous lover, Aleksandar (Rade Serbedzija), a war photographer. Aleksandar wants her to return with him to his homeland of Macedonia, but she refuses due to the region's instability. Over dinner at a restaurant, Anne tells her husband she wants a divorce. Moments later, an argument between a patron and a waiter escalates into a shooting spree, and Nick is killed.

"Pictures" finds Aleksandar returning to Macedonia alone. In the sixteen years since his last visit, his village has changed radically. Religious and ethnic hatred have torn neighbor from neighbor. Aleksandar's childhood sweetheart, Hana (Silvija Stojanovska), is now considered an enemy because she is Albanian. Nonetheless, she turns to Aleksandar for help when her daughter Zamira is accused of killing Aleksandar's cousin. As his relatives take up arms to seek revenge, Aleksandar helps Zamira escape. Aleksandar is shot and killed by his cousins, as Zamira flees in the direction of a monastery.

BEFORE THE RAIN was filmed entirely on location in Macedonia and London, using a multi-national cast and crew. Two-thirds of the dialogue is Macedonian, with the London segment spoken in English. The trio of leads give compelling performances. Though Serbedzija has the meatiest role, Colin's wide-eyed monk makes the most indelible impression. Kiril is horrified when confronted with the violence that exists outside of the sanctuary of his monastery, and it is through his unusually expressive eyes that we see the pain of war's victims.

Comparisons to the blockbuster PULP FICTION bolstered BEFORE THE RAIN's box office draw. Though the two films are completely divergent in theme and subject matter, both tell their stories out of chronological order. The circular structure of BEFORE THE RAIN adds to its impact. Near the end of the third segment, the viewer realizes that the three seemingly separate stories are interconnected, and that events are racing toward an inevitable, tragic conclusion.

Technically superior in every department, BEFORE THE RAIN features achingly beautiful Macedonian landscapes, lovingly exploited by cinematographer Manuel Teran. The visually stunning, vibrantly colorful Macedonian segments stand in stark contrast to the harsh, gray London settings. This disparity reiterates one of the film's messages: war in one region affects another, no matter how far removed geographically or culturally. (*Violence, nudity, sexual situations, adult situations, profanity.*) — B.R.

d, Milcho Manchevski; p, Judy Coughlin, Cedimir Kolar, Sam Taylor, Cat Villiers; assoc p, Sheila Fraser Milne, David Redman; co-p, Frederique Dumas-Zajdela, Marc Baschet, Gorjan Tozija; w, Milcho Manchevski; ph, Manuel Teran; ed, Nicolas Gaster; m, Anastasia; prod d, Sharon Lamofsky, David Munns; sound, Aidan Hobbs (recording); fx, Valentin Lozey, John Fontana, Vasil Dikov; casting, Moni Damevski, Liora Reich; cos, Caroline Harris, Sue Yelland; makeup, Morag Ross, Joan Hills; stunts, Parvan Parvov, Rob Woodruff

Drama/War/Political

(PR: C MPAA: NR)

BETRAYAL

★★½

(Sweden/U.K./Denmark) 58m Charon Film; Channel Four; Swedish Film Institute; National Film Board of Denmark; Nordic Film & TV Fund ~ SVT International c (FORRADERI)

Sascha Anderson; Bjorn Cederberg (*Interviewer*); John Hurt (*Narrator*)

BETRAYAL tells an interesting and disturbing story of an East German artist who appears to have been a spy for the former Communist government. While this documentary is unpersuasive as an investigation, it touches on some of the larger issues related to East German history.

Secret government files have been made public to the unified Germany of the early 1990s. Bjorn Cederberg, a Swedish reporter, travels to Germany to meet with Sascha Anderson, a dissident artist accused of being an informer for Stasi, the East German secret police. Anderson denies the charges against him in a series of interviews with Cederberg, but the reporter also meets with many of Anderson's former colleagues, his ex-wife, and a former girlfriend, who confronts Anderson during a luncheon set up by Cederberg. Despite the evidence against him, Anderson remains an elusive character. Cederberg travels back to Sweden feeling he has not been told the whole story.

The research presented to the viewer regarding Anderson's alleged guilt is disturbingly scanty: one former colleague views the now-public Stasi files, but the audience never gets to see them. Thus the filmmakers leave themselves wide open to the charge that they, like the Stasi, are only too eager to substitute innuendo for truth when it suits them. BETRAYAL is better when it deals with larger themes; e.g., the complicity of others (especially the government) in Anderson's crime, or the historical oppression in Germany that set the stage for many betrayals.

The mostly unseen reporter investigating the mysterious figure is a trope borrowed from CITIZEN KANE, and it works well in the context of this film (the Stasi archive even resembles the Kane mansion). Krusenstjerna and Cederberg also evoke Orson Welles's last completed project, F FOR FAKE, by showing the lengths to which, it seems, Anderson has gone to cover up and lie about his crimes. Shots of an idyllic-looking modern-day Germany are inserted between the interviews, presenting an unsettling contrast between the place and the people. Also, a haunting musical theme is used sparingly but to good effect. The film illuminates an important piece of history with an artistic and political awareness that the subject demands. — E.M.

d, Fredrik von Krusenstjerna, Bjorn Cederberg; p, Fredrick von Krusenstjerna; ph, Jan Roed; ed, Niels Pagh Andersen

Documentary

(PR: A MPAA: NR)

BETTER OFF DEAD

★★½

(U.S.) 91m Heller/Steinem Productions; Lifetime Television; Viacom Productions ~ Turner Home Entertainment c

Mare Winningham (*Katherine "Kit" Kellner*); Tyra Ferrell (*Cutter Dubuque*); Kevin Tighe (*John Byron*); Don Harvey (*Del Collins*); Reed McCant (*Sam*); Marilyn Coleman (*Rene Dubuque*); Michael MacRae (*Frank Kellner*); Robert Nadir (*Davis*); Jan D'Arcy (*Kit's Mother*); Peter Lohnes (*Andy Riley*); Claire Brown (*Jean Kellner*); William Earl Ray, I (*Jack Rollins*); Diane Caldwell (*Judge Judith Brooks*); Tom Spiller (*Val*); Krisha Fairchild (*Lurline*); Landon Wine (*Victor Marquez*); Victor Morris (*Nathan Webster*); Bonnie Banks (*Nancy*); Moultrie Patten (*Judge Peter Lindsey*); Don Hohenstein (*Ben*); Brynna Jourden (*Young Kit*); David MacIntyre (*Warden*); Ryan Van Arnam (*Roy*); Robert James White (*Dave*); Stephen West (*Governor's Servant*); Ruth Walsh (*Reporter #1*); Drake Collier (*Reporter #2*); Don Creery (*Prison Guard #1*); Randall Lee Kenyon (*Prison Guard #2*); Allan Barlow (*Gas Chamber Guard*)

Originally produced by feminist figurehead Gloria Steinem for the Lifetime Cable TV network in 1993, this powerful 1995 home video release delivers on the considerable dramatic challenge of matching up to a legacy of bigscreen death-penalty dramas from 1958's I WANT TO LIVE! to 1995's DEAD MAN WALKING.

After her boyfriend is shot by a cop they were trying to hustle, Kit Kellner (Mare Winningham) returns fire and kills the officer. Assistant D.A. Cutter Dubuque (Tyra Ferrell) prosecutes the case against the girl, who displays no remorse, and argues that Kit is beyond rehabilitation. The sentence: death by asphyxiation. Seven years later she's still on death row. Cutter, who resigned as District Attorney, comes to realize that she was driven by ambition rather than justice in her prosecution. She takes Kit's appeal, but finds that the plaintiff wants to be executed. Cutter probes Kit's nightmare upbringing and begins to believe she doesn't belong in prison. But Kit is now pregnant from an affair with guard Andy (Peter Lohnes). She wants an abortion, but the state refuses her the right. Cutter petitions the courts and wins—but by that point Kit has decided to marry Andy and keep the baby. A new family and support system changes Kit's outlook on life, but the Supreme Court rejects her appeal, and the governor refuses to hear Cutter's impassioned pleas. Kit is executed.

BETTER OFF DEAD is jam-packed with issues—capital punishment, abortion, racism in the courts, politics versus justice—and amazingly, none of them gets short shrift. Marlane X. Meyer's script is taut and unpredictable, while director Neema Barnett keeps the energy high and elicits strong performances all around. Winningham is sensational as she transforms an initially hateful character into a sympathetic one, endowing Kit with strength and dignity, yet never inviting pity, even when being led to the gas chamber. Ferrell is her equal as the conflicted attorney, and the supporting cast members provide excellent backup. (*Violence, adult situations, profanity*) — B.R.

d, M. Neema Barnett; p, Rosilyn Heller; exec p, Rosilyn Heller, Gloria Steinem; co-p, Randy C. Baer, Grazia Caroselli; w, Marlane X. Meyer (from a story by Randy C. Baer); ph, Ueli Steiger; ed, David Beatty; m, John Barnes; prod d, Keith Burns; set d, Rondi Tucker; sound, Robert Anderson, Jr. (mixer); casting, Beth Klein; cos, Carol Oditz; makeup, Gigi Williams

Prison/Drama

(PR: O MPAA: NR)

BEYOND RANGOON

★★★

(U.S.) 99m Castle Rock; Pleskow/Spikings Productions ~ Columbia c

Patricia Arquette (*Laura Bowman*); U Aung Ko (*U Aung Ko*); Frances McDormand (*Andy*); Spalding Gray (*Jeremy Watt*); Tiara Jacquelina (*Desk Clerk*); Kuswadinath Bujang (*Colonel*); Vicor Slezak (*Mr. Scott*); Jit Murad (*Sein Htoo*); Ye Myint (*Zaw*)