

## **The Lie and How to See It**

On Despair, Hate, and Hope in Contemporary Film

An Analysis in 10 Parts

[by Nathan Vass]

### **1. Oh, Those Oscars**

When did the Oscars become the Grammys?

I don't mean, when did they lose relevance in identifying the actual best films of the year. That's always been the case. Everyone knows *Citizen Kane*, which lost Best Picture in 1941, is a better movie than *How Green Was My Valley*. Or that *Rocky*, the big winner in 1976, is easily the blandest, least artistically compelling of the five films nominated that year for Picture. Or that Charlie Chaplin, Alfred Hitchcock and Stanley Kubrick are probably good enough to have won something, *anything*, at least once.

We know of these egregious errors, but we take them in stride. Blows like this are easy to throw, and we thank the Academy for generally rounding up an admirable crop of pictures each year. If every year you watch everything that gets nominated, as I do, you'll find yourself taking in a pretty good selection.

If you want the really trailblazing stuff, however, you'll need to go elsewhere. Try the Cannes fest [nominees](#) and [winners](#). Or [Berlin](#). These are the things you show people when they tell you modern film isn't creative anymore: *The Square* ([trailer](#)), or *Winter Sleep* ([trailer](#)), or *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* ([trailer](#)). For an in-between, look up [Venice](#), Telluride and Toronto, which have become the de facto Oscar season launching pads and often contain pictures in addition to the final nominees that were too creative, too challenging, or too, well, *foreign*, for the Academy's tastes. If *Roma* ([trailer](#)) wins

Best Picture, it'll be the first foreign film in history to do so. These festivals got over that hurdle a long time ago.

## 2. What We Do Like About the Oscars

But I bet you knew that already, more or less. You know what you're getting into with a list of Oscar nominees: above average quality, by and large. Often great quality. At worst you'll have a few too many actor-centric pieces (the Academy is mostly comprised of actors) that lean too heavily on script and performances for quality, rather than more cinematic means: directing, editing, cinematography.

Like *The Queen*. Or *A Beautiful Mind*. *The King's Speech*.

But rubbing shoulders alongside, you'll also find genuine masterpieces. *There Will Be Blood* ([trailer](#)). *Birdman* ([teaser](#)). *Tree of Life* ([trailer](#)). *The Social Network* ([trailer](#)). Uncompromising films of undeniable talent, with a singular authorial voice untainted by the studio system and often not made within it. In so many words, you could expect quite a few of the year's actual best films to show up.

You don't do that at [the Grammys](#). You and I know the Grammys are [a joke](#) for [a myriad reasons](#), not least of which being that they depressingly only focus on pop music, while somehow managing to ignore most any refreshing, forward-thinking or otherwise creative trends in... pop music.

## 3. Films in the Age of Extremism

This is the first time in recent history where I feel the [Oscar nominations](#) do the same. I don't expect hidden gems, [personal favorites](#) or cutting-edge works to dominate the list, but they're absent here in a way I find unique, and instructive.

Calendar year 2018 was a curious one for the movies. Films have always lagged behind popular culture by a year or two because of how long they take to make. They can instigate cultural trends, but they take a while to catch up with existing ones. This is the first year in which most of what we are seeing was greenlit for production *after* the 2016 election. How has cinema, both domestic and international, responded to the global push toward prejudice and nationalism?

Films this past year, both popular and highbrow, together fell, with a few exceptions, into one of two categories:

- 1) Totally Escapist, or
- 2) Everything Sucks.

Neither of those do much for me.

## 4. "Totally Escapist"

*Black Panther* ([trailer](#)), an example of the former, revels in its well-meaning bombast as it skirts our country's legacy and silence on its past. It ignores the complicated push toward isolationist thought propelling the aforementioned nationalism, sidestepping the strands informing that trend, such as the reactive nature of the 2016 election to the Obama years, the immigration crisis in Europe, and our peaking

wealth disparity. The US's complex relationship with the atrocity of slavery is collapsed into a few lines from the villain. *Black Panther* reflects current concerns without actually dealing with them.

And more power to it, I say. It bears no mark of having such intentions, so I will not take it to task accordingly; but nor will I pretend, because of its very refreshing casting and much-needed normalizing of positive role models of color, that it is something more than what it is: a children's movie.

Like many of this year's many superhero movies, it is loud, colorful, and dumb, designed for the little(r) ones. It restates plot points, names and themes, just in case you forgot something you saw fifteen minutes ago, or weren't paying attention. And it has all the problem-solving diplomacy of a primary-school playground, where the noble intentions of its characters are realized, disappointingly, through numbingly staged scenes of computer-enhanced violence.

It shares these elements with most every superhero picture of late, and though it is by far the best Marvel movie yet, it is best appreciated as what it is, and not more. It is admirable; it is diverting; it is a culturally essential milestone of casting inclusion and in that regard an important event; but it is not art. It's entertainment.

## 5. "Everything Sucks"

*The Favourite* ([trailer](#)), *Cold War* ([trailer](#)), *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* (to name three nominated films), *Zama* ([trailer](#)), and *Happy as Lazzaro* (to name two that aren't) all aspire to be capital A art. These 2018 dramas about human nature and humanity at large hail from around the world, are all spectacularly well directed, extremely well reviewed, and feature prominently in this year's Oscar lineup.

These pictures fall into the Everything Sucks category.

Narratives differ from life in having predefined end points, and it is from where narratives choose to end that they derive much of their meaning. In order to discuss how the films achieve their conclusions of hopelessness, I need to briefly discuss what those endings are. I won't name which film is which, but as regards the five films above, **spoilers follow**.

1. Two underlings to a Queen torture each other with psychological mind games, each intent on destroying the other's chances at gaining the Queen's affections; we end with the definitive destruction of idealist resolve in one of them, as she is reduced to a mere victim of abuse she thought she was more than a product of, and defeated in her failure to be a woman of principle. We are asked to find this trajectory amusing.
2. Two lovers who never should've reconnected continue their toxic relationship for a decade plus, destroying each other's lives and psyches in the process, ultimately concluding that they'll never figure things out, let alone have the perspective and decency to part ways, and thus decide to commit double suicide together. The audience is asked to find this conclusion romantic.
3. A disabled man with no limbs is part of a traveling performance act, and is cared for by his performing partner, until that man replaces him with a chicken and throws him over a cliff to his death.

4. A kind farmhand does good to all around him, and eventually dies by being kicked to death by a mob that wrongly mistakes him for having bad intentions.
5. A pawn without agency in a colonial town requests a job transfer that never comes. He systematically loses hope in all things, but not before a local criminal finds him, tortures him, and chops both his arms off.

Fade to black.

How are these conclusions useful to me?

## 6. Cruelty, Abbreviated

And you thought those were bad. Even more revealing are the Academy's selections for Live-Action Short. They're presented as a package of five short films ([trailer](#)), and thusly seeing all five in immediate succession unavoidably highlights what themes, if any, they share in common. Let's synopsize the five shorts, which of course are by unassociated filmmakers from around the world, and see if there's any connective tissue in what gets selected and celebrated as great today.

1. *Marguerite* is unrelated to the themes at hand. It's the perfect, if slightly overlong, film for someone with an inclusive but old-fashioned outlook on the gay community. It follows a senior who never acted on her feelings for another woman (worth dramatizing, certainly); but sentiments of lesbianism as absolutist goodness are expressed in a way that feel tokenist and reductive (less worthy of exploration). This being a short, I'm not prepared to be overly critical of the filmmakers, as mounting this as a feature rather than a short might naturally have allowed for more nuance in exploring a complicated subject. This is the only film of the five by a director who might conceivably be a parent, in that it isn't about children or toddlers being subjected to assault and murder. As for the rest:
2. Filmed mostly in a single expertly mounted steadicam shot, *Madre* follows a mother who, along with her grandmother, gradually becomes more and more terrified when she receives a call from their six year-old son, who's alone on a beach he can't identify, as a man who may be a predator approaches him. We feel the mother's dread, terror, and helplessness and sympathize intensely with her plight. Or at least, I did. The film ends with things getting as torturous as they can. A series of disjointed end credits follow, which, processed as they are with pops of white and intentional flashes, tilts and breaks in flow, against a pulsing synth-metal track, signal that we're intended to take apathetic delight in the hopeless helplessness the characters are feeling.
3. *Fauve* depicts two rascally young boys playing irresponsible games of one-upmanship with each other, leading to one throwing the other in liquid concrete, accidentally killing him. The surviving boy feels remorse, but the film ends before he can grow or otherwise learn from his deed.
4. In *Skin*, we follow a neo-nazi and his companions as they violently destroy a black man. The victim and his associates then kidnap the neo-nazi and permanently tattoo his entire body black.

5. *Detainment* recounts in harrowing and unbearable detail the true story of two ten year-old English boys who, in 1993, abused and killed two year-old toddler James Bulger by throwing bricks at him. It's as awful as it sounds, and a petition with [150,000 signatures](#) exists to ask the Academy to withdraw the nomination. They've done nothing. Ty Burr of *The Boston Globe* [calls the film](#) "well-made, disturbing, and, in the end, only disturbing. It gazes into the eyes of a senseless crime and comes away with . . . nothing. ...Does it deserve to be celebrated? I'm not so sure." The director, who made the film *without consulting the victim's family* (think about that for a second), says he "wanted to humanize" the child murderers. To what end?

## [End Spoilers]

*Black Panther* is sounding pretty good right about now.

## 7. The Last Gasp

Merriam-Webster [defines](#) sadism as "delight in cruelty." The Collins dictionary [calls it](#) "a type of behavior in which a person obtains pleasure from hurting other people and making them suffer physically or mentally." I'm not being unfair in calling the above filmmakers sadists. I'm stating the obvious. The intent is self-evident: to subject the viewer to pain, and not mere physical pain at that but the more insidious psychological pain of an *idea*:

That everything good is dead.

The systematic attempt to break a viewer's worldview by misleading them into thinking hope and right action is futile constitutes emotional abuse. These films are Trojan horses. They're tragedy without catharsis masquerading as substance. Writes Bilge Ebiri for *The New York Times*, [in his clear-eyed review](#) of the live-action shorts:

*"Emotional manipulation is nothing new to cinema, but it can be particularly repellent if a film's story feels pointless. And sadly, some of this year's live-action nominees ... may seem cheap in that regard, with ghastly images and scenarios that appear designed to make us feel like we've seen something important and meaningful, without delivering on either import or meaning."*

How did we get here? Where works are praised for simply being "bizarre" (*The Telegraph's* [word](#) for *Buster Scruggs*) and "startlingly original" (*WSJ's* [praise](#) for *Zama*), without considering the impact of what the content might be?

## 8. The Rest is Noise

*We just can't be amazed  
Even if you pull the pin from your hand grenade  
-Andre 3000*

It is only because of the speed of contemporary society that we fail to notice what would be obvious in any other circumstance:

Extremes get boring quickly.

The Oscars only look like an event celebrating Art. We know that they, like the Grammys, are a vehicle for doing so in a limited fashion due to a more pressing agenda: media relevance. How is something relevant in media today? How is something *heard* in media today? By being the loudest and most didactic. Mr. Ebiri is keen to note the cheapness of cruelty for cruelty's sake. In the 24-hour circus onslaught of nonstop media saturation, extremes are all that rise above the noise, and often those excesses get mistaken as actually having value.

Just because the President yells doesn't mean there's anything worth listening to. Just because these films shock us doesn't mean there's any substance in there. There might even be something false, damaging, instead: we might forget every positive thing that's ever happened and fall prey to the suggestive and potent power of cinema, and start to think the world really is as bad as these anomalous, cherry-picked stories imply.

Lost in a sea of noise, we have fallen for the lie that goodness is boring.

[Writes](#) Ursula K. Le Guin:

*"The trouble is that we have a bad habit, encouraged by pedants and sophisticates, of considering happiness as something rather stupid. Only pain is intellectual, only evil is interesting. This is the treason of the artist: a refusal to admit the banality of evil and the terrible boredom of pain."*

On occasion, we confuse pessimism with realism, even though we know better. It's hard sometimes. But we should *absolutely* know better than to confuse nihilism with realism. We've gotten so well-trained at ignoring when things go well, or neutrally, in favor of searching out the worst. Highlighting it. Assigning to it meaning and attention, and losing eyes for all the rest.

I'm guessing *Telegraph* writer Robbie Collin doesn't read Le Guin. In his [widely derided positive review of \*Detainment\*](#), he justifies that film's celebration of child murder by quoting German-Jewish film theorist and philosopher Siegfried Kracauer: "Films mirror our reality." Collin reveals his misunderstanding of Kracauer by following up the quote with an aphorism of his own, writing, "if we don't like what we see, it takes some nerve to blame the mirror."

I say: it takes some nerve to misrepresent Kracauer. [In his 1927 essay](#) Kracauer is actually referring to the subjective reality of our *minds*, or to use his own words, "what we think about ourselves." We create that with our perspectives. If resorting to despair as a solution and turning a blind eye to the goodness all around us are the perspectives Collin finds most worthwhile, he and others like him are more juvenile than I ever imagined. Maybe he's dwelling on how hate is the big social problem right now.

But the antidote to hate is not depression, silly.

## 9. Why I Don't Swallow Wallowing

*Don't you think that it's boring how people talk  
Making smart with their words again; well I'm bored  
-Lorde*

It's not enough anymore to deconstruct the hero archetype. We've done that. We've deconstructed the Joseph Campbell journey to death. We've figured out that morality is ambiguous, a spectrum. Popular culture has more than caught up to philosophy and literature in that regard; we understand now, at a basic level, what we didn't sixty years ago, that good and bad are relative, that things aren't black and white. People know what antiheroes are.

I am no longer surprised into appreciation by a narrative that upends expectations for no other reason than to prove that it can. Yes, I know things end badly in life sometimes. Believe me. But shock factor isn't enough of a justification to do anything in art, and it's definitely not enough when we already understand all of the above. It's not refreshing.

It's tired.

Moreover, we've discovered something in the aftermath: yes, we've deconstructed heroes and self-reflexively broken down the units that comprise filmic narratives. Godard and others blazed that trail five decades ago. Wonderful. And you know what? People still need to tell each other stories. Catharsis, understanding, resolution— we search for these in our blood, our hearts, long after our minds think we know the answers.

Maybe these artists are disheartened by the global political climate and are expressing their dismay through art. Of course they are, you're thinking. That's exactly what some of them are doing, and several have even said so. Even for those who aren't, the resulting frustration of these narratives resonates mightily with the critical community, who unabashedly loves each of these pictures.

Controversial films are always extremely well made. If they weren't, no one would give their objectionable content the time of day. It's instructive to remember that film critics historically know very little about filmmaking. They distinguish themselves from critics of all other fields, from literature to food to sports, in being the least experienced in the medium they're critiquing. Accordingly, they usually fail to discuss aesthetic prowess in cinema; but now they seem to be falling for the bait of impressive technique, blind to the content they're often so good at dissecting.

That may work for them. But artfully throwing a fit isn't enough for me. In film school we all get bored of the rejected boy who keeps making movies about his girlfriend who dumped him, where the girl in the story keeps getting run over by a truck. We rightly describe that as infantile and wait patiently for him to realize he could be using the medium to do some actual processing. Tantrums and dirges don't become something else when they're dressed up in high pedigree. These talented, embittered artists pulled one over on the critical community, who, perhaps because of their inexperience or maybe just because of the sadness we all share, fell for it completely.

## **10. Break on Through (to the Other Side)**

I understand the impulse toward escapism, but I don't find it constructive. I also understand the impulse toward abject despair, but I find it debilitating. I know there's more than what the films above purport: that life can be hard, unfair, despairing, that it can appear horrible and pointless. To all this I find myself shrugging my shoulders, as in:

Yes, and?

There's more, is the thing. You've got to push further as an artist, as a person. You've got to be able to figure that despair isn't the end of the road. It's part of the journey. You push through it, around it, putting it in its place or trying to, and you eventually find your own way toward either marvelling at the world or laughing at it, or both, because we're alive all right, and while we are we need to get on with the business of living.

Total Escapism, or Everything Sucks. I don't know which is worse, except to say I'm disappointed by the options. What lies between such extremes?

In film, the thing that lies between Total Escapism and Everything Sucks has a name. It's a lot more useful than either end of the spectrum.

It's called hope.

And it's distressingly absent from cinema this year. I don't need films to be happy. But I appreciate when films do something besides broadcast the message that we should give up on life completely. I find that line of inquiry tiresome and unproductive. Call me crazy. And giving up— on life, on challenges, on possibility— is what Total Escapism and Everything Sucks have in common.

In Paolo Sorrentino's *Youth*, Paul Dano's character, an actor, says:

*And I have finally come to a conclusion...I have to choose. I have to choose what is really worth telling. Horror or Desire? And I chose Desire. You, each one of you... You opened my eyes. You made me see that I should not be wasting my time on the senselessness of Horror.*

It doesn't matter if the world is a good place or not. What's undeniable is the constructiveness of aiming toward the betterment of ourselves, of society, of understanding. Of pointing toward the light.

In an upcoming post is a list of my favorite films of the year. I didn't do a list for 2017, but feel compelled now. In the way this blog functions as a repository of positive truths exemplified in daily life, I feel a need to share the great films of 2018 which did the same. Some of them are happy, some of them heavy, and some are tragic. Catharsis can exist in tragedy too. But none of them take joy in cruelty.

None of them celebrate giving up.

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## Further Reading

### The Grammys

*SPIN Magazine*. [It's Okay—The Grammys Are Useless and Everyone Knows It](#)

An excerpt: Jordan Sargent on the Oscars vs the Grammys:

- *But the Grammys are unique in that the choices for winners in its most prestigious category are just clearly bullshit. If you were a young kid in the process of consciously forming his or her own taste and you looked at the list of Best Picture winners at the Oscars, it would require a certain*



*amount of effort to understand that The English Patient is worse than Fargo and Forrest Gump than Pulp Fiction, or that Titanic is schlock, or that Crash is awful, or that The King's Speech is worthless, or that The Artist exists. Such truths do not immediately jump off the page. But for the Grammys, and especially for Album of the Year, this is not the case. It would take only the most passing understanding of the recent history of music—of what was good and what wasn't, what mattered and what didn't, what was cool and what was lame—to understand that Celine Dion did not make the best album of 1997, or Santana of 2000, or Norah Jones of 2003, or Ray Charles of 2005, or Herbie Hancock of 2008, or Mumford and Sons of 2013, or Beck of 2015. If you were an impressionable young person looking at [this Wikipedia page](#), you would almost certainly have enough sense to completely disregard what you're reading and set out on your own path, to find... uh, different Wikipedia pages with more useful information, hopefully.*

*The Village Voice.* [Why the Grammys Don't Matter.](#)

*Vulture.* [Drake Says Grammys Don't Matter While Accepting a Grammy at the Grammys](#)

### **Film exploration!**

*Wikipedia.* Cannes Film Festival: [Palme d'Or winners, 1939-2018.](#)

*IMDB.* Cannes [winners in all categories, 1939-2018.](#)

*Esquire.* [The 20 Best Movies to Win Cannes' Top Prize.](#)

*Wikipedia.* [Berlin Fest Winners, 1951-2018.](#)

*Wikipedia.* [Venice Fest Winners, 1946-2018.](#)

### **Ursula**

*The Ones Who Walk Away From the Omelas*, by Ursula K. Le Guin. This five-page short story from 1973 has more wisdom than most novels. [Full text PDF here.](#)

### **Kracauer**

*Imaginations: Journal of Cross-Cultural Image Studies.* [“Mirroring terror”: The impact of 9/11 on Hollywood cinema.](#) By Thomas Riegler.

[German Essays on Film](#) by Richard McCormick and Alison Guenther-Pal. Continuum, 2004.

### **Live Action Shorts**

*The New York Times.* [“The 2019 Oscar Nominated Short Films’ Review: Heartbreak, Abbreviated](#) by Bilge Ebiri.

*The Boston Globe.* [This year’s Oscar live-action shorts nominees paint a pretty grim picture](#) by Ty Burr.

### **Film Criticism vs. Film Theory**

*RogerEbert.com.* [Please, Critics, Write About the Filmmaking](#) by Matt Zoller Seitz.