

## Movies: Do They Have To Be A Contact Sport?

I love movies. I am not a movie snob. I will see almost anything except chainsaw slasher films or movies in which animals are killed on purpose or anything that suggests Paris Hilton might appear.

I also love the Academy Awards. For years my husband and I have been honored to be part of a connected group that holds an annual party in which ballots are marked with great seriousness and knowledge, the Awards show watched with discernment, and prizes given for those who select the most winners. I always lose, but I always learn something quite important, like whether Tom Cruise *is* or *isn't*.

What I don't understand is why over the last few years the best films and best performances are very dark, bleak. They leave little hope that humans will or should be able to stop their slide to oblivion, greased by greed and fueled by violence. This year is no exception, and the toll on us addicted moviegoers is high, exacerbated by the studios' strategy to release the big films all within a few weeks at the end of the year, presumably to keep them in the voters' mind once the award season begins.

But for a movie and movie award junkie like myself, the late December viewing frenzy is so depressing that therapy should be added with the popcorn: "Do you want butter or Paxil, ma'am?"

Last year we had *Ray*, *Crash*, *Hotel Rwanda* and *Million Dollar Baby*, in which heroin, racism, corruption and violence competed with violence, corruption, racism and heroin.

This year we have, in rapid order, *Crash*, *Syriana*, *The Squid and the Whale*, *Brokeback Mountain*, *The Constant Gardener* and *Munich*. I dare you to see those films in a 10-day period and not need an anti-depressant or a live-in therapist.

It is not that they are bad movies, or unfair in their depiction of the terrible tensions in which we live, or deliberately manipulative. They are, in fact, intriguing examinations of some of the most important political and social issues that touch us every day. They are also for the most part beautifully crafted, technically brilliant, and masterfully acted.


But they are unrelenting in their outcomes: Mankind does not get better, just more so, and a good person or two cannot do anything lasting to break the cycle of greed and violence and political or moral corruption that drags us to the inevitable abyss.

I wonder if some of this creative obsession with the darkness around us reflects the enormous complexity of our world and the barrage of information about that world that we have to sort through every day, all day. So little of it is encouraging to know, or easy to hear. So much of it seems beyond our control, even when we unanimously want to change it. So Darfur continues to bleed and the world continues to warm and ancient tribes now morphed into modern nation states continue to war while individually all over the world we most-

ly wish for peace and quiet, or at least for less combustion in our lives.

I also wonder if these movies stir us to take action, whatever that may mean to a particular viewer, or if they are so overwhelming in themes and consequences that they paralyze us, leave us wandering in the parking lot with an empty Harkins cup and a sense that all is lost. I have no idea what I can do to stop a cycle of mutual revenge (*Munich*), sponsored genocide (*Constant Gardener*), epic corporate corruption (*Syriana*) or ignorant discrimination (*Brokeback*). I can try to live my life with kindness, vote my conscience and drive less, but in the end it seems quite a pathetic response to the global investment in anger, hate and greed that makes up our daily headlines.

I am not giving up the movies, and I will continue to take the blows and thumps that come with the "great movies," but I am hereby committing to sprinkling the industry's heavy hitters with the lighter fare that passes unnoticed in the awards lists. In fact, I think we need a whole new category, and the inevitable award shows that follow, for movies that help us just get through the bad stuff, whether personal or national or intergalactic. Let's call them the "Whew, Life's Not So Bad" movies. They have to have good soundtracks, an ending in which someone survives and is happy about it, and at least one fabulous dress.

And the nominees this year are: *In Good Company*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *In Her Shoes*, *Mrs. Henderson Presents*, *Cinderella Man*, *The Producers* and, of course, *The Sound of Music*. Feel free to add your own to the list. They may mean nothing years, or even days, from now, but they keep the daily demons at bay for a good two hours (three with previews), and that may be all we can ask of a strip of film and a lounge chair. 



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