

Twelve Films Not to Miss

If the 1986 year in cinema is notable for anything, it must be for display of sheer professionalism without vision, a distinction between the director as artist and the director as artisan. Most of the '86 releases were entertaining, well crafted and worth a few hours of our time, a sure sign of a skilled artisan, yet this spelled a poor year for brilliance, the territory of the artist.

The year 1986 was conspicuous for its display of filmmaking competence. On the one hand this made for, in some respects, a good year. Most of the films that came out were entertaining, well made and worth a few hours of our time. On the other hand, 1986 was a bad year for brilliance. A few films took stabs at greatness, notably "Blue Velvet," "Hannah and Her Sisters," "Fool For Love" and "Brazil" (ostensibly a 1985 film but released locally in 1986), but minor flaws or failings kept these films from attaining the levels they aspired to. The foreign cinema was responsible for the best films of 1986, but even those came in smaller numbers than in previous years.

Of course, a number of critically acclaimed features that number on many 10-best lists across the nation have yet to make it to Eugene. Notable among them are "Platoon," "Round Midnight," "The Sacrifice," "Sid and Nancy," "Vagabond," "The Mission" and "The Decline of the American Empire." In their place we got late '85 releases: "Ran," "The Color Purple," "Sheer Madness," "A Great Wall," "28 Up" and "Shoah," among others.

Two films in particular seem to capture the tone of 1986 American cinema: Francis Coppola's "Peggy Sue Got Married" and Martin Scorsese's "The Color Of Money." These two features have a lot in common: neither Coppola nor Scorsese had had a popular hit in

a number of years; both had snubbed Hollywood for forays into other modes of production (Coppola created the now collapsed Zoetrope Studios and Scorsese made the independently produced "After Hours"); and both found themselves back in Hollywood making films that needed to be popular successes if they hoped to continue their directorial careers.

They succeeded at their primary goals, but something was lost on the way. Neither picture reached the standards they had set in previous features, Coppola's in particular. High gloss and Hollywood sheen did little to replace the personal visions that took a backseat. The films aren't bad, mind you, but like some of American cinema in 1986 they aren't great.

Scorsese has since signed a four-picture contract with Disney's Touchstone Pictures (the producers of "Money"), and Coppola is already at work on his next film. There's a lesson to be learned from all of this: there is no reason to risk greatness when the merely good is much safer.

The best of '86 cinema wasn't found in Hollywood's "class" productions, where production values and pretension were traded for sensibility and intelligence, but for the most part arose from the middle tier of production. These smaller pictures, many of them made by the new generation of film makers who trained in low-budget productions, reflect personal sensibilities that give traditional productions a little personality and a sense of character.

Unpretentious, stylish and quite clever, these films invariably looked to classic genres, classic directors and classic (or near classic) films. There were remakes — David Cronenberg's fabulous "The Fly," "Tobe Hooper's crazy," "Invaders From Mars" and Frank Oz's musical parody "Little Shop of Horrors," a remake twice removed. There



Illustration by Lorraine Rath

were classic genre productions — James Cameron's "Aliens" (asequel to the '70s hit), which displayed the sense of ethics of a Hawks or an Aldrich military adventure, Jonathon Demme's "Something Wild," which had resonances of Hitchcock (and in particular "North by Northwest"), and John Carpenter's "Big Trouble in Little China," a spoof of kung-fu costume adventures. And there was the just plain odd, in particular Alan Rudolph's enigmatic "Trouble in Mind" and John Bender's wild comedy "UFOria."

Continuing on down the list were more standard Hollywood

products that nonetheless provided solid entertainment. Leading the pack was "Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home" (possibly the most fun film of the year), followed by "Heartbreak Ridge," "One Crazy Summer," "Running Scared," "Ferris Beuller's Day Off," "Ruthless People," "FX" and Eugene's own "Stand by Me." None of these films were brilliant, but they all did what they needed to — entertain — and an unpretentious picture that does its job is worth five "serious" productions that don't.

The major aesthetic disappointments of '86 weren't numerous but were conspicuous. "The Color Purple" led the pack, proving that rich, white,

urban male Stephen Spielberg had about as much chance to sincerely understand and portray the poor, black, female experience as a poor, black female has of making a Hollywood film that could do just that. "Heartburn" gave me just that, "Gung Ho" proved to be both racist and unfunny, Walter Hill's "Crossroads" went nowhere and "The Golden Child" proved that, whatever else he can do, Eddie Murphy can't turn lead into gold.

Like the year in review, my "best" list covers films that premiered in Eugene between Jan. 1 and Dec. 31 during 1986. Once again my top-10 numbers 12 and is folled by a slew of notables. Even if the American

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