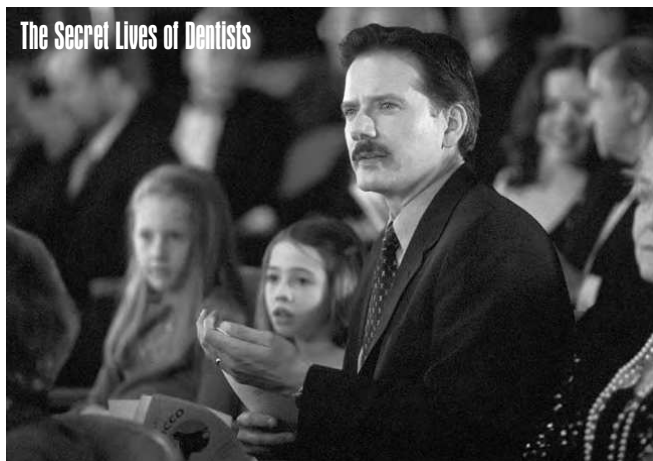


7. THE SECRET LIVES OF DENTISTS

Alan Rudolph directs one of the year's finest domestic comedies about two dentists, Dave Hurst (Campbell Scott) and his wife, Dana (Hope Davis), who share their practice. Parents of three little girls, Dave and Dana, like the parents in *Mystic River* and *In America*, are devoted to their children. But they may have reached the point in their marriage where things left untended are breaking down. We never learn if the problem is a sexual one, but we can infer from Dave and Dana's behavior that intimacy of some kind is lacking in the relationship.

I love the children in this film, because they know something is off-kilter between the parents, as real children always do. The toddler, especially, responds to the emotional balance in the household like a Richter scale



that measures marital felicity. When tension between Dave and Dana increases, she becomes correspondingly needier and rejecting of Dana. By the time the whole family is leveled by a five-day bout of flu, this small one will not permit Dave to put her down. He wears her around his neck for days. She is the only person in the family getting what all the others need — security and comfort — and she isn't about to give it up.

Dave's conflict centers on a real or imagined affair he thinks Dana is having. His



domestic distress triggers the hallucinatory presence of Slater (Dennis Leary), a former patient who has issues with Dave's dental work. Slater verbalizes all the nasty things Dave thinks but doesn't say. At least, up to a point. Performances by Scott and Davis are faultless and pitch-perfect. When Leary invokes the presence of Scott's alter ego (or is it alter id?) right at the dinner table, the pre-scient tiny toddler picks up on him as well.

8. AMERICAN SPLENDOR: 2003 Academy Award nominations: Best Adapted Screenplay, Robert Pulcini, Shari Springer Berman.

Looking at this film a second time, I saw the artistry the writer, director team of Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini brought to bear on their story of Harvey Pekar, author of autobiographical comics titled *American Splendor*. I recognize the film's post-modern artistic concerns. Berman and Pulcini understand Pekar's humanity that's hidden behind the depressed everyman persona he shows the world. They find his poetic side the same way Pekar expresses it in his work, by turning to a comic-book style. Some scenes have a comic-strip look, while

the rest of the film looks relatively realistic.

But it's the relationship between Pekar and Joyce, his wife, that I love. I'm talking about the roles played by Paul Giamatti and Hope Davis as well as the real couple, who are included in the film. The interconnections between the film characters and the actual Pekars is a form of self-reference the film investigates in a documentary manner.

The value of human connections and the isolation that comes from a lack of communication with others underlies the entire film. Pekar is a prickly man, who makes it difficult for others to be close to him. But he shows his good heart in the way he relates to his co-workers at the Cleveland VA Hospital, where he works as a clerk until his retirement.

Joyce, however, cannot live without relationship, and she finds her commitment in the bond with a child they foster-parent. Harvey comes to love the girl as well, and the Pekars adopt her. By the end of the film, they are family.

9. GIRL WITH THE PEARL EARRING: 2003 Academy Award nominations: Best Art Direction; Cinematography; Costumes.

Peter Webber's film, based on Tracy Chevalier's novel, is a work of fiction about the unknown young woman who modeled for Vermeer's famous portrait. Set in the Dutch city of Delft in the mid-1600s, the movie chronicles the experiences of the daughter of a craftsman, who must earn a living as a servant in the household of the painter. The girl comes from a Protestant family for whom respectability and order are important values. She

Girl with the Pearl Earring



moves into the undisciplined Catholic household of the painter, his wife, her mother and a band of children. The girl hears shocking stories about the licentious behavior of the painter and his patron with the painter's models.

But when it comes to Vermeer (Colin Firth) and Griet (Scarlett Johansson), their relationship is based on mutual respect for the work. Griet helps Vermeer mix paints. Griet takes a great risk when she moves a chair the artist has set up for a scene he is painting. But apparently he agrees with her decision, because he removes the chair from the painting. But when the mother-in-law, who owns the house, orders Griet to model for Vermeer, the sexual tension between the painter and the girl charges the atmosphere.

Like the lovers in *Lost in Translation*, Griet and Vermeer express their longing through facial expression, which is the story's conceit and the film's vibrant centerpiece. The face of the *Girl with the Pearl Earring* has drawn viewers to her over for centuries. What is she saying? we ask. At whom is she looking? In one of the most erotic scenes in recent films, Vermeer first pierces Griet's ears and then hangs the exquisite pearl earrings in the vulnerable lobes.

10. 21 GRAMS: 2003 Academy Award nominations: Best Actress, Naomi Watts; Supporting Actor, Benicio Del Toro.

In Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu's haunting, fragmented film, several characters are brought together through tragedy. Their relationships are colored by the accident

that kills Cristina's (Naomi Watts) husband and two daughters. The husband's heart saves the life of Paul (Sean Penn), but the driver of the car that hits the family, Jack (Benicio Del Toro), loses his faith in God and his confidence as a husband and father after the accident.

Like the role of fate in *Mystic River*, these characters are bonded by time and circumstance to one another. Paul leaves his wife, who wants to have his child, for Cristina, who has lost her family. Cristina is unaware that Paul knows he owes his life to her late husband, and he does not tell her immediately. After they become lovers, Paul and Cristina bond in vengeance as well as love.

The fractured, non-chronological narrative of Inarritu's film challenges the desire to understand the connections between characters, but the result of the director's choice is a textured, layered film that echoes in the viewer's mind.

films

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