Realism and Inoculation:
International Films Make Us Sick To Make Us Well
by name withheld

Make Us Sick
Hollywood is rightly accused of creating movies that do no more than mindlessly indulge the viewer's fantasy. The top five box office hits for 2011, *Harry Potter, Transformers, Pirates of the Caribbean, Twilight, and Kung Fu Panda* exemplify the fantasy and escapism commonly associated with film. However, film can also be a very effective tool for undermining and complicating the viewer's sense of certainty. Instead of allowing their viewers to "escape," the harshness of reality, many international films make conscious choices to force the viewers' focus inward. They accomplish this feat (much to the chagrin of karate-chopping pandas everywhere) by utilizing techniques grounded in realism. The feeling of realism is created by selecting and confronting uncomfortable themes, leaving difficult issues unresolved, and developing authentic characters. Each of these techniques are discussed in detail below.

Confronting Uncomfortable Themes
International films confront uncomfortable themes, unlike popular themes who either avoid them entirely or distort them so as to minimize internalization. *Juno*, for example, uses the plot of teenage pregnancy not to invite a serious thought, but as a vehicle for the writer's cheeky wit. When the pregnant girl in *Juno* chooses not to abort the child because "it has fingernails already, allegedly," and suggests to the adoptive parents that they "kick it old school," by "putting the baby in a basket," it is immediately apparent that the movie undermines realism in favor of instant gratification. First, it masks the seriousness underlying the abortion issue with an off-hand verbal dismissal. This stands in stark contrast to *4 months, 3 weeks and 2 days*, where director Christian Mungiu will transport you to the oppressive, bleak world of Romania in 1987. He then will force your involvement in a black market abortion. His use of filming techniques such as silence and long shots will trap you, panicked in your own mind and leaving no other option than to explore your very own conscious. While *Juno* cavalierly dismisses the idea of abortion as nothing more than a vehicle for a joke, *4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days* puts the topic front and center; one scene literally having the expelled fetus displayed on-screen.

The element of death is another theme that is deluded by mainstream movies. Even when it is presented for the sake of drama, the amount of closure given is unauthentic. An example of this is the popular love story *A Walk to Remember*; the premise being that a bad boy meets church girl who changes him for the better. He finds out she has terminal cancer, then proposes to her in the hospital and marries her before she dies. Yes, a sad ending, but one masking reality. *The Best of Youth*, on the other hand, is a film that recognizes death as an imminent force and doesn’t shy away from it. You will follow the lifespan of an entire family and witness the unmitigated pain of aging, sickness and death. You will see that there is not always an opportunity to say goodbye and that things are often left unsaid; you will attest to the agony regret can cause. But then, when the film concludes you will appreciate it for it’s genuine nature. You will grasp the importance of confronting death as a means to truly embracing life.

No Easy Answers
The film viewer's "escapist," expectations are frustrated not only by the forced confrontation of uncomfortable themes, but also by the lack of resolution to those themes.
Escapism pursues clear answers and happy endings, satisfying superficial curiosity without inciting deeper emotion. *Slumdog Millionaire*, an Oscar winner that pushes the envelope for many movie-goers, exemplifies this form of escapism. In *Slumdog*, a boy's impoverished existence in the slums of Mumbai is instantaneously transformed by the riches he receives from appearing on a game show. He goes from rags to riches, gets the girl, and gets closure to an ongoing conflict with his brother as easily as saying "that's my final answer." Conversely, realism does not provide instant gratification by leaving major issues unresolved. In *City of God*, you become not only become familiarized with the characters in their youth, as they navigate the inner-workings of gangs in Brazil, but you will begin to grasp the uncanny correlation between poverty and crime on an international level. The severity of this inevitable cause and effect crisis will leave you feeling helpless. As in *Slumdog*, the poverty is visceral. Unlike in *Slumdog*, a deus ex machina did not lie in wait to save the day. The film ends by introducing a new group of impoverished boys being driven to violence by their poverty, leaving the viewer no way out of confronting the cyclical nature of poverty and crime. Although there is no resolution, the film succeeds in its ability to bring a world-wide dilemma into light and reveal the underlying issues that are often neglected.

Although popular movies provide objective endings and give us the answers and closure we think we want, the truth is that their unrealistic nature also poses limitations. *Tokyo Sonata* is a film that illustrates how material that is left open for interpretation can be effective on a much larger scale. The story is about a Japanese business man who is losing a job. You will also meet the rest of his family, all whom represent ways in which people react to the societal roles they are given. The youngest son is the only one who broke free from his role and the conclusion of the film leaves you with a him playing a mesmerizing sonata, one which resonates with the reward of adherence to personal conviction. You are given no conclusion to the characters’ lives nor do you ever get confirmation on whether the boy’s family members are dead or alive; instead the film begs you to focus on the new perspective on life that it has gifted to you, the one that has been contrived through your interpretation. Whether or not you find the ending to be a “happy” one is of no relevance; more importantly, it is one of hope and can be directly applied to the way in which you live your own life. That stands to be far more holistically uplifting than the minuscule gratification we could ever derive from most happily-ever-afters.

**Developing Authentic Characters**

The characters are another essential component to the embodiment of realism. I find the concurrent usage of Hollywood actors to be another proving example of a way in which our society promotes falsity and thrives in denial. In *City of God*, the Brazilian cast was comprised of locals who were more familiar with the favelas (gangs) than any celebrity could be. This was substantiated by a heartrending performance attainable only by authenticity. Dialogue and appearance are other aspects of realism that seem to be flawlessly depicted in much international film. The all-too-ordinary interactions had by Otelia in *4 weeks, 3 months and 2 days* exemplified another perfect way to immerse the audience and bypass the limitations of a movie screen. In regards to appearance, the naturalness of the women in this film along with most other international films allow for a multi-dimensional type of beauty which is not often seen in Hollywood.
The potential for character complexity and development reaches its peak in *The Best of Youth*, a six hour epic that unfolds the lives of characters which you will grow deeply attached to. The time goes by effortlessly while you become inextricably intertwined to each character. Despite them sharing their lives’ and compelling you to experience the array of emotions brought on by forty years of events, they will still keep you at an arms length and leave you susceptible to shock. This distance reiterates the reality of the relationships we form; our humanistic individuality is what yields our unpredictable nature. The characters in our lives along with the one’s in this film will invariably continue to surprise us with the decisions they make and when they result in irrevocable damage, we are left feeling helpless.

**Make Us Well**

We may not ever see a day where films like *The Best of Youth* or *Tokyo Sonata* dominate at the box-office. When directors make the choice to develop authentic characters, realistically depict uncomfortable themes, and leave difficult issues unresolved, they choose not to pamper audiences wanting to escape. For better or worse, this narrows the prospective audience. However, for those willing to push beyond the boundaries of “escapist,” expectations, such films provide a reward unlike any other. By interpreting the open-ended ambiguities, they become equal partners in creating meaning. With our creative faculties engaged, we can’t help but see the reality that there aren’t simple, black-and-white solutions to every problem. But unlike the crowd lined up to watch *Kung-Fu Panda*, at least we aren’t too scared to look.

**NOTE:** I’ve lengthened the assignment this semester slightly.