KAGEMUSHA (1980)
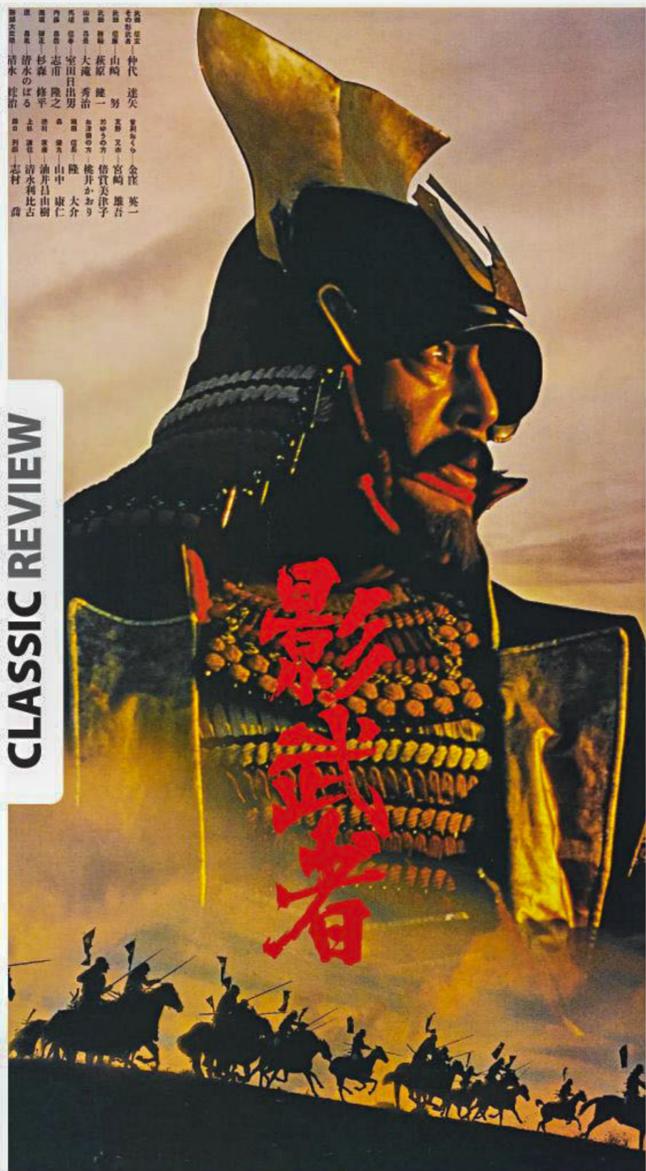
Director: Akira Kurosawa
Writers: Masato Ide, Akira Kurosawa
Stars: Tatsuya Nakadai, Tsutomu Yamazaki, Ken'ichi Hagiwara
Runtime: 162 minutes

Plot: A petty thief with an utter resemblance to a samurai warlord is hired as the lord's double. When the warlord later dies the thief is forced to take up arms in his place.

Review: Kagemusha is partly the story of the thief who slowly acquires the grandeur and vision of the man he is impersonating, partly the story of Shingen's ambitious son, whose claims to leadership had been ignored by his father, and partly the story of the evolution of modern Japan. However, Mr. Kurosawa does not allow one of these stories to dominate. Kagemusha, though so elegantly directed that even perfunctory shots seem integral to the film's ritual, has no more narrative drive than an entry in an encyclopedia. The movie frequently cuts away to scenes in the enemy camps, but if you're following the subtitles, you may not always know where you are. About halfway through, it becomes apparent that the specific details are less important than the overall panorama, the accumulation of scenes of court politics, of Kagemusha growing into his role, and of furious, life-and-death battles, all of which are observed as if from another planet.

What one carries away from this film is not any prettified idea of the dignity of man but of man in impotent relation to historical forces over which he has little if any control. There is beauty in Kagemusha but it is impersonal, distant, and ghostly. The old master has never been more rigorous.

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Reviewed by Mohaiminul Islam

TALVAR

Director: Meghna Gulzar
Writer: Vishal Bhardwaj
Stars: Irrfan Khan, Konkona Sen Sharma, Neeraj Kabi
Strength: Story, Acting, Direction
Weakness: Slightly complicated for younger audiences
Runtime: 132 minutes
Rating: 4.5/5

Plot: An experienced investigator confronts several conflicting theories about the perpetrators of a violent double homicide.

Review: Neeraj Kabi and Konkona Sen essay the roles of Ramesh and Nutan Tandon, parents of 14-year-old Shruti (Ayesha Parveen) who was found dead in her own bedroom. Their servant Khempal's body was also found the same day. Irrfan Khan plays CDI officer Ashwin Kumar who steps into the scene when the double murder case is handed over to the agency.

Vishal Bhardwaj's narrative is an insightful commentary on the media's tendency to jump to instant conclusions and the prejudices and limitations of India's judicial and investigating systems. Vishal also highlights several socio-political issues which are woven seamlessly in his narrative. The uninterested police officer who is more inclined toward getting his next promotion than examining a crime scene; investigation officers who are eager to get their friends on board for a new case on their hands; the gossip-hungry neighbours - the writer mixes a lot more than just the murder case and investigations at hand, and does so brilliantly. The portrayal of media's sensationalism and desperation for eyeballs is to the point.

As for the performances, Konkona and Neeraj are as detached as their characters demand and Gajraj and other cops and investigating officers are impressive and identifiable. Irrfan Khan, expectedly, stands tall over everyone else in the film.

A tightly written narrative and mostly rational view of the investigations ensure Talvar is an edge-of-the-seat, engaging thriller that seeks to shock its audience and boasts of brilliant performances, witty dialogues and much more. You should definitely not miss this one.

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Reviewed by Intisab Shahriyar

NOT EVERY GIFT IS WELCOME.

THE GIFT

Director: Joel Edgerton
Writer: Joel Edgerton
Stars: Jason Bateman, Rebecca Hall, Joel Edgerton
Strength: Great Thriller, Story, Acting
Weakness: Long runtime
Runtime: 108 minutes
Rating: 3.5/5

Plot: A young married couple's lives are thrown into a harrowing tailspin when an acquaintance from the husband's past brings mysterious gifts and a horrifying secret to light after more than 20 years.

Review: Jason Bateman and Rebecca Hall play Simon and Robyn, recently relocated from Chicago to a spacious modern house nestled in the hills of L.A.'s East Side. Robyn is recovering from a miscarriage and subsequent depression; Simon is climbing the corporate ladder at a new job.

Refreshingly free of expository frills, The Gift gets right down to business with Simon and Robyn running into an old high school classmate of Simon's, the amusingly named Gordo (Edgerton, sporting orange-ish hair, an earring and ill-fitting flannel), at a store. "That was awkward," Simon whispers to Robyn as they walk away, but soon enough Gordo is invited for dinner and the three are exchanging pleasantries over plates of pasta in a quietly unnerving scene shot mostly in alternating facial close-ups.

Things get weird, as they always do when a quirky outsider bonds with a couple of shiny, happy yuppies in these films. It starts innocuously enough with a bottle of wine sent as a thank-you, then takes a more unusual turn when fish appear in Simon and Robin's once-empty backyard mini-pond. Before long, Gordo has turned into an incorrigible unwanted-gift giver, violating all codes of new-friend etiquette and prompting the slick, somewhat snarky Simon to nickname him "Weirdo."

Edgerton, who wrote recent Australian noirs The Square and Felony, has a somewhat cut-and-dry approach to plot and character but the writer-director knowingly plays on our familiarity with tropes of the genre, both stylistic and narrative.

The Gift is the work of a sure-handed craftsman who knows how to keep a story moving and when to tighten the screws. Even at its most routine, the movie offers the pleasure of Edgerton's own superbly creepy performance, which could easily have devolved into ghoulish revenge-of-the-nerd caricature, but instead turns Gordo into a simultaneously pitiable and unsettling figure — a dejected adolescent frozen in time.

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Reviewed by Intisab Shahriyar