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Das employs a traditional nostalgia of an era that longed for unity, all the while stripping people of their homes and identities. The timeless ideals of the film's content make *Manto* extremely relevant for today's audience.

LAS NINAS BIEN (THE GOOD GIRLS)

This Mexican film explores the lives of ultra-rich housewives during the country's economic crisis of 1982. Directed by Alejandra Marquez Abella, the film provides a close-up look of the wealthy and fashionable, and the emptiness that comes with being on top of the hierarchy. With an aesthetic finesse of new heights, Abella folds the toxic and vile nature of rich socialites within its disguise of makeup, high-heels, and Gucci-Versace.

Rarely is a national monetary crisis explored through the eyes of the women who are affected by it. Within the narrative, we see how these women are often side-lined or ignored by their macho husbands who are equally incapable of improving the situation. And then there is the psychological turmoil a financial crisis can bring to women who never learnt to value life beyond what is simply materialistic. The film is special in its genre because while it depicts the upper class in its entirety, it

consciously avoids its glorification and treats its subjects with scepticism and suspicion.

Abella executes the film with the sensitivity it needs to understand women trapped in a world of vanity controlled by men—and how that does not excuse women for their complicity. The film employs a dark irony to protagonist Sofia who we never manage to sympathise with, due to her sheer arrogance and pride. Fantastically played by actor Isle Salas, who speaks through strong glances, pursed lips, and commanding hands, the protagonist is an extension of Marie Antoinette who infamously said “Let them eat cake” during the French Revolution, when she heard peasants were starving from not being able to afford bread. Enveloped in an aesthetic masterclass of composition, framing, and colour, *The Good Girls* provides a deep and dark prophecy for the unapologetically wealthy.

SHADOW

Chinese director Zhang Yimou of *Raise the Red Lantern* fame comes through again in this action-packed historical-drama. The story is an old one—two nations at war with claims to the same land. Yet, the narrative is one with a twist that is poetic as much as it is thrilling. But what makes this film a true

delight is its visual magnificence—the scenes look as if the landscape is painted on soft silk. It is a cinematic masterpiece, with monochrome colour-grading, calligraphy, and use of traditional Chinese ink-wash painting to design the mood of its audience.

To top it all off, the film demonstrates neatly curated, detailed, and technologically augmented action sequences that explore and experiment with the genre of historical warfare itself. While set in the past, the weapons used in the films are hyper-real and futuristic adding an exciting layer of fantasy.

Although, I must acknowledge that the film falls into the trap of one-dimensional female characters with motivations based in patriarchal customs of ancient China. Many may say that this was done to maintain historical accuracy but considering the futuristic artillery used in the film, it feels as though it was really a crime not to write stronger female roles for a story which is otherwise fantastic. While it fails to give women agency, it does explore the psychological quarters of dark and twisted men, making it a remarkable thriller that shines for its technical and visual feats.

ONE LAST DEAL

One Last Deal by Finnish director Klaus

Härö is about an ageing local art dealer Olavi, who is struggling to keep up with the tide of time—no one buys traditional art anymore and the rent in Helsinki is increasing due to urbanisation. At this moment of financial and existential crisis, Olavi is visited by his estranged grandson, Otto, looking for an apprenticeship. At first reluctant, Olavi hires his grandson upon discovering the boy's knack for salesmanship. As they crack open one last shot at salvaging the business, complications of absent parenthood, corporate jealousy, and the darkness of old age surround the story's muted narrative.

The drama which is set in the backdrop of minimal, Scandinavian landscape, hits a familiar chord of estrangement ever so common in urbanised spaces where nuclear families are increasingly becoming alienated. The relatable, sometimes clichéd cost of individualism proves a compelling arc in this highly emotional tear-jerker. Every single audience in the theatre was sobbing by the end of this beautiful story. One of my favourite films this season, *One Last Deal*, engulfs the audience with a longing for warmth and a realisation of loss.

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