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## A Reprieve for Reality in New Crop of Films

By **STEPHEN HOLDEN**

Penguins versus grizzly bears: the battle for the hearts, minds and dollars of American moviegoers waged by the emperor penguins of Antarctica against the grizzly bears of Alaska in two widely praised summer documentaries has something to tell us about our appetite for reality.

Whether taken with milk and cookies or swallowed as a gulp of bitter medicine, reality is something many would like a lot more of than the infotainment juggernaut is willing to supply. Some of the most revealing portals to the world beyond the glutinous mass culture that Martin Amis dubbed "the moronic inferno" are to be found in independent films.

"March of the Penguins," the endearing French documentary that observes the mating cycle of emperor penguins, serves up its reality with sweets. "Grizzly Man," the German director Werner Herzog's skeptical portrait of a preservationist who was devoured by one of the beasts he was protecting, comes without sugar. Whether you prefer reality sweetened or unsweetened, both films encourage audiences to turn away from the epidemic distractions of celebrity watching and shopping and contemplate our distant and uncertain relationship with the natural world.

That the adorable penguins who parade stoically across the screen like animated Disney creatures have trounced the ferocious grizzlies at the summer box office should come as no surprise. Morgan Freeman, who narrates the English version of "March of the Penguins," speaks in the comforting avuncular tone of a wise old fabulist relating a children's bedtime story. Mr. Herzog, who narrates "Grizzly Man," offers barbed commentary on the engrossing home movies filmed in the wild by Timothy Treadwell, a preening Rousseauian nature boy from Long Island whose hubristic attachment to wild animals ultimately overcame his judgment.

"March of the Penguins," the summer's surprise hit, recently displaced "Bowling for Columbine" as the second-highest grossing documentary in film history, after "Fahrenheit 9/11." As you watch the birds pull themselves out of the freezing ocean to waddle single-file in a monkish procession 70 miles inland to their breeding ground, through blizzards and sub-zero temperatures, you are encouraged to imagine that they are a lot like humans, only braver, purer and endowed with more community spirit.

Monogamous during each mating cycle, the penguin parents take turns tending their precious eggs while one partner returns to the sea to fetch food. Despite its Disney-worthy streak of anthropomorphism, "March of the Penguins" allows some room for death and terror. The penguins, harassed by predators as they march back and forth to the sea, have a high mortality rate; even in the best of times, a penguin's life is no Antarctic idyll.

"March of the Penguins" may be a good film but "Grizzly Man" is a great one. At its center is a charismatic modern-day hippie who lived in Alaska on and off for 13 years. An initially appealing figure, Treadwell loses his glamour as he grows to imagine himself a kind of honorary grizzly; the man who gave cute pet names to the beasts in his wilderness neighborhood appears increasingly unhinged and messianic. Investigating Treadwell's troubled life and his doomed escape into the wild, Mr. Herzog uncovers some hard lessons.

Giving carnivorous beasts pet names won't turn them into pets. Nature isn't the harmonious peaceable kingdom Treadwell wanted to imagine. Late in the movie, the camera zeroes in on a grizzly's expressionless face. Mr. Herzog speaks of chaos and murder and of nature's overwhelming indifference.

These movies challenge audiences to examine reality at a moment when the very term has been warped beyond recognition by reality television. This has been the summer in which mass culture, in its search for new commercial distractions, reached a dangerous tipping point. There is a sense of exhaustion in the air, as though the accumulation of cultural debris, celebrity worship and meaningless competitions had reached a critical mass.

How much longer can we continue to live inside a bubble where Jennifer Aniston's broken heart and Tom Cruise's public meltdown compete with the war in Iraq, famine in Sudan and the catastrophe in New Orleans as headline news stories?

Are the fame-seeking narcissists who swarm through reality television shows an accurate mirror of who we have become as a people? Or are they an illusion marketed by hucksters who cleverly play on a creeping self-disgust, then devise fresh new camouflage to mask that deepening sense of revulsion?

The relationship of reality television to the rise of the documentary is another question to ponder. Did reality television prepare the way for the new popularity of the documentary? Or is the increasing popularity of documentaries a response to the Orwellian political climate.

Seventy years ago T. S. Eliot observed in his poem "Burnt Norton," "Humankind cannot bear very much reality." "March of the Penguins," "Grizzly Man" and the 16 other summer movies discussed below (and listed alphabetically) may not solve the riddles of existence, but they offer glimpses into the real world beyond the matrix.

### **The Beat That My Heart Skipped**

In Jacques Audiard's brilliant remake of James Toback's "Fingers," Romain Duris, a wiry, smoldering French actor who suggests a tightly wound hybrid of Alain Delon and Jean-Paul Belmondo, is a shady real-estate enforcer who wants to resume his once promising career as a concert pianist. A man's angelic and bestial sides wrestle in a taut, thrilling melodrama that recalls the sleek Alfred Hitchcock thrillers of the 1950's, but with darker colors.

### **Broken Flowers**

In Jim Jarmusch's most accessible film, Bill Murray plays a womanizer who leaves home to visit several ex-girlfriends after receiving an anonymous letter saying he has fathered a son. As he drifts around the country on his lonely odyssey, the movie pointedly refuses to identify the places he visits; he gets lost in America. The bittersweet, enigmatic film finds Mr. Murray doing another skillful variation on his brooding poker-faced Man-in-Late-Midlife-Crisis persona.

### **The Constant Gardener**

This thriller, adapted from a John le Carré novel, traces the moral and political awakening of a mild-mannered British diplomat posted in Kenya after his wife (Rachel Weisz), an outspoken humanitarian and left-wing activist, is killed. When he uncovers a conspiracy between a pharmaceutical conglomerate and the British government to cover up the lethal effects of a drug being tested on Africans, his own life is endangered. Directed by Fernando Meirelles in the same feverish style as "City of God," his searing chronicle of youth gangs in a Rio de Janeiro favela, the movie features one of Ralph Fiennes's greatest screen performances. Although "The Constant Gardener" is fiction, the movie's portrayal of a greedy multinational corporation in cahoots with corrupt politicians rings uncomfortably true.

### **Crash**

Paul Haggis's overly schematic, too meticulously balanced exploration of tensions among blacks, Latinos, Middle Easterners and Asians in Los Angeles lances boils of bigotry and stereotyping by allowing its characters to air incendiary hostilities in a harrowing sequence of confrontations, most related to driving. With wonderful performances by Matt Dillon, Terrence Howard, Don Cheadle and Sandra Bullock, among others, the movie, for all

its heavy-handedness, has been a surprise hit, and it deserves to be.

### **Darwin's Nightmare**

A perfect companion piece to "The Constant Gardener," Hubert Sauper's documentary examines the processing and export of the Nile perch, a predatory species of fish introduced into Lake Victoria in the 1960's that has decimated the lake's ecosystem. The same cargo planes that take away the fish return with weapons to fuel the ongoing wars in the region. The laborers work for subsistence wages in camps ravaged by AIDS. The movie is as despairing a view of globalization run amok as has ever been filmed.

### **The Edukators**

In this German film, three naïve, self-righteous anti-globalization activists kidnap a wealthy businessman, who reveals himself to have been a 1960's radical who once shared their ideals. As they hold him hostage, the kidnappers debate politics with their prisoner. Does an understanding develop among them? Or is their increasingly sympathetic captive manipulating them? To its credit, the hard-headed little movie refuses to go soft.

### **Happy Endings**

The ambitious but overcrowded multicharacter comedy from Don Roos, the director of "The Opposite of Sex" and "Balance," explores the outer limits of the meaning of family in 21st-century America, touching on divorce, pregnancy, adoption, abortion and gay and straight alliance and misalliance. It should be seen, if only for the luminous performance of Maggie Gyllenhaal, the American Jeanne Moreau, as a careless, scheming adventurer.

### **Hustle & Flow**

A hit at the Sundance Film Festival, this movie about a Memphis pimp who becomes a rap star was touted as the next "Rocky" or "Saturday Night Fever." Although it didn't ignite the box office, the movie still features a star-making performance by Terrence Howard. If its juxtaposition of raw thug life with corny "everybody has a dream" clichés is incongruous, it should still be seen for its central performance.

### **Junebug**

A sleek Southern golden boy (Alessandro Nivola) brings his glamorous cosmopolitan wife (Embeth Davidtz), a Chicago art gallery owner, home to meet his churchgoing family in semirural North Carolina. This serious comedy is a compassionate, detailed exploration of culture clash and the complicated meaning of family values in a clan torn by conflict and disappointment. A Southern "Five Easy Pieces," directed by Phil Morrison, "Junebug" uncovers the essence of a world rarely visited by Hollywood.

### **Last Days**

Gus Van Sant's fictional imagining of the final days of Kurt Cobain continues the director's rigorous exploration and depiction of emptiness and shades of nihilism, which began with "Gerry" and continued with "Elephant." The detached, uncompromising "Last Days" peers into the heart of drug-numbed nothingness and de-glamorizes celebrity self-destruction.

### **Murderball**

This exciting, richly human documentary about wheelchair rugby as played by members of the United States Paralympic Team avoids the inspirational bromides of many movies about the disabled. Its disturbing observation that brutal, cutthroat athletic competition gives the players a reason to live can easily be extended to embrace our entire national sports mania.

### **On the Outs**

This troubling, well-acted docudrama is based on case histories of three teenage girls from the mean streets of Jersey City, who wind up in a juvenile detention center because of wrong choices that were really beyond their control.

### **Pretty Persuasion**

This nasty go-for-broke satire set in a private Beverly Hills high school might be described as the thinking vixen's "Heathers." Evan Rachel Wood is a toxic alpha girl who convinces two sidekicks to join her in accusing their English and drama teacher (Ron Livingston) of sexual harassment. The movie is a funny, foul-mouthed indictment of the culture of entitlement.

### **Saraband**

Ingmar Bergman's bleak made-for-television epilogue to his "Scenes From a Marriage" revisits 30 years later the same embattled ex-spouses, again played to perfection by Liv Ullmann, and Erland Josephson. There has been no mellowing with age. The solemn world-weary characters rummaging through the past are still possessed by their nagging inner demons. As so often in Bergman, woman is the healer of men's sick souls. The actors maintain a supreme mastery of the Bergman style, with performances that are spiritual and emotional X-rays of complex adults gazing into an eternal Scandinavian twilight.

### **The Talent Given Us**

How much is real and how much is acting in this extremely intimate fake-but-real documentary about the Wagners, a voluble, often abrasive New York couple in late middle age who drive across the country with their adult daughters to visit their son, a Los Angeles filmmaker? That filmmaker, Andrew Wagner, who accompanied them on the trip, is actually the producer, director and cinematographer of "The Talent Given Us." Whatever the truth, the fascinating, lively film adds a new twist to the documentary form.

### **2046**

The Hong Kong director Wong Kar-wai shuffles the erotic memories of a roguish writer (Tony Leung Chiu-wai) brooding over his lost loves in a crumbling hotel. In a protracted nonnarrative film, the repetition of the "Casta Diva" aria from Bellini's "Norma" (sung by Angela Gheorghiu) and Nat King Cole's "Christmas Song" underscore the movie's vision of the past as an eternal present. But be warned; this long, semi-abstract, fetishistic reverie is an acquired taste.