



**Monday, April 11, 7:30 pm**

*Reviewed by Jessica Kiang | The Playlist Not Rated 115 Mins.*

Company Commander Claus Pedersen is a good man. We know this from practically the first scene in Danish director Tobias Lindholm's "A War," and not just because he is played with characteristic everyman integrity by the preternaturally sympathetic Pilou Asbæk. It's in the way he hovers worriedly over the radio back at base camp as he hears news of a routine patrol of the surrounding Afghan countryside going horribly awry. It's in the way he picks the exact right tone of voice to talk to the shellshocked men who return, some splattered with blood not their own. It's in the way his goodness is mirrored in that of his wife Maria (Tuva Novotny) at home in Denmark, raising three unruly children without him, in wry good humor. We know Claus is a good man for every decision he makes and every motivation he has throughout the course of this bruising two hours of you-are-there cinema, and we also know that his goodness is not going to be good enough. After just two prior directorial features, the brutal, prison-set "R" and the gruelling shipbound "A Hijacking," Lindholm returns to the territory of men (or more specifically, Pilou Asbaek, because he stars in all three) trapped in volatile, stressful and violent situations with "A War," and it is a tremendous, provocative cap to that unofficial trilogy.

Parachuting us into the action in media res, the film starts with a literal bang in a grisly landmine sequence that proves once again how adept Lindholm and regular DP Magnus Nordenhof Jønck have become at creating a sense of jolting immediacy. The camera is handheld and slightly nervy but everything remains fluid, comprehensible, and often grittily beautiful. Of the dazed soldiers scrambling to the assistance of the wounded man, one in particular, Lasse (Dulfi Al-Jabouri) is closest and is the most hysterically affected as his fellow soldier dies in his arms before the Medevac helicopter arrives. Later, he falls apart, and begs to be sent home. But Claus can't do that, instead consigning Lasse to barrack duty for the next fortnight, and resolves to start leading the patrols himself as a morale boost for his men.

Having established an anything-can-happen mood of unease with that early explosion, Lindholm ensures that now every new foray out into the scrubby desert comes freighted with threat, an itchy, nerve-racking sense that any situation, no matter how seemingly benign, could go sour in half a quickened heartbeat. This tension only increases as the movie wears on and the feeling mounts that we are operating on borrowed time, especially, to give an added lurch to the stomach, when children play a role in so many of the encounters. Whether they're clustering around the soldiers in play, being used as human shields by escaping militants or trailing into the camp with their parents to beg for refuge from the Taliban, the

presence of all these kids is entirely unnerving, when you can feel in your bones that something bad is going to happen.

And Claus' children back home are not out of harm's way either. Trying to bond with her elder son who is taking Claus' absence the hardest, Maria takes her eye off the youngest for a moment and he swallows some pills. He's taken to hospital to have his stomach pumped — a sequence Lindholm allows to play out in full (a lesser filmmaker would cross-cut between the two locales for added pathos) and which he treats with the same urgency and gravity as anything that happens in Afghanistan. This is not to create an equivalence between the experiences of husband and wife that trivializes either, it is more to reinforce the overriding theme: acting out of nothing but a purehearted desire to help and protect your family or your crew, you can still do the wrong thing. Or at least the thing that has the wrongest possible consequences, which in Claus' case see him sent home, lawyered up (his lawyer is played by "A Hijacking" co-star Søren Malling) and facing a war crime charge.

So in contrast to "A Hijacking," it is not survival but reputation and exoneration for which Claus subsequently must struggle. This does mean that the film has a less overtly dynamic second half in which it becomes a courtroom drama rather than a war movie. But this may be exactly where we see Lindholm's maturation as a filmmaker most evidently: the courtroom scenes are brilliantly written, pared-back and yet realistic, providing room for all the horrible inferences and ambiguities of a split-second decision with a terrible outcome.

But while there are IUD explosions in the first half and legal fireworks in the second, neither the Afghan desert nor that institutional room in Copenhagen are where the actual battleground lies. Instead the real war of "A War" is waged within Claus, with Lindholm's camera trained mercilessly on Asbæk as he delivers yet another faultlessly committed performance, within a large ensemble in which every performer feels note-perfect. Indeed the sense of directorial sureness throughout can't be overstated; although this is a metaphorical as well as a literal minefield, Lindholm navigates it with complete confidence — so much so that he could maybe even have widened his remit further, perhaps taken in some sense of broader Danish society or the nature of the media attention that cases like these receive. But instead we get that sense of containment and claustrophobia, so well evoked in his previous films too, only here it is a psychological cage made of blame and guilt and a helpless sort of regret: given another chance would Claus even do anything differently? Would we? Some decisions are no-win situations and it's all you can do to limit your losses. But the question this controlled, thought-provoking drama leaves you with is - how much of that sort of moral compromise can you take before you simply lose the ability to look in the mirror and see a good person looking back.

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# Anomalisa

## "A MASTERPIECE"

**Monday, April 25, 7:30 pm**

Reviewed by Manohla Dargis

Rated R

90 Mins.

The sad and stinging painful "Anomalisa," a beautiful big-screen whamsit, features a throng of whiners, malcontents and depressives along with one bright soul who hasn't let disappointment break her. They're a funny, odd group. Some register as generically prickly, full of vinegar and spit (a few may just be tired after a day's work); others sag, as if deflating one breath at a time under an unfathomable weight. And while some carry their burden quietly and alone, others insist on sharing it, like those people who take deep, accusatory sighs when you bump into them on the subway.



This is, in other words, the human comedy as brought to you by Charlie Kaufman. He's best known for his dense, wily, rebuslike screenplays — including "Being John Malkovich," "Adaptation" and "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind" — and least loved for "Synecdoche, New York" (2008), the only other feature he directed before "Anomalisa." A delirious, brutally undersung masterwork about a tormented theater director who stars in his own self-devouring production, "Synecdoche" closes with a voice providing the ultimate stage direction: "Die." It seemed like a portentous omen given that Mr. Kaufman subsequently seemed to disappear for the next seven years.

He didn't; he was busy working, including on the play that became "Anomalisa." Like that production, the movie stars an excellent David Thewlis as Michael, an author and motivational speaker who has traveled to Cincinnati to deliver a speech. He meets a woman, Lisa (Jennifer Jason Leigh), and they have an intense affair. At this point it seems like a good idea to mention that all the characters in the movie are stop-motion puppets. And that all the other roles are performed by Tom Noonan, an invaluable vocalizer who creates a supporting cast of thousands (well, dozens) through a voice that rises and lowers, barks and purrs, and builds the ominous wall of sound that opens and closes the movie, as if boxing it shut.

Mr. Kaufman has a co-director this time out, Duke Johnson, who's a partner in the production company that turned the play into an animation. They make a seamless team. "Anomalisa" is a recognizably Kaufmanesque creation in its anarchic and mordant humor, its singular narrative beats and especially in its preoccupations (identity, authenticity, loneliness, death, love, pleasure, the usual). And this isn't the first time that Mr. Kaufman's work has involved puppets. The lead character in "Being John Malkovich," directed by Spike Jonze, is an unhappy puppeteer who works with marionettes that look like him and his wife. In a surreal turn, the puppeteer finds a portal into the mind of the title character

(played by Mr. Malkovich), who becomes something of a puppet pulling strings of his own.

It's complicated, as are most of Mr. Kaufman's scripts; "Anomalisa" is more narratively and philosophically streamlined. It also clocks in at a well-timed 90 minutes, a relatively abbreviated length that fits this hermetically sealed, precariously unoxygenated world, with its doll-size scale, human avatars, fabricated environments and locked-down protagonist. The filmmakers delay Michael's introduction, opening with a babble that rises against a black screen: Enter, the great abyss! Next up is a pale cloudy sky — it's the most expansive image in the movie as well as the only representation of the natural world — a dreamscape that's soon pierced by the plane taking Michael to his talk in Cincinnati.

With his sallow complexion, drooping eyes and air of exhaustion (or perhaps exasperation), Michael could be merely another business traveler. Well, except that he's a puppet, one with strange black seams that run along his hairline, down his chin and cut temple to temple, dissecting his face into discrete quadrants. He's also a puppet that is shortly popping a prescription pill, a moment that — with his melancholic resignation, the usual nightmare of plane travel, the droningly familiar voices that swell around him — rapidly makes Michael feel somewhat real, more recognizable than not. That's because while "Anomalisa" is filled with uncomfortably, at times sourly humorous moments, it's also a horror movie about the agonizing, banal surrealism of everyday life.

Mr. Kaufman's gift for quotidian horror remains startling; he's a whiz at minor miseries. The story progresses through a series of squirmy encounters with other characters who, despite variations in clothing and hair, all have the same eerily blank faces. Once Michael breaks free of the airport herd, most of these faces are attached to service workers of one type or another who, with degrees of friendliness and hostility masquerading as affability (or professionalism), roll out like dolls on an assembly line. One after another, with voices that Mr. Noonan distinguishes with modulations in pitch and an occasional curse, they serve Michael: the asthmatic cabdriver; the obsequious hotel clerk and bellhop; the room-service worker; the grumpy waitress.

Lisa turns out to be the exception to this manufactured nightmare (she's the anomaly of the title), and Michael falls hard. "Your voice!" he cries out in wonder, a moment of lyricism that the filmmakers tuck in between unbuttoned clothes and an admirably uncomfortable, honest sex scene. Lisa may seem like a mess — she voluntarily enumerates her supposed failings, like someone who's memorized other people's criticisms of her — yet she's glorious. And Ms. Leigh, who brings Lisa to trembling life with soft mewls of feeling, perfectly timed pauses and a poignant a cappella rendition of "Girls Just Want to Have Fun," makes you see how much is at stake both for her and Michael. Whether he can hear her is one heartskippingly moving question; whether he deserves to is another.



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# EMBRACE of the SERPENT

**Monday, May 9, 7:30 pm**

*Reviewed by Stephen Holden - NY Times Not Rated 125 Mins.*

"The horror! The horror!" The terminal valediction of Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" is deconstructed with a raging eloquence in the Colombian director Ciro Guerra's majestic, spellbinding film, "Embrace of the Serpent." Is the unspeakable savagery evoked by his dying words really beyond the reach of the civilized imagination? I doubt it.

That tricky word "civilized" connotes enlightenment, behavioral restraint, evolutionary advancement and the suppression of bestial impulses. But what is so civilized about mass slaughter, torture and planetary despoliation in the name of anything or anybody? It shouldn't have taken a journey up the Congo River for a white man to discover the evil within.

That is the uncomfortable truth at the core of Mr. Guerra's tragic cinematic elegy for vanished indigenous civilizations in the Amazon jungle. Viewed largely through the aggrieved eyes of a shaman whose tribe is on the verge of extinction at the hands of Colombian rubber barons in the 19th and 20th centuries, "Embrace of the Serpent," a fantastical mixture of myth and historical reality, shatters lingering illusions of first-world culture as more advanced than any other, except technologically.

The director's third film, it is the more remarkable for being shot in black and white, with one brief color sequence near the end. Beautiful isn't a strong enough word to describe its scenes of the heaving waters of the Amazon and its tributaries, on which two explorers, separated by more than 30 years, navigate in canoes, accompanied by a shaman, Karamakate.

The film's central figure, he is the last survivor of the Cohiuano, an Amazonian tribe killed off by the rubber barons. He is no innocent, noble savage but an angry, morally complex individual with a heart full of grief. He may be in greater harmony with the natural world than any foreign intruder, but he is alone. The film gives full voice to his view of a social order in which the rules of nature assimilated and handed down through the centuries among the Cohiuano must be obeyed, or else.

The Amazonian ecosystem, in which everything seemingly preys on everything else, is a continual and endless feeding frenzy. In a signature image, an aquatic serpent devouring another snake is observed by a glowering jaguar.

Inspired by the travel journals of Theodor Koch-Grünberg, a.k.a. Theo (Jan Bijvoet), a German ethnologist and explorer, and Richard Evans Schultes, a.k.a. Evan (Brionne Davis), an American biologist considered the father of modern ethnobotany, the film imagines their parallel journeys, decades apart, seeking the yakruna, a sacred healing plant. This miraculous cure-all is a hallucinogen that attaches itself to rubber trees.

In Karamakate's eyes, the European and American marauders who enslaved and destroyed his tribe are agents of an insane culture devoted to genocidal conquest and rapacious destruction. He finds the concept of money laughable; it is just useless paper. He urges the explorers to throw their luggage overboard. Their possessions are "just things," he scoffs. To the extent that the film persuades you that he is right, "Embrace of the Serpent" is potentially life-changing. One thing Evan refuses to relinquish is a portable phonograph on which he plays a recording of Haydn's "Creation." Karamakate responds respectfully to the sublime music.

The first journey takes place in 1909, when Theo is near death. (Koch-Grünberg actually died in 1924). Accompanied by the young Karamakate (Nilbio Torres), he is escorted by canoe up the Amazon River with a guide, Manduca, who had worked on a rubber plantation and was freed by Theo. In a movie in which nine languages are spoken, Manduca is the cultural mediator and sometime interpreter. Initially reluctant to help Theo find a yakruna, Karamakate agrees to only if Theo will help him locate other surviving members of the Cohiuano, who he says exist.

Later, Evan makes the same journey with the older, enfeebled Karamakate (Antonio Bolívar Salvador), whose tribe is now extinct. Karamakate has lost his ability to communicate with rocks and trees and is weighed down by a resigned sadness. The movie jumps between the two journeys, which follow roughly identical routes.

The film's anger is concentrated in two devastating scenes of tyrannical white intruders. At a Roman Catholic mission, a Spanish priest presides over a flock of boys orphaned by the conflicts between rubber barons and indigenous tribes. Dressed in white robes and forbidden to speak "pagan languages," the boys are viciously whipped at the whim of this Dickensian monster.

Decades hence, at another riverside community, the dying indigenous wife of a self-proclaimed white messiah is healed by one of Karamakate's potions, and her husband proclaims himself the Son of God. In a delirium, he invites his followers to consume his body and blood. As they encircle him like vultures, the visitors flee.

From here, the film moves to mystical higher ground, as abhorrence expands into awe. Instead of "The horror!," I would substitute "The wonder!"

In Spanish and Amazonian tribal languages with English subtitles.

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*Kenneth Turan, LA Times*

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*Devin Faraci, Birth.Movies.Death*

Monday, April 25 at 7:30 pm

*Anomalisa*  
"A MASTERPIECE"



"One of the most singular cinematic  
experiences you could hope to have."

*The Playlist*

Monday, May 9 at 7:30 pm