

JOYEUX NOËL

Monday, December 16, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Roger Ebert | RogerEbert.com | Rated PG-13 | 116 Mins.

On Christmas Eve of 1914, a remarkable event took place in the trenches where the Germans faced the British and the French. There was a spontaneous cease-fire, as the troops on both sides laid down their weapons and observed the birth of the savior in whose name they were killing each other. The irony of this gesture is made clear in the opening scenes of "Joyeux Noel," in which schoolchildren of the three nations sing with angelic fervor, each in their own language, about the necessity of wiping the enemy from the face of the earth.

The Christmas Eve truce actually happened, although not on quite the scale director Christian Carion suggests in his film, which was nominated for the foreign film Oscar this year. He is accurate, however, in depicting the aftermath: Officers and troops were punished for fraternizing with the enemy in wartime. A priest who celebrated mass in No Man's Land is savagely criticized by his bishop, who believes the patriotic task of the clergy is to urge the troops into battle and reconcile them to death.

The trench warfare of World War I was a species of hell unlike the agonies of any other war, before or after. The enemies were dug in within earshot of each other, and troops were periodically ordered over the top so that most of them could be mowed down by machinegun fire. They were being ordered to stand up, run forward and be shot to death. And they did it. An additional novelty was the introduction of poison gas.

Artillery bombardments blew up the trenches so often that when they were dug out again, pieces of ordinance, bits of uniforms, shattered wooden supports and human bones interlaced the new walls. A generation lost its leaders. European history might have been different if so many of the best and brightest had not been annihilated. Those who survived were the second team. Goodbye to All That, by Robert Graves, is the best book I have read about the experience.

Carion's film is a trilingual portrait of a short stretch of the front lines, a small enough microcosm of the war that we're able to follow most of the key players. We meet some of them as they volunteer for service. There is a German tenor named Sprink (Benno Furmann), who leaves the opera to serve in uniform. Two Scots brothers sign up: Jonathan and William (Steven Robertson and Robin Laing), who agree, "At last, something's happening in our lives!" They are joined by their parish priest, Father Palmer (Gary Lewis), who follows them into uniform as a stretcher bearer. The French are led by Lt. Audebert (Guillaume Canet), whose father (Bernard Le Coq) is the general in charge of these lines. Audebert throws up before leading his men into battle, but that's to be expected.

On Christmas Eve, the Danish singer Anna Sorensen (Diane Kruger) is brought to a support area to sing for German officers and

the Crown Prince, but insists on being taken to the front lines. She says she wants to sing for the ordinary troops, but her real hope is to see Sprink, her lover. Reaching the lines, she is surprised to find that thousands of little Christmas trees have been supplied by Berlin and form a decoration on top of the German trenches.

The Scots and the French are equally surprised by the trees, and by the sound of singing as Sprink and Sorenson sing "Silent Night" and "Adeste Fidelis." Slowly, tentatively, soldiers begin to poke their heads up over the ramparts, and eventually they lay down their arms and join in the cratered no man's land to listen to the singing, and then to the bagpipes of the Scots, and then to celebrate mass. The next morning, Christmas Day, there is even a soccer game. Precious bits of chocolate are shared. And they bury their dead, whose bodies have been rotting between the lines.



These men have much in common with one another. They come from the same kinds of homes, went to the same kinds of schools and worship the same kinds of Gods. They are required to fight, and most of them are required to die. In a remarkable moment of common interest, they share information about plans for artillery attacks, and all gather in one trench while the other is shelled, then switch trenches for the response. This is treason, I suppose.

"Joyeux Noel" has its share of bloodshed, especially in a deadly early charge, but the movie is about a respite from carnage, and it lacks the brutal details of films like "Paths of Glory," "A Very Long Engagement" and, from later wars, "Saving Private Ryan" and "Platoon." Its sentimentality is muted by the thought that this moment of peace actually did take place, among men who were punished for it, and who mostly died soon enough afterward. But on one Christmas, they were able to express what has been called, perhaps too optimistically, the brotherhood of man.

In French with English with subtitles.

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PARASITE

Monday, January 20, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Michael Phillips | Chicago Tribune | Not Rated | 132 Mins.

It's hard to talk about why the South Korean phenomenon "Parasite" has captured the imagination of a broad international film audience without talking about "Joker," the other conspicuous class-warfare experiment in terror of the moment.

They're night and day in terms of, well, everything: wit, emotional sophistication, filmmaking rigor, mastery of tonal shifts. The branding helps, of course, but something beyond comic-book familiarity has turned "Joker," with its willfully sloppy combination of brutal pathos and wormy vigilante spirit, into a thing — a thing connecting with millions of people. It's a movie about an endlessly abused victim whose existence cries out for a miracle, and for a folk-hero transformation into a morally justified serial killer superstar. Joaquin Phoenix acts the living hell out of it, though if Gertrude Stein were alive she'd probably say there's no "it" in it.



"Parasite" has connected with millions, too, which is more surprising. It's a massive hit in its native South Korea and elsewhere, and the co-writer and director Bong Joon-ho commands a willing, growing fan base here in America. The filmmaker, one of the great contemporary commercial artists in any medium, has made two films in English ("Snowpiercer," the juicy anti-capitalist allegory, and "Okja," the strongest cinematic argument for vegetarianism since "Babe.") But for now his finest work in a variety of genres — all his films traffic in a variety of genres, within a single film — sticks closer culturally to home, and to the bone.

In 2006 Bong made a terrific monster movie, "The Host." "Parasite" feeds on that earlier picture's themes of societal callousness. This one's about people, and money, but it too contains subterranean secrets. And it too is terrific.

The first shot sets the scene. In a precise widescreen composition, we're looking out of the street-level window of a tiny apartment in Seoul, occupied by the Kim family. A drunk urinates on the pavement. Life isn't easy for the Kims. Inside the apartment, the clever forger daughter Ki-jung (Park So-dam) and her mild-mannered brother Ki-woo (Choi Woo-shik) brandish their cellphones, seeking out some stray neighborhood Wi-Fi in various corners of the flat.

The Kims get by folding cardboard pizza boxes for a living. Father Ki-taek (played by Bong veteran Song Kang-ho) and mother Chung-sook (Jang Hye-jin) wonder if that's all there is. Their luck,

joined with their cunning, provides the answer. What they lack in material possessions and blithe privilege, the family soon acquires in "Parasite."

A friend of the son's has been working as a tutor for a wealthy Seoul family. The family proves gullible: At Ki-woo's friend's urging, and with the friend away for extended travels, Ki-woo fakes his way into the role of replacement tutor for the teenage daughter of the Park family.

Working in sleek, clinical luxury proves mighty appealing. In short order all the Kims find employment by deceptive means in the Park household. Dad (Song Kang Ho) becomes the trusted chauffeur of Mr. Park (Lee Sun Kyun, elegantly condescending); Mother (Chang Hyeae Jin) takes the place of the Parks' longtime housekeeper (Lee Jung Eun, a wonderful two-sided performance); daughter fills the role of the unruly Park boy's visual arts tutor/counselor. Easy peasy, she says: "I Googled 'art therapy' and ad-libbed the rest."

It's a pleasure watching the story's home-invasion con click into place. The first half of "Parasite" carefully unrolls the rug Bong then pulls out from under the audience. Avoiding spoilage here, but it's fair game to say the Kim family pays for its heartless stratagems, a comeuppance tipped by the reappearance of a character pushed out of the narrative (and the Park home) earlier on. When the Parks go away on a camping trip, the drunken revels and smashed glassware leads the Park clan to a discovery that leads to increasingly sinister and bloody doings.

The screenplay co-written by Bong and Han Jin-won stays clearly, even doggedly on-point in its themes of class resentment and economic warfare. The shift into varying suspense thriller guises, and finally into disarming depths of feeling, works like magic, both inevitable and unpredictable. I'm not sure how Bong pulled it off. Then again, all his movies make similar transitions; the worlds he creates live and breathe, even when the plot machinations remain carefully calibrated to unsettle.



Oh, and there's a local angle! The fake art instructor's alter ego is "Jessica from Chicago," an Illinois State University graduate. It's one of many such scams being run by the Kims, exploiting the Parks for all they're worth, while the Park family follows its own code of blinkered bourgeois behavior. Like Jordan Peele's "Get Out," Bong's "Parasite" expresses consequential ideas that matter to the filmmaker about the way we live today, and the prejudice and malice we create for ourselves and others. The best social satires, like this one, dwell in the underworld where the sinister, the sobering and the bitterly funny swirl in the same stream of consciousness.

There's a reason, in other words, people want to see what happens in "Parasite," and how. And then talk about it.

In Korean with English subtitles.

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pain and glory

Monday, January 27, 7:30

Reviewed by Kenneth Turan | Los Angeles Times | Rated R | 113 Mins.

A surprise in all ways except its surpassing quality, "Pain and Glory" reveals master Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar forging dazzling new paths while being completely himself.

Dramatic rather than melodramatic, autobiographical but only around the edges, using Antonio Banderas in unexpected ways but skillfully enough to win him the best actor prize at Cannes, Almodóvar takes delight in contradicting whatever you might be expecting.

Yet on the other hand this at times austere story of an aging filmmaker ("a director with his aches and pains" in Almodóvar's words) at a crisis point in his life is very much like the director in that very unpredictability.

Instead of the shocks of melodrama, a genre the filmmaker loves passionately, "Pain and Glory" is successful in the way its considerable classic emotional heft manages to sneak up and wallop you by the close.

Artfully set up in their own place and time by Almodóvar's fluid screenplay, events that seem random turn out to be intimately connected, with the filmmaker himself emerging one more time as someone having way more imagination than we do.

A film with many touchstones, pain, memory and enduring love among them, "Pain and Glory" concerns itself most with the nature and influence of the creative impulse and the power of the past to revive and enlighten us in the present.

And, not surprisingly since Almodóvar has just turned 70, it both demonstrates and deals with how all things change with age, the regrets we have to live with and those we do not.

Not only has development of the drug Herceptin saved the lives of an untold number of women with a particularly aggressive form of breast cancer, but it also opened new avenues of research that have led to multiple other targeted therapies that...

Given that Almodóvar has a considerable amount in common with Salvador Mallo, "Pain and Glory's" filmmaker protagonist, including living in the identical apartment with the same art on the walls, it's tempting to see this film as more autobiographical than it is.

But in an interview at Cannes the director explained this was not the case, noting that while for practical reasons "my own reality was the start," invention inevitably became the order of the day.

Banderas, who has worked with the director on seven previous films, is the heart of things here, but his exceptional work is very different from the large, energetic performances that made him a Hollywood star. Even Almodóvar himself, despite his decades-long

friendship with the actor, confessed at Cannes he wasn't initially sure the switch was possible.

As it turned out, the actor's Salvador Mallo expertly projects more stillness and gravitas than energetic brio. It's a master class in restrained charisma that confirms that a gifted performer underplaying enhances feelings in the most effective way.

Mallo is first met, of all places, standing stock still at the bottom on a Madrid indoor swimming pool. As a scar running the length of his back hints, and as we soon learn, Mallo is two years removed from spinal surgery but still in intense, debilitating pain.

Not only is being underwater easy on the back, it conjures the first of the film's many luminous forays into enriching memory. The director reflects on his 9-year-old self (beautifully played by Asier Flores) hanging out with his mother Jacinta (Penélope Cruz one more time) as she and her friends wash sheets by the river near his boyhood home.

Leaving the health club, Mallo runs into an actress friend (Cecilia Roth, another Almodóvar veteran), telling her that though he feels he can't live without directing, his back pain is so excruciating he may have to give it up.

Mallo also tells her that he's just re-seen and enjoyed "Sabor," a film he made 32 years earlier, and though he insists he doesn't hold a grudge, he's clearly still furious at star Alberto Crespo for acting choices made lo those many years ago.

But because the city's cinemathèque has restored "Sabor" and wants to have a gala screening, Mallo makes his way out to Crespo's house to ask him to participate even though the two haven't exchanged a word in the decades since their altercation.

Sharply played by Asier Etxeandia, Crespo is still angry as well, but at the moment he's preoccupied with "chasing the dragon," slang for smoking heroin off of aluminum foil. Mallo, who's never indulged, decides to try it and even more memories result.

"Pain and Glory's" central remembrance centers on the time young Mallo and his family moved to Paterna, in Valencia, in search of better times and ended up living in one of the city's strange, cave-like underground dwellings.

It's here that he meets Eduardo (César Vicente), a young laborer who he teaches to read and write in exchange for the handsome youth doing work around the cave. Also coming into play is a reluctant decision by the adult Mallo to allow actor Crespo to turn "Addiction," a short memoir he's written about his life in the more recent past of 1980s Madrid, into a one-man theatrical show.

That all these disparate elements could appear in the same film, let alone coalesce almost magically by the close, may sound beyond belief, but Almodóvar, a filmmaker surely at the height of his powers, is up to the task.

"It's a question of the passage of time," he said at Cannes about his switch from melodrama to drama, adding puckishly, "This is because I am getting old." Whatever the reason, the results speak articulately and movingly for themselves. In Spanish with English subtitles.

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JOYEUX NOËL

"A vivid, quietly powerful recreation of a truly extraordinary moment in history."

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Monday, December 16 at 7:30 pm

"One of the best films of the decade."

Award Circuit

Monday, January 20 at 7:30 pm



pain and glory

"It's a deeply personal and very moving film, anchored by the best work of Banderas' career."

Brian Tallerico, RogerEbert.com

Monday, January 27 at 7:30 pm