



Summer Hours

Director: Olivier Assayas

Country: France

Date: 2008

*A review by A.O. Scott for **The New York Times**:*

In a literal, almost banal sense, Olivier Assayas's "Summer Hours" is a movie about an inheritance. Hélène Berthier (Edith Scob), a silver-haired matriarch enthroned among her children and grandchildren at the beginning of the film, leaves behind a charming country house and a cherished art collection, and her heirs, as is normal, must figure out what to do with it all after her death.



Hélène's eldest son, Frédéric (Charles Berling), wants to keep everything as it is, so that the next generation can gather at the old place and appreciate Grandma's stuff. But Frédéric's sister, Adrienne (Juliette Binoche), and their younger brother, Jérémie (Jérémy Renier), who live abroad (she in the United States, he in China with his wife and three children), would rather sell the house and most of what is in it, donating the best of the paintings, pieces of furniture and sundry knickknacks to the Musée d'Orsay.

That, in a nutshell, is the dramatic arc of this extraordinary film, which, in spite of its modest scale, tactful manner and potentially dowdy subject matter, is packed nearly to bursting with rich meaning and deep implication. And this is only fitting, since one of Mr. Assayas's themes is the way that inanimate things accrue value, sentimental and otherwise — the curious alchemy that transforms certain objects into art.

Looking at a silver tea service, Adrienne, a designer whose tastes are generally more modern than her mother's, remarks that such distinctions don't matter in the end, that beauty is beauty, an inherent, intuitively recognizable quality that transcends periods or styles. And while Mr. Assayas's filmmaking techniques are identifiably of the moment — and his sensibility is as thoroughly French as the long, painstakingly prepared family meals that punctuate "Summer Hours" — the assurance and aesthetic poise of the film make it quietly ravishing.

The camera (wielded by Eric Gautier, who has worked frequently with Mr. Assayas, as well as, among many others, with Sean Penn on "Into the Wild") seems less like a mechanical apparatus than an organ of perception, even of consciousness. Its movements mimic those of a person's attention, at times restlessly trying to gather information from all directions, at times observing with serene and sympathetic concentration, occasionally puzzled but never bored.



And there is not a dull moment in "Summer Hours," even though the high points of its action (the big scene is a visit to Hélène's house by a group of appraisers) sound singularly tedious. It is arranged in three parts — panels, almost, in a triptych on the topic of mutability — followed by a brief coda.

First, we meet H  l  ne and her family, and learn something about her devotion to her uncle, a noted painter named Paul. We also witness Fr  d  ric's anxious reaction to his mother's intimations of mortality. In the hectic comings and goings of a summer afternoon — the peculiar busyness of a family in repose — we can see the tensions and alliances in her scattered brood, whose love is nonetheless equally evident.

Fr  d  ric, Adrienne and J  r  mie are all there, and they gather again in the wake of H  l  ne's death to negotiate the fate of her property. Life will go on, with an acknowledgment of loss that will always seem insufficient. A precious piece of furniture that finds a home in a museum is also in a state of exile, just as members of a family, once the older generation is gone, are both set free and set adrift.

“Summer Hours” is interested in the things as well as in the people, whose sometimes prickly individuality is incarnated by a flawless cast. (Ms. Binoche, as she did in Hou Hsiao-hsien's “Flight of the Red Balloon,” seems to relish bringing her natural grace to the role of a difficult and abrasive person).

Along with the three siblings, Mr. Assayas contemplates a pair of paintings by Camille Corot (Fr  d  ric's favorites, which don't much impress his teenage children); a panel by Odilon Redon; and a desk, armoire and several vases of similarly notable pedigree. (Most of the treasures that appear in the film are authentic, having been lent to the filmmaker by the real museum to which they are donated by his fictional characters.)

The point is not to fetishize these items, but rather to ponder how and why they arouse such strong feelings, how they function both as cultural artifacts and private totems. H  l  ne, who is deeply attached to her collection, nonetheless anticipates its dispersal, explaining to Fr  d  ric that in spite of their preciousness, the things in her house are a “residue” of life, without a life of their own. Fr  d  ric nonetheless dreams of holding on to it all for at least one more generation, but the film's clearest and most poignant insight is that this longing, which is essentially to stop time, can never be fulfilled.

This is true not only of families, which are always in flux even as they offer an image of stability and continuity to the world, but of societies and nations as well, and “Summer Hours” is, in its understated way, as much about France as it is about H  l  ne and her children. Her property ends up in the museum because it is part of a cultural patrimony, each piece an emblem of a tradition that is worldly and cosmopolitan but also rooted in rich local soil.

This film is, in part, a meditation on the changes that globalization has wrought on this legacy. J  r  mie's job with a sneaker company is lucrative and fulfilling enough to keep him in Asia for the foreseeable future, and Adrienne, though she disapproves of his corporate career, is similarly enmeshed in the transnational economy. Fr  d  ric, an economist, no doubt understands the forces that keep his brother and sister far from home, and is in any case powerless to challenge them.

Mr. Assayas is similarly philosophical. Globalization is a phenomenon he has considered before, obliquely and overtly, in films like “Irma Vep,” “Demonlover” and “Boarding Gate,” but “Summer Hours,” as calm and quiet as its title, is in some ways his most coherent and complex exploration of the current shape of the world. Don't be fooled by the apparent modesty of its ambitions. Sometimes a small, homely object — a teapot, a writing desk, a sketchbook, a movie about such things — turns out to be a masterpiece.

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