

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Varying Portraits of Women in Top Films

David Sheward · Monday, January 20th, 2025

This year's Best Actress Oscar race is particularly crowded. With only five slots open, many fine performances may be edged out. Among the other front-runners are stars playing women struggling with sexuality, aging, life and death itself.



Mark Edyelshteyn and Mikey Madison in *Anora*.

Credit: Neon

Like the transient, motel-dwellers in Sean Baker's *Tangerine* and *The Florida Project*, the characters in his *Anora* live on the edges of conventional society. Anora, a Brooklyn-based exotic dancer who falls for the son of a fabulously wealthy Russian oligarch, unashamedly pedals her body. The oligarch family and their minions operate above the law and other constraints. The difference is Anora and Igor, the hired muscle who tries to support her and is attracted to her, have a sense of honor beyond themselves. Ivan and his parents don't care who they step on as long as they get what they want. Mikey Madison is unvarnished and uncynical as the title character, fiercely believing in herself and the possibility of love in her sordid surroundings.



Nicole Kidman and Harris Dickinson in *Babygirl*.

Credit: A24

Babygirl, *The Substance* and *The Last Showgirl* are directed and written by women and feature female protagonists facing aging issues. The first two rely on the respective genre tropes of erotic thriller and horror while Gia Coppola's *Showgirl* is an intimate character study. I felt I knew the characters and what drove them in *Anora*. From Anora herself to the disgusting oligarch family to the hired goons who accompany Anora on a bizarre trek through Brooklyn and Manhattan, they were all real, three-dimensional beings. I didn't get the same depth from Halina Reijn's *Baby Girl* which stars Nicole Kidman as a super-successful CEO with serious sexual issues. In a reversal of *Fatal Attraction*, she begins a weird, semi-sadomasochistic affair with a 20-something intern (Harris Dickinson) who possesses almost supernatural sensitivity and wisdom. Apparently her husband (Antonio Banderas) just doesn't do it for her and doesn't understand her need to be humiliated. He's portrayed as out of touch with up-to-date psychology and power dynamics. He's a theater director staging a modern production of *Hedda Gabbler*. The fact that he's directing an "old-fashioned" play about women is supposed to be evidence of his cluelessness of his wife's needs.

Both Kidman and Dickinson's characters are not clearly defined beyond their sexual roles. Apart from a few lines and rapid flashbacks, we know nothing of their respective pasts or what motivates them.



Demi Moore in *The Substance*.

Credit: Working Title Films

Coralie Fargeat's *The Substance* is deliberately over-the-top, peopled with caricatures of show-biz types. Demi Moore stars as Elisabeth Sparkle, a mature exercise video star who has aged out of her network TV show. In a bow to *Death Becomes Her*, she becomes hooked on a mysterious formula which allows her to regenerate every other week into a younger, tighter self (Margaret Qualley, deliciously evil). The only problem is she must follow strict guidelines. Of course she doesn't with horrific results (no spoilers but the climax references *Carrie*). It's a wild, goofy film and Moore works hard, enduring prosthetic make-up (always a help in the Oscar race) and conveying Elisabeth's self-loathing and nutsy determination to stay young. Dennis Quaid is a zany cartoon as the chauvinist producer of her show.



Pamela Anderson in *The Last Showgirl*.

Credit: Roadside Attractions

While *Babygirl* is all about sex and *The Substance* is an elaborate parody, *The Last Showgirl* is sensitive and realistic. Like Elisabeth Sparkle, Shelly (Pamela Anderson in a career comeback not unlike Moore's), is facing an uncertain future after decades of getting by on her looks. After 30 years, her tacky Vegas spectacle is closing and there is nowhere else for her to go. Anderson is touching, tender and transparent as Shelly. You can see her thoughts play across her beautiful features, especially when she is about to go onstage and her forced smile at first resembles a death's head grimace. But then the spotlight hits her and she exults in her natural element: the limelight. Jamie Lee Curtis is a riot as Shelly's gambling-addicted, cocktail-waitress friend, Annette.



Tilda Swinton and Julianne Moore in *The Room Next Door*.

Credit: Warner Brothers Entertainment

The women in Oscar winner Pedro Almodovar's *The Room Next Door* speak as if they've translated from another language. The dialogue is in complete sentences and is stiffly formal. It reminded me of Woody Allen's "serious" films like *Interiors* where everyone spoke as if they were at a board meeting. This is probably because it's Almodovar's first English-language feature. It felt as there was a filter between me and his protagonists Ingrid and Martha. I couldn't relate to their serious dilemma—the terminally ill Martha (Tilda Swinton looking like the White Witch of Narnia) wants her friend Ingrid (Julianne Moore) to be in the next room when she commits suicide and handle any pesky loose details like dealing with the police. I kept thinking, "Can't she just move to a state where euthanasia is legal like Oregon?" The lady in front of me at the movie said a friend of hers just told everyone she was ending it all and heading to New Jersey where the practice is evidently OK. It's also legal in Washington (both the state and in DC), Hawaii, Maine, Colorado, California and Vermont. But maybe you have to be a resident there and Martha couldn't wait. Another element that reminded me of Allen's *Interiors*: there was no humor. A big switch from the auteur of *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*.

The lead actresses, and John Turturro as a former lover of both, deliver bloodless performances. Turturro plays a pompous author forecasting gloom and doom because of climate change and the pairing of the radical right with neo-liberalism. He seems to exist solely for Ingrid to declare optimism while they eat lunch in a beautiful upstate restaurant. (The art direction is tastefully sterile, like the film itself.)

Swinton did receive a Golden Globe nomination, probably because in addition to playing Martha, she dyed her hair and doubled as Michele, Martha's estranged daughter. Both performances are stylized and frosty, unlike those of Madison, Kidman, Moore, and especially Anderson, the realest of the bunch.

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