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Girl with a Pearl Earring (United Kingdom/Luxembourg, 2003)

A movie review by James Berardinelli

Girl with a Pearl Earring is the first feature for director Peter Webber. Most freshman filmmakers don't come close to Webber's level of accomplishment, and (not to take anything away from him) some of the credit must certainly be parceled out to the cast and the cinematographer, Eduardo Serra. *Girl with a Pearl Earring* offers sumptuous visuals and compelling drama effectively intermingled in a pleasing, satisfying production. The director has crafted the film with great care, composing each frame like a painting with respect to color, light, camera placement, and texture. *Girl with a Pearl Earring* could be silent and it would still be an amazing achievement. Indeed, the dialogue is sparse, which forces the performers to do most of their acting with expressions and body language - something Scarlett Johansson (who can also be seen in *Lost in Translation* (https://www.reelviews.net/php_review_template.php?identifier=33)) excels at. By reading her eyes and face, we understand her thoughts.

The movie purports to tell the story behind the creation of Vermeer's 1665 painting, "Girl with a Pearl Earring." Since historical records are sketchy at best, most of the screenplay (based on Tracy Chevalier's book) is conjecture. The film does not carry a "based on real events" label. Nevertheless, the postulated tale is both credible and dramatically solid, thus forming the spine of a sensitive, intelligent motion picture.

Griet (Johansson) goes to work in the household of Johannes Vermeer when she's a teenager. Forced into service because her parents can no longer support her, she must endure difficult conditions in order to remain employed. The Vermeers are not easy to work for. The head of the household (Colin Firth) is a moody individual, and spends long hours locked away in his vast studio. His perpetually pregnant wife, Catharina (Essie Davis), is resentful and jealous of Griet's youth and beauty. His mother-in-law, Maria (Judy Parfitt), is a strict disciplinarian. His children don't like Griet, and his patron, van Ruijven (Tom Wilkinson), likes her too much. Eventually, van Ruijven's attraction for Griet leads him to commission a painting of her. Maid posing for master leads to a variety of tensions, both domestic and erotic. The result of this, however, is "Girl with a Pearl Earring."

Most recent movies about painters have done a poor job of conveying the delicacy and complexity of the artistic process. Not so in this case. Webber's approach gives us excellent insight into Vermeer's creative process. The scenes in his studio, especially those with Griet working as his assistant/apprentice, are among the best the movie

has to offer. The relatively straightforward melodrama of the friction between Griet and the rest of the household is counterbalanced by the better, more complex material. The sexual chemistry between Griet and Vermeer is wonderfully understated, but unmistakable. The most erotic moment of the film comes when Vermeer steals a glance at Griet with her hair unbound. It's every bit as sensual as if he had seen her naked.

Johansson's sublime performance is ably supported by those of her better-known co-stars. Colin Firth gives us a brooding, dour Vermeer who only shows passion while painting (imagine Mr. Darcy with long hair). Judy Parfitt is her usual excellent, acid-tongued self. Tom Wilkinson gives himself to debauched abandon. And Essie Davis plays her part as a grown-up spoiled brat to the hilt. We have come to anticipate top-notch acting in British productions, and our expectations are not disappointed here. *Girl with a Pearl Earring* is one of those films that does many things right, and that places it among the year's best period pieces. It's a cut above the usual BBC costume drama.

Girl with a Pearl Earring (United Kingdom/Luxembourg, 2003)

Director: Peter Webber (<https://www.reelviews.net/search/director/peter-webber>)

Cast: Scarlett Johansson (<https://www.reelviews.net/search/actor/scarlett-johansson>), Colin Firth (<https://www.reelviews.net/search/actor/colin-firth>), Tom Wilkinson (<https://www.reelviews.net/search/actor/tom-wilkinson>), Judy Parfitt (<https://www.reelviews.net/search/actor/judy-parfitt>), Cillian Murphy (<https://www.reelviews.net/search/actor/cillian-murphy>), Essie Davis (<https://www.reelviews.net/search/actor/essie-davis>)

Screenplay: >Olivia Hetreed, based on the novel by Tracy Chevalier (https://www.reelviews.net/search/screenplay/olivia-hetreed__-based-on-the-novel-by-tracy-chevalier)

Cinematography: Eduardo Serra (<https://www.reelviews.net/search/cinematography/eduardo-serra>)

Music: Alexandre Desplat (<https://www.reelviews.net/search/music/alexandre-desplat>)

U.S. Distributor: Lionsgate

Run Time: 1:35

U.S. Release Date: 2003-12-12

MPAA Rating: "PG-13" (Sexual Situations) (https://www.reelviews.net/search/mpaa/pg_13)

Genre: DRAMA (<https://www.reelviews.net/search/genre/drama>)

Subtitles: none

Theatrical Aspect Ratio: 2.35:1

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