

Away from Her (2006)

“The desires of the heart are as crooked as corkscrews... Dance while you can.”

Major Credits:

Director: Sarah Polley

Screenplay: Sarah Polley, from a story by Alice Munro (“The Bear Came over the Mountain”)

Cast: Julie Christie (Fiona Anderson), Gordon Pinsent (Grant Anderson), Olympia Dukakis (Marian), Michael Murphy (Aubrey), Kristen Thomson (Kristy)

Executive Producer: Atom Egoyan

Production Background

Sarah Polley, who was still in her twenties when this film was released, has been acting in movies since she was a child. The Toronto born writer/director had previously appeared in two successful features by the distinguished Canadian director Atom Egoyan (*Exotica* and *The Sweet Hereafter*), who serves as executive producer on this, her first film. Polley had also acted in two films with Julie Christie, *No Such Thing* and *The Secret Life of Words*, and her husband at the time, David Wharnsby, was the film’s editor. *Away from Her* won the Genie, the Canadian Oscar, for direction and was nominated for an Academy Award for best adapted screenplay. It was filmed in the lakeside town of Paris, Ontario.

Cinematic Aspects:

1. Casting: *Away from Her* marks the stunning return of one of the great stars of the late 1960s international film renaissance, Julie Christie (*Billy Liar*, *Darling*, *Doctor Zhivago*, *Far from the Madding Crowd*). Viewers of a certain age will remember her as a luminous, sexy icon of the screen, “sweet and ironic,” her beauty and charisma still felt in the character she plays here, determined to sustain “a little bit of grace.” Like Fiona, Christie bears “the spark of life” that defines her character. Her performance earned Christie an Academy Award nomination. (Unfortunately, the actress seen in the grainy opening close-up of the young Fiona is not Julie Christie from the 1960s but Stacey LaBerge, otherwise unknown—the difference is palpable.)
2. Editing: Befitting a drama about Alzheimer’s disease, the narrative employs a disrupted chronology analogous to the fracturing of memory. The voiceover heard in the opening lines, for example, is repeated verbatim in dialogue much later. The discontinuous story line also requires the audience to remain attentive to details, as if holding on to the evanescent lives of the characters. Note, too, the use of *dissolves* and *overlapping sound* for transitions between scenes, reinforcing the sense of passing time but also providing a metaphor for the blurring of memory.

3. **Camera Movement:** The restless tracking shots and panning shots animate what might have been a dreary, stagnant essay about the ravages of aging. Note, for example, the stunning bird's eye shot of Fiona collapsed in the snow that then moves in to a close-up.
4. **Lighting:** Rather than shooting against a dark skyline or within drab interiors, Polley chooses very bright lighting (snowy landscapes and blue skies, the airily lit entryway to the retirement home) for most scenes. She also fades to white rather than black on a couple of occasions. Note the beautiful backlit close-up of Fiona when she poses before the window on her way to Meadowlake.

Questions for Discussion:

1. As the story develops, cracks appear in the 44 year marriage of the Andersons, and some suspicions arise that Fiona may be acting to "punish" her husband. How do you understand Fiona's behavior in the retirement home? Does the film ultimately exonerate Grant for not "forsaking" his wife or reveal his shallowness?
2. Although the film undoubtedly "belongs" to Christie, several supporting players have key moments that illuminate its themes. In a small role, the purple-haired Goth girl (Nina Dobrev) comments on Grant's "pathetic" presence, "I should be so lucky." The nurse, Kristy (Kristen Thomson), both supports and rebukes Grant in different scenes and serves as a guide to the "progress" of Alzheimer's. Similarly, Marion (Academy Award winner Olympia Dukakis) initially labels Grant "a jerk" and then helps to redeem him. She speaks the film's overriding truth: "Can't beat life."
3. *Away from Her* runs the considerable risk of becoming sentimental (imagine it as a Lifetime channel movie). The non-diegetic music, with its acoustic guitar and cloying piano, seems a mistake in this regard. How does Polley generally avoid lapsing into either maudlin emotionality or life affirming inspiration? What do you make of the film's closing image?