

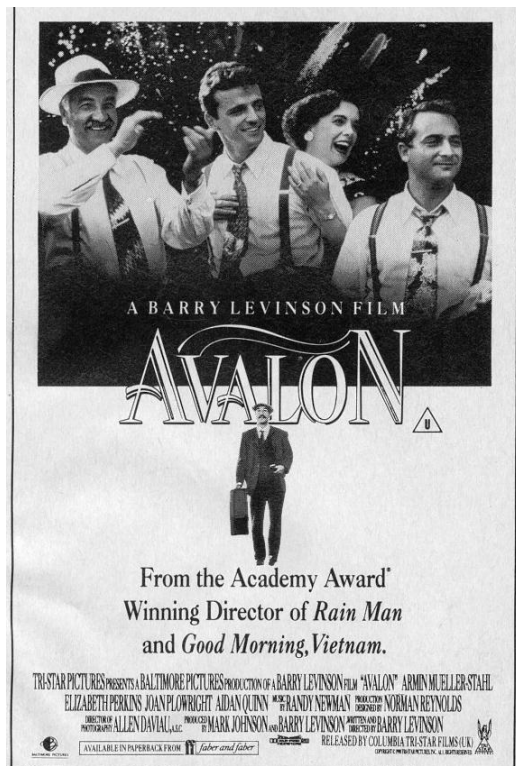
# Avalon

US : 1990 : dir. Barry Levinson : Tri-Star / Columbia / Baltimore : 128 min  
 prod: Barry Levinson & Mark Johnson : scr: Barry Levinson : dir.ph.: Allen Daviau  
[Elijah Wood](#) .....  
 Armin Mueller-Stahl; Elizabeth Perkins; Joan Plowright; Aidan Quinn; Eve Gordon; Lou Jacobi  
 Kevin Pollak; Ronald Guttman; Tom Wood; Leo Fuchs; Israel Rubinek; Grant Gelt;  
 Frania Rubinek; Neil Kirk; Miles A.Perman; Herb Levinson; Paul Quinn; Michael Krauss

| Ref: | Pages | Sources | Stills | Words | Ω | □ | ≠ | Z | ⚡ | Copy on VHS | Last Viewed |
|------|-------|---------|--------|-------|---|---|---|---|---|-------------|-------------|
| 5477 | 5½    | 10      | 2      | 2,612 | 3 | - | - | - | - | No          | unseen      |



*"When I were a lad, we 'ad to get up at six in 't mornin, eat a plate o' cold gravel, work down at 't mill twelve hour a day seven days a week for thruppence a month, and when we got 'ome our dad 'ould thrash us to sleep wi' 'is belt"*  
 Source: Film Review 1991-92



Source: Time Out

“An epic human comedy... a sly, golden, enchanting movie.”

– Nigel Andrews, **Financial Times**

“A loving, nostalgic celebration of family life.”

– David Robinson, **The Times**

“Beautifully filmed and acted... eloquent, moving, sometimes richly humorous.”

– Hugo Davenport, **Daily Telegraph**

**Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001 review:**

“Deeply-felt, personal story by writer-director Levinson, of an immigrant's life and times in Baltimore, and the changes the years bring to his large and boisterous family. Long, deliberately paced and not always successful, but filled with telling moments and loving visual reminders of a way of life that's disappeared from our midst. The third of Levinson's Baltimore chronicles, following **"DINER"** and **"TIN MEN"**. Melancholy and evocative score by Randy Newman. \*\*\* ”

**The Critics' Film Guide review:**

“A family saga covering four generations, a lament for the extended Jewish family, killed off – so Levinson argues – by prosperity, the move to suburbia, and television.

The third of this writer-director's pictures to be filmed in his home town of Baltimore (the others were **"DINER"** and **"TIN MEN"**) is heavily autobiographical. It is glorious to look at, thanks to Allen Daviau's Oscar-nominated cinematography, and features a marvellous cast led by Armin Mueller-Stahl; but it's proof that if you don't have a good plot, you don't have anything. After more than two hours, most audiences will have formed their own opinion on why these extended families really break up: everyone just gets bored with all that incessant, pointless bickering. It divided the critics, some of whom loved it; others, like me, thought it rambling and sentimental. **5/10**”

“Here's a gorgeous film with a spellbinding start... Levinson's... best.”

– Shaun Usher, **Daily Mail**

“A lengthy and leisurely epic ...[which] epitomises the age-old struggle between defending one's national identity and the cultural assimilation that modern capitalism demands... Levinson manages to combine a cinematic sense of magic with a well-observed sense of reality.”

– **Morning Star**

“The affection and authenticity of this memoir are rich and appealing, but when someone slowly turns the pages of the family album, your interest tends to wane unless it happens to be your family.”

– Iain Johnstone, **Sunday Times**

“A lifeless experience devoid of a central conflict or purpose.”

– **Variety**

“An elegy to a mythical past. That's probably why people emerge from the theatre sniffing... There's a wide streak of fuddy-duddyism in Levinson's notion that the family used to be the bulwark of the nation's value system. It may seem unfair to say this, but at times the movie seems like a product of the cultural wing of the Republican Party – a lament for those bygone days when mothers stayed at home and watched over their children, and children obeyed their parents, and so on.”

– Pauline Kael

**Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:**

“Dealing with an extended Jewish family

headed by brothers who left Europe in the



*Nostalgia for the clannish immigrant family – a hallmark not of Scorsese’s “GOODFELLAS”  
But of Coppola’s GODFATHER trilogy.*

*Source: indeterminate*

early 20<sup>th</sup> century, “AVALON” seeks to recapture both a period (the post-Second World War era, as television became king) and the essence of family life, with all its feuding, pettiness and tumult.

Still, beyond the beautiful photography, spotless classic cars and slavishly detailed sets, the film lacks focus or a real reason for being. The patriarch of the central nuclear family is Sam Krichinsky (Armin Mueller-Stahl), who arrives wide-eyed in the US on the Fourth of July. His reminiscences to his grandchildren introduce us to the extended clan.

Son Jules (Aidan Quinn) changes his name... and goes into business selling TV sets. Jules marries and has his own son (Elijah Wood), who becomes close to Sam, while Jules’ wife (Elizabeth Perkins) chafes under the intrusiveness of his mother (Joan Plowright).

After meandering through the family life for nearly two hours, Levinson rushes to what proves a moving conclusion, one that seeks to connect all that proceeded it on some higher level.”

#### **Video Movie Guide 1993 review:**

“For the third film in his Baltimore trilogy, which also includes “TIN MEN” and “DINER”, writer-director Barry Levinson has created what may come to be considered his

masterpiece: a heart-tugging story of fifty years in the lives of three generations of Russian-Jewish immigrants. Armin Mueller-Stahl gives an unforgettable performance as the ultimate grandfather, whose honest values and love of family are slowly pushed out of fashion by something called progress. Rated “PG” for brief profanity. \*\*\*\*½ ”

#### **The Virgin Film Guide review:**

“Completing writer-director Barry Levinson's "Baltimore trilogy," which began with the acclaimed "DINER" and continued with "TIN MEN", the autobiographical "AVALON" is a lyrical, melancholy account of an immigrant family's rise and gradual disintegration.

Immigrating to Baltimore [sic] in 1914, Sam Krichinsky (Armin Mueller-Stahl) is reunited with his brothers – Gabriel (Lou Jacobi), Hymie (Leo Fuchs) and Nathan (Israel Rubinek) – and drawn into the "family circle," whose members pool their resources to bring relatives over from the old country. Wallpaper hangers during the week, the brothers are musicians during the weekends, and it is during one of their gigs that Sam meets Eva (Joan Plowright), his future wife. Their son, Jules (Aidan Quinn) does not follow in his father's footsteps as a manual labourer. Instead he becomes a door-to-door salesman, sometimes taking along his young son, Michael (Elijah Wood). During one of these outings, Michael watches in terror as his father is

stabbed by a mugger. While recuperating, Jules is given a television set by his family. The only "programme" at that time is a nonstop test pattern; nevertheless, Jules glimpses a future in the new invention.

Not unlike Martin Scorsese's **"GOODFELLAS"**, **"AVALON"** is concerned with the perils of sacrificing humaneness for hollow material success, a sort of 90s cinematic hangover from the "go for it" excesses of the 80s. The crucial difference between the approaches taken by these two accomplished filmmakers is that Scorsese's theme rises naturally from his material while Levinson imposes his themes on his material. Thus, **"GOODFELLAS"**'s strengths – its strong sense of time, place, character, and mood – become **"AVALON"**'s weaknesses. Despite the film's meticulously detailed production design, its human details don't ring true. It's hard to imagine even the most alienated of families eating Thanksgiving dinner silently in front of the TV. If Jules' family is really that alienated, how did it become that way? The movie offers no clue beyond the presence of the all-powerful boob tube, which has displaced the extended family that once gathered in the living room, talking, arguing, and telling stories of their immigrant experiences.

Despite a spirited performance by Elizabeth Perkins (**"BIG"**, **"LOVE AT LARGE"**, **"THE DOCTOR"**), Jules' wife Ann, like all the women in **"AVALON"**, remains only a hazily defined character. Equally vague is Jules' father Sam, who goes from paperhanging to owning a nightclub, then returns to paperhanging, inexplicably amassing a fortune in the process. For that matter, the film is full of loose plot threads; Levinson continually sacrifices narrative sense to clobber his audience with obvious and underdeveloped thematic points. We don't know how Sam built his comfortable retirement from a career as a paperhanger. We don't know what Jules does for a living after dropping out of his retailing partnership with Izzy. More importantly, Avalon, the neighbourhood in which Sam settles his family, never comes alive; it never becomes tangible enough to justify the film being named after it.

As a result, **"AVALON"** never really comes alive as a movie, although Allen Daviau's photography is exceptional, evoking many images of life that exist no more, and the film is graced with a flawless ensemble cast. Quinn's (**"DESPERATELY SEEKING**

**SUSAN"**, **"STAKEOUT"**, **"AT PLAY IN THE FIELDS OF THE LORD"**) pivotal character gives the actor a plethora of varied moments to demonstrate his talent, and he is matched in touching displays by Mueller-Stahl and Joan Plowright as patriarch and matriarch and Elijah Wood as Jules and Ann's son. Ultimately, however, Levinson's very personal project never acquires a personality of its own."

#### Film Review 1991-92 review:

"Every now and then a filmmaker feels compelled to write and direct an epic chronicling his childhood and roots. Few have pulled it off as well as Barry Levinson, who shapes his childhood in Baltimore with a masterful hand. Armin Mueller-Stahl stars as Sam Krichinsky, an Eastern European immigrant who arrives in America in 1914. In Baltimore he sets up home, scraping together enough money to pay for his brothers and family to move across the ocean. Levinson's alter ego is little Michael (Elijah Wood), Krichinsky's grandson, who soaks up his family's history through big soulful eyes. From the annual ritual of Thanksgiving to less regular deaths and pregnancies, Levinson weaves a dense, magical tale of humanity that is touching and funny and gives a dignified perspective on the world we live in. **"AVALON"** doesn't strike a single false note.

Also with: Elizabeth Perkins (Ann Kaye), Joan Plowright (Eva Krichinsky), Aidan Quinn (Jules Kaye), Eve Gordon (Dottie Kirk), Lou Jacobi (Gabriel Krichinsky), Kevin Pollak (Izzy Kirk), Ronald Guttman (Simka), Tom Wood (Michael Kaye, as an adult), Leo Fuchs, Israel Rubinek, Grant Gelt, Frania Rubinek, Neil Kirk, Miles A. Perman, Herb Levinson, Paul Quinn, Michael Krauss, Ava Eileen Quinn, Irv Stein. Dir and Screenplay: Barry Levinson. Pro: Levinson and Mark Johnson. Ph: Allen Daviau. Ed: Stu Linder. Pro Des: Norman Reynolds. M: Randy Newman. Costumes: Gloria Gresham. Sound: Richard Beggs. (Tri-Star Columbia.) Rel: 1 March 1991. 128 mins. Cert U."

#### Still caption:

"The director as a young man: Elijah Wood portrays Michael, the alter ego of Barry Levinson, in Levinson's autobiographical masterpiece **"AVALON"** - seen here with Armin Mueller-Stahl."

**Time Out** review (6-13/03/91):

“Writer-director Levinson returns to his movie home of Baltimore for this semi-autobiographical voyage into family history. Sam Krichinsky (Mueller-Stahl), arriving in America from the Old Country on July 4, 1914, wanders awestruck against a night sky alive with firecrackers. He is joined by his brothers, who acquire jobs, produce children, and reside in a row-house neighbourhood. Levinson’s canvas broadens to include colourful characters like prattling Grandma Eva (Plowright). Sam and Eva’s son Jules (Quinn) makes his fortune selling televisions. While his wife Ann (Perkins) strives to distance her interfering in-laws, their son Michael (the Levinson character, played by Elijah Wood) dotes on Grandpa and learns the value of family and honesty. The sprawling story eventually traces four generations; changing circumstances and wider social influences are reflected in the way family circle meetings give way to internal divisions and personal ambitions. It’s a shamelessly sentimental interpretation of history, with television ushering in a generation which has lost the art of communication and the ability to care. Against this blinkered vision, even Levinson’s confident direction and ability to capture the absurdities and rhythms of everyday speech fail to provide sufficient compensation.”

[no listing in "Halliwell's Film Guide" or "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995"]

**Radio Times** review:

“Long and at time laborious account of immigrant Sam Krichinsky (Armin Mueller-Stahl), who begins a new life in Baltimore in

1914. The film is laced with poignant scenes as it traces Krichinsky’s life and that of his family over a period of years. But despite being a semi-autobiographical story, director/writer Barry Levinson never really allows his characters to come alive. A film to appreciate rather than one to get wrapped up in. \*\*\* ”

“Drama about the members of a Jewish family living in Baltimore in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.”

“Drama about an extended Jewish family in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.”

“Epic family saga completing Barry Levinson’s Baltimore trilogy of films, starring Aidan Quinn, Elizabeth Perkins. In 1914, Sam Krichinsky emigrates from Eastern Europe to Baltimore where he joins up with his three brothers who operate a decorating business and at weekends play as musicians.”

**TV Quick** (?) note:

“High-class soap about the members of a close-knit Jewish family in Baltimore.”

**What’s On TV** note:

“Moving saga following the life and times of a family of European Jews from their arrival in America early in the century through to the Sixties.”

“A moving drama following the fortunes of a Jewish family in America from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the Sixties.”

Several critics allude to the film’s inherently reactionary values, but it might just as well be read as an indictment of capitalist (greed-driven) society – as second and third generation immigrants claw their way into the bourgeoisie, so they jettison the very cultural and family traditions they fled communism to preserve. This homogenisation process, which runs counter to America’s perception of itself as an eclectic, “multicultural” society, is reflected not least in the concept that such immigrants arrived from a place called Europe. No immigrant ever arrived in the States from “Europe”, any more than from “Africa” or “Asia”. That failure to grasp the depth and breadth of cultural differences, or their value, continues apace with the – American – myth of the “global village” (by which they implicitly mean refashioning the entire planet in their own image).

That television impoverishes more than it enriches contemporary life is surely so self-evident as to defy contradiction. It is the primary agent of that homogenisation, and US television – perhaps more so than anywhere else – is driven by hard-nosed commercial agendas which don't give a fig for democracy or diversity. Television is a cattle market, and the viewers are its cattle.

Elijah Wood, 9, still an unknown at this point, was to become a counterpoint in US movies of the early 90s to the more abrasive, smug persona of Macaulay Culkin (which was more in tune with the *devil take the hindmost* spirit of the 80s). Whether as the defender of a battered younger brother in **"RADIO FLYER"**, as a matchmaker for his mother in **"FOREVER YOUNG"**, as the "perfect son" of **"NORTH"**, or the game hero of Disney's **"ADVENTURES OF HUCK FINN"**, Elijah Wood was always clean-cut, well-mannered and noble of heart, his doe-eyed handsome face without the merest hint of devilment. A better actor certainly than Culkin, and more becomingly modest, he nevertheless registered far lower on the personality meter. When the two of them went head-to-head in **"THE GOOD SON"** (93), Wood gave the better performance, but the eyes of the audience were on Culkin. Only when he attempted a disastrous Cockney accent as the Artful Dodger in a truly dreadful remake of **"OLIVER TWIST"** did his limitations become painfully apparent. At the time of writing, he is about to stake his future prospects on the role of Frodo Baggins in a new, CGI-assisted three-part filming of Tolkien's **"LORD OF THE RINGS"**. It will be interesting to see if there's still a broad public appetite for that tale, thirty years after its heyday with the post-hippy culture. Personally I doubt it. New age is looking old hat already.

See subject index under **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL TITLES, GRANDPARENTS** and **REFUGEES / EVACUEES / IMMIGRANTS**.