

EVERY TOTAL FILM FIVE-STAR MOVIE

— FROM 1997 TO 2022 —



TOTAL
FILM



FIVE STAR COLLECTION



193 FIVE-STAR REVIEWS

AMÉLIE, BOOGIE NIGHTS
GRAVITY, THE DARK KNIGHT
DUNE, THE WOLF OF WALL STREET
PLUS 187 MORE



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★★★★★

In 2022, *Total Film* celebrates 25 years since we published our first issue. Through this quarter of a century, we've seen many revolutions in cinema, from how films are made (greenscreen, 3D, motion capture) to how they're consumed (mega-multiplexes, home-cinema streaming). And *Total Film* has changed too. We've matured while staying true to the ethos of staying fun and accessible, we've seen stars rise, and indeed fall, and we've become more diverse in our coverage and representation too. One thing has never changed since our first issue, though: we've always aimed to bring you the best film reviews in any magazine around, to be a voice you can trust and believe in when it comes to the all-important decision on what to see at the cinema (or on streaming) tonight. And it's always been hard to get a full score in *Total Film*. After 25 years and more than 320 issues, with over 30 cinema releases reviewed every issue on average, only 193 films have ever received that five-star stamp of ultimate approval. And in this special issue we've got them all, and nothing else! We've filtered out re-releases of films originally released before our first issue (sorry, *Seven Samurai*, *GoodFellas*, *Metropolis* and countless other classics), and new cuts of older films (so sorry, *Alien: Director's Cut* and *Blade Runner: The Final Cut*), leaving only films from *TF*'s lifetime. We've edited some for length to fit them all on these 132 pages, but they're all here, and (mostly) in alphabetical order, so you can retread four-quadrant hits (*Avengers: Infinity War*), admire modern classics (*There Will Be Blood*), discover hidden gems (*Sicilian Ghost Story*), and even wrinkle your brow at our judgment at times (*Talladega Nights*?)... Did your favourite movie make the cut? Are there gaps in your watchlist? Read on to find out – and if you manage to tick off every movie on our list, feel free to let us know so we can congratulate you personally!

Enjoy this very special issue!

「 FUTURE 」



TOTAL FILM FIVE STAR COLLECTION

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Burnat filmed his mother pleading with an Israeli soldier after a family member is arrested.

5 BROKEN CAMERAS¹⁵

DIRECTOR Emad Burnat **YEAR** 2011

In 2005 the people of the Palestinian village of Bil'in, learned the Israeli government's Separation Wall would run close to their village, depriving them of much of their cultivated land. They resolved to protest by every non-violent means possible – and one of them, Emad Burnat, decided to document it with his camera.

Over the next five years, Burnat doggedly carries out his plan – despite being beaten up, wounded, jailed and having one camera after another smashed by soldiers. The story unfolds in parallel with the growing up of his youngest son, Gibreel, born just as the protests start, and we often watch events through the boy's wondering eyes. Almost his first words are “the wall”, “cartridge”, and “army”.

In collaboration with Jewish Israeli filmmaker Guy Davidi, Burnat's footage has been edited into a powerful story of defiance. The sights captured are sobering, shocking. We see ancient olive trees being set alight, settlers beating up protesters, Israeli soldiers firing tear-gas grenades – and sometimes bullets. One of Burnat's cameras takes a direct hit, saving his life, and augmenting the movie's immersive authenticity.

Emad's friends Adeeb and Bassem are prominent in every protest. Adeeb is fiery, indignant, haranguing the impassive troops. Bassem, a gentle giant, is ceaselessly optimistic. Yet it's Bassem who falls victim to a horrifying turn of events. Despite the palpable sense of despair running through the film, it does end on a note of victory – a small one, true, but the relief is testament to the film's intense emotional pull. **PHILIP KEMP**

THE VERDICT A hugely powerful, moving study of a village's stand against overwhelming state power. Despite the suffering and injustice, the final message is one of optimism.

120 BPM¹⁵

DIRECTOR Robin Campillo **YEAR** 2017

No polite history lesson, this always engrossing drama follows young Aids activists in the Paris branch of ACT UP in the early '90s. Drawing on his personal experiences, writer/director Robin Campillo (2013's *Eastern Boys*) places at the heart of this story the protest movement's weekly group meetings, held in a university lecture theatre.

The participants passionately debate the most effective ways to force the government into tackling the epidemic. These are not theoretical discussions but rather matters of life and death for the likes of the militant Sean (Nahuel Pérez Biscayart), an HIV-positive man whose T-cell count is becoming dangerously low. *120 BPM* shifts seamlessly between moods and modes. We witness the direct actions of the group, who storm the offices of drugs companies and stage nighttime 'die-ins' – lying down on the streets as if dead. There are dream-like interludes in nightclubs, where the protestors dance euphorically to house music.

As the film progresses, focus tightens on the intense relationship that develops between the dying Sean and newcomer Nathan (Arnaud Valois). Campillo's movie confronts death head-on, while celebrating its characters' defiant vitality. Performances are strong across the board and the film is filled with many memorable images – not least the aerial shots of a River Seine stained crimson.

THE VERDICT The personal is the political in this superb, emotionally affecting account of young Aids activists in 1990s France.

TOM DAWSON

TOM DAWSON



Arnaud Valois' Nathan joins the Aids activist fight in '90s Paris.



It was a mission with plenty of risks, not least helmet hair...

AD ASTRA TBC

DIRECTOR James Gray **YEAR** 2019

I always wanted to be an astronaut, for the future of mankind and all,” intones Brad Pitt in James Gray’s wondrous sci-fi. Set in the near future, at a time when “humanity looks to the stars”, *Ad Astra* casts Pitt as Roy McBride, a space explorer unquestionably made of the right stuff. Even in the most extreme of situations, his pulse rate never rises above 80.

McBride is miles above Earth when we first join him, climbing on the International Space Antenna and making adjustments as if he were up a first-floor ladder. Then, suddenly, a huge explosion causes him to tumble, a parachute thankfully slowing his fall in the first of several thrilling set-pieces dreamed up by Gray (*The Lost City Of Z*) and his long-time collaborator, co-writer Ethan Gross.

Part of a worldwide power surge caused by cosmic-ray bursts arriving from Neptune, this is seemingly no accident; 29 years earlier, a mission called the Lima Project – led by our hero’s own astronaut father, Clifford McBride (Tommy Lee Jones) – set off for the same planet to seek out new life.

McBride Sr. was the first man to reach Jupiter and Saturn, but has not been heard from in years and was presumed dead. Now, the government is convinced he’s behind the power surges. McBride Jr.’s mission is to head to Mars, the last manned outpost in our solar system,

THE VERDICT Sublime and stupendous. Beautiful, bold and remarkably executed, this is James Gray’s masterpiece, driven throughout by a career-best turn from Brad Pitt.

where he can reach a secure transmission facility in an attempt to send his dad a message.

Joining him is Colonel Pruitt (Donald Sutherland), who will chaperone him to a rocket bound for Mars. Amusingly, their flight is operated by Virgin – it seems Richard Branson’s desire for space travel came true after all.

On a stopover at the Moon – which has been grossly commercialised, t-shirt vendors and all – Pruitt and McBride head to the Mars rocket. In buggies, they’re chased down by pirates in a staggering sequence that fully takes into account the physics of the Moon’s gravity. Yet there is much more to come as McBride travels to the Red Planet, beautifully visualised by Gray and his DoP, Hoyte Van Hoytema (*Dunkirk*).

Pitt’s voiceover interjects throughout, as he muses on his troubled relationship with his father, absent for all of his adult life, and on his wife Eve (Liv Tyler), who shimmers in his memories. The obvious forebear is *Apocalypse Now*, with Tommy Lee Jones’ “legend” the out-of-this-world equivalent to Marlon Brando’s Kurtz.

After a potent mid-film turn from Ruth Negga as McBride’s contact on Mars, who has her own personal interest in the Lima Project, the emotional chords are struck deeply in the final act, where Gray lays bare the old adage about the son suffering the sins of the father. Best of all, following his fine work in *Once Upon A Time... In Hollywood*, Pitt is on sensational form with the most mature performance of his career. Could it be time for his first acting Oscar? **JAMES MOTTRAM**

AMERICAN MOVIE 15

DIRECTOR Mark Borchardt **YEAR** 2000

What is it with the latest batch of cinema-released documentaries? We’ve had the Oscar-winning *One Day In September*, the oddly touching *Beyond The Mat* and now this, a brutally honest and often hilarious account of one man’s quest to make the great American movie.

It could so easily have been a character assassination of wannabe director Mark Borchardt. With his weedy frame, jam-jar glasses and tendency to use big words he clearly doesn’t understand, lesser filmmakers would have simply taken the piss. Yet after spending years in the presence of the guy, the makers of *American Movie* chose to sieve through 70 hours of footage and discover the motivation of someone who truly believes he can make a great movie in the backwater that is Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin.

That Borchardt is a motivated filmmaker isn’t in doubt, but what’s surprising is to see how he throws himself into his project despite being so poor at everything else. There’s true tragedy in the fact that not even his own family rate his life which has, to date, resulted in a couple of children from a failed relationship, a job sweeping leaves in the local cemetery, a spell in the army and 15 years of alcoholism.

All of which would be terribly depressing if it wasn’t balanced with some of the most gut-bustingly hilarious scenes to splurge onto the screen since *South Park*. Mark and his chemically befuddled companion Mike are comedy magnets; quite simply, funny stuff happens around them. From nonsensical views about life to haphazard shooting schedules they’re very, very amusing. And, although *American Movie* only hints at the crushing terribleness of a film written, directed and starring Mark Borchardt, it chooses instead to revel in the fact that he did it. He made a movie. And that’s more than can be said for most of us. **JORDAN FARLEY**

THE VERDICT A fascinating insight into boringly normal life in Middle America. It serves up tragedy and comedy, and proves even the most ordinary people can provide extraordinary entertainment.



Audrey Tautou's portrayal as Amélie Poulain scooped up several awards.



AMELIE 15

DIRECTOR Jean-Pierre Jeunet **YEAR** 2001

So you're the co-director of surreal, nightmarish fairytales *Delicatessen* and *The City Of Lost Children*, and your last project was as helmer-for-hire on the last (and, let's face it, dumbest) instalment of the *Alien* franchise. What next? Well, rather than re-team with long-time collaborator Marc Caro and delve into the dingier corners of his brain-cellar, Jean-Pierre Jeunet has quit cheese-before-bedtime snacks, tapped into childhood memories and made a feelgood love story.

But what could have become a cloying, soft-focus self-indulgence binge is in fact the French director's best and most accessible picture yet – even for the subtitle-wary. And, as you'd expect from one half of the team responsible for post-apocalyptic cannibal-butchers, killer fleas and dream-stealing mad scientists, *Amélie* is a rom-com of an entirely different flavour to Hollywood's nutrition-free confections. Imaginary monsters, globetrotting garden gnomes, talking pig-shaped lamps and strange glass-boned old men all feature in this tale of a lonely girl with an overactive imagination and an undernourished heart.

Jeunet has constructed a contemporary Parisian fantasy, where the streets of Montmartre glow in the sun, where the waters of the canal are blue and sparkling and where every advertising billboard is an eye-massaging work of art.

Some critics have pointed out that Jeunet's Paris is also free of any signs of poverty or ethnic diversity, claiming that *Amélie* is a right-wing exercise in nostalgia for 'simpler' times. It's an opinion

so far off the mark as to be offensive. It's not as if *Amélie* has a transparent, right-wing agenda like, for instance, *Forrest Gump*. The fact that Jeunet hasn't felt the need to dabble in tokenism should be lauded. Besides, if the movie was so right-of-centre, would Mathieu Kassovitz, the Jewish director of ghetto drama *La Haine*, really have agreed to play the male lead?

SIMON KINNEAR

THE VERDICT

The rarest of cinematic rarities – a schmaltz-free feelgooder which doesn't just make you feel good, but reminds you that true love can exist and that beauty can be found in even the most seemingly mundane of places. Quite simply, c'est parfait.



Yes, we're including all the five-star reviews. Also the problematic ones.

AMERICAN BEAUTY 15

DIRECTOR Sam Mendes **YEAR** 1999

Don't be deceived by appearances. *American Beauty* may look like yet another Middle American family drama, with tears, laughter, rifts and reconciliations, but it isn't. Yes, it's a family drama (well, kind of...), yes it's set in Middle America and, yes, there are laughter and tears and rifts (although it soon becomes obvious that there won't be much reconciliation going on).

The first hint you should have that you're going to be watching something different here is the fact that this 'family drama' is directed by British theatre prodigy Sam Mendes. Mendes won awards for his revival of *Cabaret*, directed the original stage version of *Little Voice* and excited tabloids with *The Blue Room*. So you know you're going to be treated to a far fresher approach than you'd expect from schmaltz-prone Hollywood solids such as Ron Howard or Garry Marshall.

Kevin Spacey is flawless as Lester, seamlessly charting his transformation from a crumpled, hunched loser into a supremely self-confident forty-something slacker. Annette Bening, meanwhile, throws all her acting energy into playing the immaculately feathered Carolyn, making her snappy and superficial enough for you to believe Lester would grow to find her so repellent, yet resisting what could have been an easy slide into caricature. When she bursts into tears after a comically disastrous day, you can't help but feel guilty for laughing at her.

There's not a single false note struck by any of the actors. Thora Birch plays the troubled adolescent without resorting to theatrics, while Mena Suvari switches to the flip side of her *American Pie* nice-gal persona, pouting and preening as an oddly fragile, wannabe-model teenie-bitch. Finally, Wes Bentley is ideal as Ricky, the enigmatic boy-next-door with a compulsion for camcorders, blurring the line between unhinged weirdo and artistically inspired genius.

Indeed, blurring the lines is precisely what *American Beauty* is about. The movie itself is almost impossible to define. While the outcome is

THE VERDICT

obvious from the first line of Lester's voice-over, you can never work out exactly how you're going to get there. But what is certain is that *American Beauty* is a profound piece of cinema which works its way inside you, grabs hold of your heart and refuses to let go.



AMERICAN HONEY 15

DIRECTOR Andrea Arnold **YEAR** 2016

Prepare to (man)crush on Shia LaBeouf. Returning from a career wasteland to play a wastrel roaring across dustbowl America in a people carrier housing a peripatetic party posse, his charisma burns radioactive from the moment we, like heroine Star (superb newcomer Sasha Lane), first see him: hopping onto a Walmart checkout to strut his considerable stuff to Rihanna's 'We Found Love'.

American Honey sees one of Britain's most exciting filmmakers muscle her way to the vanguard of global cinema. Andrea Arnold here fashions a loose, ragged American epic, its narrative figure-eighting and cul-de-sac-ing dramatically, its unwieldy length (164 minutes!), with spin-cycle repetitions and flagrant dismissal of a three-act structure, bringing not just authenticity but a crazed, anything-goes energy. Yes, there's a shorter, tighter film in there, but that would lose... well, everything.

Early scenes sketch out Star's crushed life in Hicksville, Oklahoma. Then, after an oh-so-cute meeting with Jake (LaBeouf), she gets the hell out, joining the band of misfits as they travel the Midwest selling magazine subscriptions by day and hoovering intoxicants by night. Krystal (Riley Keough) is queen bee of the operation, and Jake is her on-call toy boy. Then Jake and Star begin to find love in a hopeless place...

With songs playing on loop, sun-soaked days bleeding into moonlit nights into weeks into months, and Robbie Ryan's gorgeously scuzzy photography capturing Hopper-esque Americana, Malickian nature and the detritus coating all, *American Honey* presents an endless summer in which everyone lives in the incandescent moment.

Arnold's masterpiece blows between twilight ambience and thrilling energy. And it's fuelled by outlaw spirit, with Jake and Star's high-voltage connection recalling such on-the-lam classics as *They Live By Night*, *Bonnie And Clyde* and *Badlands*. A gun is even introduced at one point, but such is Arnold's refusal to adhere to narrative conventions, its

later appearance doesn't play out quite as you'd expect.

Come the credits, this exhilarating, exhausting movie will leave you spent but ready to hit repeat. Like the anthems its characters listen to, it's immersive, euphoric and addictive, demanding to be played again and again. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

THE VERDICT

Will infuriate those who like their movies tight and tidy, but go along for the ride and this is wind-in-your-hair thrilling. A modern classic.



AMOUR 12A

DIRECTOR Michael Haneke **YEAR** 2012

Old age and terminal illness are placed under Michael Haneke's microscope in *Amour*. But far from being a cold, scientific study from a filmmaker frequently accused of placing a pane of glass between his work and his viewers, this sensitive film emerges heartfelt and humane.

Opening with the police breaking down the doors of a Parisian flat to find the corpse of an old woman laid out in bed, the Austrian auteur then takes us through the months leading up to this discovery.

Octogenarian couple Anne and Georges (Emmanuelle Riva, Jean-Louis Trintignant) share a tender, attentive relationship. Then Anne suffers two strokes and the film records, unflinchingly, her incremental demise. In evidence, always, is the love of the title (a love far more profound than the honeymoon fervour portrayed in most movies), Georges feeding her, washing her and attending to her toiletry needs. But present also is the humiliation of debilitation. Shame, fear, despair frustration... all clog the apartment and provoke an overwhelming sense of suffocation, while an all-too-human loss of patience proves shocking – as cruel and devastating as anything in Haneke's back catalogue.

Contained almost entirely within the couple's elegant apartment, *Amour* comprises static takes, somberly lit, and the odd track or pan to freshen the frame. Controlled but never cold, it eschews music to underline the complex emotions at play, instead trusting in Riva and Trintignant's tremendously skilled performances. Watching Georges struggle to make Anne's deterioration bearable as she, all the while, desperately craves release, we're forced to confront some terrible questions. How to cope with losing a soulmate? How far do courage and integrity stretch, and to what end? Is a life like this even worth living?

Amour contains its share of caustic confrontations, with exchanges between Georges and a house nurse (Carole Franck), and between Georges and his daughter (Isabelle Huppert), worthy of Bergman's domestic dramas. But for the most part, fighting death is enough. In place of Haneke's signature nihilism and austerity come warmth, nobility and, yes, love. The drama scars all the deeper for it. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

THE VERDICT

A compassionate, masterful work that deservedly won Haneke a second Palme d'Or after *The White Ribbon's* 2009 victory. Best to avoid on a first date, though.



AMERICAN ANIMALS ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Bart Layton **YEAR** 2018

If, as the saying goes, film is a series of lies that combine to tell the truth, Bart Layton is muddying the waters. The British writer/director made his name in TV docs before unleashing 2012's *The Imposter*, an incredible true story about the slippery nature of truth – and stories. Its USP was risky, interspersing talking-head confessions with gorgeously shot reconstructions that might have been taken from a thriller. But what emerged was a triumph, spearheading a new breed of streamlined, multiplex-friendly documentaries, such as *Man On Wire*.

For this belated follow-up, the (true) story of four American students who plotted to steal priceless books from their university library, Layton moves one step further away from straight documentary. Most of what we see is a dramatic re-enactment of real events, but every now and then he cuts away to genuine interviews with the real people involved. How's that for muddy?

As a mischievous statement of intent, the film opens with the legend, "This is not based on a true story." But then the middle words melt away to read, "This is a true story." We're then plunged into preparations for the robbery, watching Spencer (Barry Keoghan), Warren (Evan Peters), Chas (Blake Jenner) and Eric (Jared Abrahamson) applying old-age make-up as the score booms like an oncoming coronary. Just as things are getting tasty, Layton cuts to Warren's

THE VERDICT Running from entertaining to tense as hell, Layton's docu-drama heist flick grapples with something most capers can't even begin to compute: consequences.

(actual) dad. "There was a moment when we lost them," he says, before bursting into tears. Anyone not hooked at this point should find a new hobby.

Spinning back 18 months, the film introduces us to sensitive Spencer and wild-card Warren, bored teens desperate for something – anything – to happen. In the spirit of adventure, they start plotting the robbery, staking out the location and getting the gang together. Trouble is, they're rubbish at it. Unlike his protagonists, Layton pulls off some deft manoeuvres here, mining the tension between the amusing amateurism of our heroes and the heart-pounding drama of the heist. It's not the only interesting juxtaposition. As the boys take notes from thrillers such as *Thief*, *Matchstick Men* and *The Killing*, the real Spencer and Warren criticise the telling of their own story. "So this is how you remember it?" fictional Warren asks real Warren. "Not exactly," he replies.

For all its meta-smarts, this is a film about disappointment. As Spencer stacks supermarket shelves, Warren chides him: "Everyone in here thinks they're going to win the lottery but nobody buys a ticket."

These aren't bad kids, just characters waiting for their own inciting incidents. To begin with, it's all fun and games. Then it begins to gain a terrible weight. It's here that Layton's hybrid style comes into its own. Watching the real Spencer and Warren coming to terms with their actions adds an unexpectedly moving, moral dimension. "There's no real getting past it," decides the real Warren. Viewers of this extraordinary docu-drama may well feel the same. **MATT GLASBY**

APOLLO 11 ^U

DIRECTOR Todd Douglas Miller **YEAR** 2019

Giving you what feels like a shotgun seat for humanity's greatest adventure, this exhilarating widescreen doc tracking the 1969 Apollo 11 Moonshot is an utterly immersive epic. Director Todd Douglas Miller's artistry recreates the mission using only spectacular Nasa archive footage (in the style of 1989's all-Apollo doc *For All Mankind*).

The film restores a sense of wonder to the iconic countdown-to-splashdown trajectory – you have to pinch yourself to remember the huge 70mm close-ups of the red-black fireball of take-off, or a cabin-window view of Earth's blue marble are real, rather than *First Man*-style CGI.

Capturing a true-life sense of fear-tinged hope, the film roams through the Instamatic-wielding crowds and past a laconic Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin being spacesuited and booted alongside chain-smoking engineers. The net effect makes the past feel like the present tense. The vast, crisp images freshen the well-known history, and minute-by-minute coverage injects the rumbling launch, the nerve-jangling lunar landing ("1202 alarm!") and flame-licked re-entry with high tension and immediacy.

Clever use of mission audio sews the split-screen space sections together seamlessly, casual chat between Armstrong and Aldrin and their Houston techs creating an intimate, eavesdropping feel. "It's like one of those rotating restaurants," wisecracks Aldrin, as the Earth rolls past. Gorgeous as well as dramatic, each sequence is tightened further by Matt Morton's thrumming synthesiser soundtrack.

Full of breath-catching excitement as the Eagle module inches onto the moon watched by 530 million people, this extraordinary film is an inspiring reminder of a mission that united the world like nothing else. **KATE STABLES**

THE VERDICT Archive artistry, '60s-style elegance and taut storytelling makes this a widescreen portrait out of this world.





AQUARIUS IS

DIR. Kleber Mendonça Filho **YEAR** 2016

When property developers target Aquarius, the beloved seaside apartment building of retired music critic and cancer survivor Clara (Sonia Braga), she refuses to move. As fellow tenants, and Clara's own family, get antsy about missing their big payday, the developers begin a campaign of psychological – and surreal – intimidation to force Clara to change her mind.

A major talking point in its native Brazil, Kleber Mendonça Filho's follow-up to *Neighbouring Sounds* (2012) packs a punch beyond its controversial critique of how greed and gentrification have usurped community values. That's chiefly down to a career-best performance by Braga (*Kiss Of The Spider Woman*), whose fearless turn as a pensionable social-justice warrior is riveting. The film looks and feels a lot like a disquieting thriller, with lurid imagery of orgies and infestations, and an oppressive sound design that lends a siege mentality to proceedings. Trouble is, nobody has told Clara this is meant to be a bleak, Michael Haneke-esque genre workout. With an unquenchable, devil-may-care spirit, she steadies the tension, restores her pride, and takes back control.

For all the film's asides about a corrupt, divided society, there's an optimism to Clara's stubborn defence. Through the story's languid drift, Mendonça accumulates so many details of Aquarius' history – as a place to live, love and laugh – that you won't want it destroyed, either. **SIMON KINNEAR**

THE VERDICT A timely, inspiring parable of protest, directed with sinewy style and driven by Braga's rock-solid lead performance.

AVATAR 12A

DIRECTOR James Cameron **YEAR** 2009

First, let's be clear... *Avatar* is much more than a film. It's a prescribed cinematic experience. Pure effect. The greatest sideshow on Earth. James Cameron's aim is to take our franchise-frazzled minds and plug us back in to the mainline. Like *Avatar*'s hero, injured marine Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), he wants to blast away the past and see through new eyes. *Avatar* is the new benchmark for escapist entertainment; the ultimate on-screen dream.

As Jake dives in and out of his human/alien guises, Cameron is equally urging us to leave our burdened minds and busy bodies behind – to sink into our seats and immerse in a virtual world. In the febrile jungle of planet Pandora, it's a thrillingly alive world of whooping devil-monkeys, scuttling super-spiders, fluttering titan-orchids and bioluminescent air-jellyfish. The ground is patrolled by hammerheaded, triceratops-like behemoths and sabre-toothed jaguar-giants, while immense, lizard-headed mega-birds rule the air.

And into this wild arena... enter *Avatar* Jake, a hybrid of human and Na'vi – the blue-skinned, golden-eyed indigenous people. Jake's mission: to blend with the locals and convince them to "relocate" – away from an area rich in precious/lucrative rock deposits. To go native. But instead, Jake goes rogue – after being trusted and trained by Zoe Saldana's fiery Neytiri. Like Human Jake, she's a warrior, and the two bond over a spectacular battle/ambush that humbles him and ennoble her.

For Jake, it's love at first flight. As the two soar and scamper through the treetops, he revels in swapping his broken real-world form

THE VERDICT Game-changing, yes. Spectacular, absolutely. Occasional dodgy dialogue and dramatic imperfections, also yes. But those visuals, coupled to a story that covers all the bases, are a titanic achievement.

for a faster, stronger, more athletic vessel. But, this being Cameron, there's forbidden love. The success of the human/Na'vi love story thread is mostly down to Saldana. Her subtle, spiky performance is a delicious foil to Worthington's wide-eyed neophyte. She might have played it haughty and aloof. Instead, she makes Neytiri untameable and irresistible, weighted and real, brimming with spirit and soul.

It's also a long way from just some sterile technical exercise. *Avatar* sees Cameron revisit his favourite trick of using hardware to unearth humanity. He carves out the most ambitious screen backdrop ever conceived, then uses it as a staging ground for riffs on military morality, environmental anguish, science vs nature, spirituality vs pragmatism...

Oh, yeah... and there's action, too: sinew-straining, jaw-snapping beast battles; rampaging fist-fights; arcing arrow attacks; whirring gunships peppering the canopy with incendiary fire; lumbering battle-mechs pummelling the life out of Pandora with synthetic death. All – remember – in 3D.

Avatar is much more than a film. It's an audacious, awe-inspiring work of modern art that reinvents and redesigns the whole process of sitting in a darkened room staring up at a screen. Cameron has achieved no less than a rebirth of cinema. Jackson, Spielberg, Fincher, PTA, del Toro... over to you. **ANDY LOWE**



Zoe Saldana and Sam Worthington have no reason to feel blue.

ARRIVAL ^{12A}

DIRECTOR Denis Villeneuve **YEAR** 2016

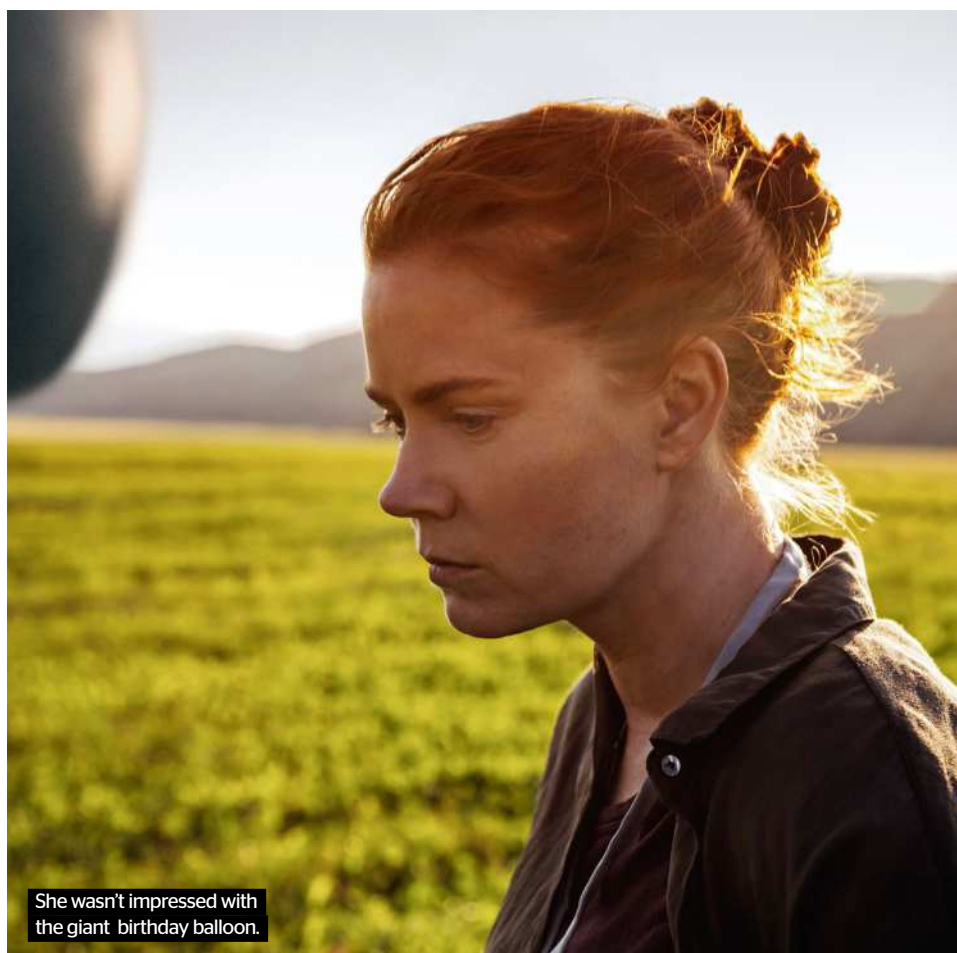
When the aliens show up in *Arrival*, it's not with your typical invasion-movie bombast. The first sign of something unusual comes when a symphony of smartphone notifications ripples round a sparsely attended lecture by language prof Dr. Louise Banks (Amy Adams). Attendees are alerted to the news story that's about to dominate the globe: enormous, pebble-shaped spacecraft have arrived, and they're hovering in the air at 12 random locations around Earth. It's a typically understated start to a super-smart sci-fi that'll blow your mind and have you on the edge of your seat without recourse to explosions or souped-up fighter jets. Take note, *Independence Day: Resurgence*...

That it grips from its first moments is thanks in part to a superb opening montage, in which we're introduced to Banks and the daughter she loses to illness; it's a heartbreaking précis that plays like *Up*'s tearjerking opener. Banks now lives alone in a remote cabin, continuing her work as a language expert, clearly keeping most other humans at arm's length.

She's drawn into the larger story when Colonel Weber (Forest Whitaker) recruits her for her language skills: turns out the alien pods open their gates for a small window of time every 18 hours, and the US government wants to send her onto the one floating above Montana, along with theoretical physicist Ian Donnelly (Jeremy Renner), to start a dialogue with the extraterrestrials on-board to find out why they're here. Across Earth, other nations are plotting their own interactions with the ships.

A combination of language studies and global politics sounds dry, but that couldn't be further from the truth. As the plot unfolds and the visitors' motives begin to come into focus, director Denis Villeneuve (*Sicario*) ensures it all plays out with clockwork precision; even when the jargon gets a bit technical, it always manages to sound like it's making sense (it helps that it's frequently leavened with humour). Banks summing up the difficulty in getting the 'heptapod' aliens to understand one simple sentence is a delight. It's not easy to turn the creatures' subtitles on: their language takes the form of inky black spores that form patterned circles. How do you clarify the distinction between a weapon and a tool

THE VERDICT An intelligent, eloquent and stirring sci-fi that grips from start to finish, *Arrival* is up there with the year's best movies.



She wasn't impressed with the giant birthday balloon.

with a species that talks in shapes? In this case, Google Translate won't quite cut it.

Amy Adams is, as ever, superb, ensuring you believe the character's heartache and authority, acting as the audience's unpatronising entry point. It's a strong month for Adams, who has another impressive turn in Tom Ford's *Nocturnal Animals*, so expect her to add more Oscar nominations to her collection (of five) when awards season rolls round. Jeremy Renner provides sturdy support in a role that requires toning down the tough-guy *Avengers* act to pleasing effect, though this is very much Adams' film.

The themes *Arrival* toys with get bigger and bigger – from language, to love, to the nature of time – but they're handled with such dexterity that you won't be struggling to keep up; it never scrambles your brain like the final act of *Interstellar*. Villeneuve is clearly operating at the very top of his game. A lot of films have to make a choice between blowing your mind and melting your heart. *Arrival* doesn't.

While it won't be off-putting to those sceptical about sci-fi, the film contains plenty to delight genre fans. The gravity-shift boarding of the spacecraft recalls visuals from 2001: *A Space Odyssey*. The alien creatures feel organic and believable, even if the CGI isn't always perfect. DP Bradford Young (stepping

in for Villeneuve's *Prisoners/Sicario/Blade Runner* sequel cinematographer Roger Deakins) elegantly captures the scale of the visiting craft and the claustrophobic corridors of the military basecamp at which Banks and Donnelly are stationed. Sparely used flashbacks have a haunting quality, and are given heart-stabbing heft by Jóhann Jóhannsson's painfully poignant score.

Fascinating as it is to watch Banks and Donnelly's developing interactions with the heptapods, the tension ratchets up as the 11 other sites grow antsy of waiting too long to uncover the meaning behind the arrival. Have they come to get us to work together, or to drive us apart? Of particular concern is China's military leader General Shang (Tzi Ma), who is itching to go on the offensive. Without hammering its message, *Arrival*'s advocacy for communication across all boundaries couldn't feel more timely.

Like the best sci-fi, *Arrival* lodges itself in your head for days, and will be sparking conversations long after its moving denouement. That Villeneuve so seamlessly wrangles thought-provoking ideas with awe-inspiring visuals and a very human story bodes extremely well for his upcoming *Blade Runner 2*. Although following this means that sequel now has even more to live up to... **MATT MAYTUM**



Brad hated getting caught in the dry ice on the dance floor.

THE ASSASSINATION OF JESSE JAMES BY THE COWARD ROBERT FORD ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Andrew Dominik **YEAR** 2007

The title tells you the what but not the why. Or even the how. Those two questions are key to the heart of Andrew Dominik's moving, expansive, brutal and beautiful western. This is a '70s movie in all but the year it was made, a film that will sit alongside the likes of *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* and Terrence Malick's CV in the cinematic corral reserved for "elegiac" and "lyrical". Certainly, it's won't be to everyone's taste. Slow, poetic, impressionistic, epic, meandering; even its director says it has a story but no real plot. Harking back to a bygone era, it's awash with melancholy and ennui, love and betrayal, obsession and paranoia and arrives like manna from movie heaven.

It's been seven years since the Kiwi-born Dominik's blistering debut, *Chopper*, introduced the world to Eric Bana and got its director on the shortlist of filmmakers that every young (or youngish) A-list actor wanted to work with. Like *Chopper* this is, essentially, another frank, ferocious examination of a nefarious real-life criminal and one all too aware of his public perception. But while old west folklore may have pegged Jesse James as a Robin Hood figure, there's scant romanticism here. Brad Pitt plays Jesse the man, the myth, the legend, as haunted and introspective, flawed and mercurial. His

Jesse is callous in his charisma, prone to mood swings and obsessed with his own mortality.

The film begins on 5 September 1881 with Jesse, according to the mellifluous, omnipresent narration, 34 and "growing into middle age", living in Kansas under an alias with his wife and two kids. After this elliptical prologue we're introduced to the remnants of the infamous James Gang, led by Jesse and Sam Shepard's stern-faced elder brother Frank, preparing for their last great train robbery in the Blue Cut Mountains in Missouri; after which Frank hung up his mask for good. It's here too we meet Robert 'Bob' Ford (the mesmerising Casey Affleck): weak, creepy, obsessive, scheming, deceitful and desperate to ingratiate himself into the gang where his dopey older brother Charley (Sam Rockwell) is already a member. Bob has idolised Jesse since childhood, collecting his clippings, revelling in the cheap paperbacks that detail his adventures. Flattered and freaked by the adulation, Jesse embraces the sycophant until one day, tiring of his idolatry, he humiliates him one last time and the die is cast, with the

THE VERDICT The running time and pacing may scare some, but Dominik has crafted an instant classic, with poetic visuals, sensational performances and a true love for the genre. Magnificent.

bounty on Jesse's head another reason for Bob to turn on his hero.

Dominik, working from Ron Hansen's novel, dissects this well-worn outlaw tale with a fresh eye and an exquisite attention to both landscape and people. The stunningly staged train robbery is the film's only real concession to an action set-piece. Thereafter it's more psychological drama, as characters are introduced and drawn, carefully and leisurely, with Dominik giving almost everyone their due.

There's no haste to the storytelling, no cut to the chase. Meticulously detailed and ravishingly shot by DoP Roger Deakins, whose distorted imagery echoes the photography of the period, the film never flinches from tragedy, violence or understatement. It builds stealthily towards a mournful climax made clear from the outset, but extends far beyond: to where Bob discovers the true cost of shooting Jesse, as the fingers of fame and infamy entwine and his own celebrity status begins to choke him. Dominik should be lauded for never taking the easy option and for playing it languid and literary.

Pitt should be congratulated, too, not just for a finely nuanced performance, his best to date, but for being his director's 800-pound gorilla, making sure a) this got made and b) it got made the way Dominik wanted. Ten-word title and all. **MARK SALISBURY**



AVENGERS: INFINITY WAR¹²

DIRECTORS Anthony Russo, Joe Russo **YEAR** 2018

So, this is it?" says Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.) in the trailer for *Avengers: Infinity War*. "It's all been building to this." He's talking about the approaching menace of Titan(ic) warlord Thanos, a threat so great that it'll take the might of all the assembled Avengers (and then some) to have even a chance of stopping him.

But he could equally be making a meta-comment on the Marvel Cinematic Universe itself. When Thanos was teased in the mid-credits scene of 2012's *Avengers Assemble*, that film felt more like the start of something bigger than the conclusion to Phase One. Since then, the MCU has grown exponentially.

It has all been building to this. So the big question is: Has it been worth the wait? Does it warrant the 10 years and 19 movies of investment? If you've given a damn about any character over the course of the series, do you need to see it?

The answer, broadly speaking, is yes. In terms of blockbuster event cinema, they don't come much bigger – or more eventful – than this one. Packed with incident from the off, it's an onslaught of action, thrills, gags and gasps, played out with an ensemble so gigantic it leaves other extended-universe crossovers in the dust.

As you'll have guessed, this isn't the best place for a newbie to start. If you haven't already, go back and watch (most of) the previous 18 movies before you dive into *Infinity*

War. But for anyone who has pored over these movies in detail, been awed by the combinations and wondered what the hell Thanos' grand plan is, this film delivers in spades.

As his masterplan involves grand-scale annihilation, it's going to take a mighty team-up to stop him. So as well as core Avengers such as Stark, Thor (Chris Hemsworth), Captain America (Chris Evans), Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson) and Bruce Banner (Mark Ruffalo), more recent players such as Black Panther (Chadwick Boseman), Doctor Strange (Benedict Cumberbatch), Spidey (Tom Holland) and the Guardians are also thrown into the mix.

But, this time, Thanos is the throughline, the movie's protagonist, if it can be said to have one. CGI baddies with evil schemes have been the downfall of many superhero movies, but Josh Brolin's hulking purple bruiser is no letdown. As a piece of visual wizardry, he's impressively textured. But more impressive still is Brolin's nuance (that grin) underneath the pixels. And while he might not reach Killmonger levels of sympathy, his plan does have shades of plausibility that prevent him from slipping into OTT maniacal-laugh territory.

Credit is due to directors the Russo brothers

THE VERDICT A super-sized superhero movie that retains the scale, excitement and humour you expect from a tentpole MCU movie.

for pulling together something of this scale and ambition with such clarity and confidence. As is inevitable with a movie like this, individual characters get cool moments rather than any real depth, but that's part and parcel of this extended universe: your engagement will be highly dependent on how invested you have been thus far. Some heroes get more to do than others, but ultimately, it's a team effort.

Despite the heavy, genocidal subject matter, there's plenty of the MCU's trademark humour, most of it delivered by the on-form Guardians. Stealing pretty much every scene they're in, Star-Lord's (Chris Pratt) gang somehow manage to retain their unique tone even when thrown into the Avengers mix. And as well as the chuckles, there are moments of genuine feeling. It scores highest when throwing together unlikely characters, in action sequences, odd-couple bantz and high-stakes emotional interactions. And it's all set against a background of legitimate peril, as Thanos sets about retrieving the Infinity Stones he needs to enact his plan.

There are quibbles: Thanos' 'children' don't make as much impact as you'd hope; the stone-collecting can feel a touch repetitive; and certain plot threads are set in motion that won't be resolved until the untitled *Avengers 4* in 2019. But any complaints are small fry in a film this bold, ballsy and satisfying. **MATT MAYTUM**



Batman practises his birthday-party magic act...

BATMAN BEGINS ^{12A}

DIRECTOR Christopher Nolan **YEAR** 2005

Missing, presumed dead, billionaire Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) is stuck in a Bhutanese prison when the mysterious Ducart (Liam Neeson) asks him to join 'The League Of Shadows' and fight injustice. After gruelling ninja training and a clash of ideals, Gotham's prodigal son returns home to save the city – with the help of some very pointy ears...

Okay. It's better than *Batman & Robin*. Quite a bit better. When the psycho pyrotechnics have subsided, the flames have turned to ashes and the Dark Knight drops into the shadows, you may wonder – if there's room for any thought in your head other than, "Wow" – how this was ever known as *Batman 5*. It's not a sequel. It's not a prequel. It truly is a new beginning. Christopher Nolan has taken the dominant franchise of the '90s and said, "Forget about it. Batman is reborn." And it's a bloody, brutal, beautiful birth.

Batman Begins does for the Caped Crusader what *GoldenEye* did for Bond. Ironic that Bale, who was so close to becoming the post-Brosnan Broccoli boy, should shoulder a series that lost its way so similarly to 007 in the '80s. For *Batman & Robin*, read *A View To A Kill* – bloated, camp disasters where stunt casting

and expensively empty set-pieces suffocated the essential appeal: a damaged, dangerous, violent man – a detective, of sorts – solving a cataclysmic case and looking ineffably cool.

So, no more glitz. But no gothic, either. Nolan hasn't defaulted to Burton's original vision – remarkable in 1989, enjoyable but rather empty now. Rather, he trusts in the inherent allure of Batman's dark heart and lets him loose on our world. Gotham here is a barely tweaked NYC, its suited and rebooted hero imposing but realistic – the logical result of a justice-seeking vigilante with limitless resources. From Wayne Enterprises' prototype body armour spray-painted black to the Bat-winged throwing stars he grinds out himself, Wayne harnesses bleeding-edge technology to create an alter ego that's "something elemental. Something terrifying." He seeks and embraces the power to become a nightmare: "To turn fear on those who prey on the fearful."

Tapping into the times, fear is the film's recurrent theme. Bale has spoken of Batman as another American psycho and there is indeed something chilling when Bruce Wayne says, "People need dramatic examples to shake them out of apathy." It is a statement. It is

a threat. Batman is the toughest of superheroes – a rage-fuelled creature of the night, whose heroics often fly close to fascism. Batman is a terrorist. But he's our terrorist.

Frank Miller reinvented Bob Kane's iconic character in *Batman: Year One* and *The Dark Knight Returns*. And while *Sin City*'s comics genius isn't credited, Nolan and David S. Goyer's script is indebted to Miller's exploration of Batman's bruised psyche and his noir-styled depiction of a Gotham wracked by organised crime more than costumed superfreaks (Tom Wilkinson excels as mob boss Carmine Falcone).

But the most surprising, shocking influence is from avant-garde Batman classic *Arkham Asylum*, whose terrifying visual style informs *Batman Begins*' most remarkable sequences – when people inhale the fear-conjuring hallucinogen of the evil Dr. Jonathan Crane, aka The Scarecrow (the superb Cillian Murphy). From Scarecrow's sinister sackcloth mask spew forth images that send victims insane. The scene of Batman as an oily, snarling beast is simply unforgettable – proof that Nolan hasn't allowed a blockbuster's budget and expectations to blunt his edge.

The director is less comfortable with the third act's prerequisite set-pieces, which suffer slightly, unusually, because of the strength of character and story that precede them. Most summer blockbusters expect spectacular action sequences to distract and amuse an audience bored by the 'talky bits'. Bale's Batman is so compelling and the supporting cast (Neeson, Morgan Freeman, Rutger Hauer) so emotionally engaging that no effects-laden high-speed smackdown can quite equal the frisson of two people talking. Similarly, an increase in flippancy – making Gary Oldman's world-weary Sergeant Gordon ultimately a touch clownish – feels like a forced concession to blockbuster rules.

Casting Katie Holmes may be a similar concession, but while imagining her as a lawyer is a stretch ("You are, like, soooo totally busted"), she sparks with Bale in a lovey-dovey subplot refreshingly free of Peter Parker/Mary Jane-style whining. And Michael Caine is outstanding as Alfred the butler, providing the emotional spine for Bale's transition from little boy lost to hulking great brute. Emotion, in a comic-book movie? In spades. Nolan's picture will have your tear ducts tingling and the hair on your neck standing straight. Funny, exhilarating and moving, it's a blockbuster whose brains and brawn are matched by a thumping great heart. The Bat is back with a vengeance. **NEV PIERCE**

THE VERDICT Amazing. *Batman Begins* may even be the greatest superhero movie ever made. Thought *Spider-Man* was the modern pinnacle? Think again.

THE BABADOOK 15

DIRECTOR Jennifer Kent **YEAR** 2014

Great horror films are always about something other than what they purport to be. Golden-age classics such as *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, for example, reenacted traumas of Vietnam; while Japanese ghost story *Ringu* resonated with millennial techno-fear. Based on her 2006 short, *Monster*, Australian writer/director Jennifer Kent's feature debut is both a terrific spook story and a moving ode to mourning. The fact Kent keeps both elements so elegantly aloft is just one of the film's many surprises – most of them rather more unpleasant.

Widowed mum Amelia (Essie Davis) lives alone with her troubled son, Samuel (Noah Wiseman), who's young enough to believe in magic – and monsters. One night he picks a bedtime story she's never read him before, *Mister Babadook*, a beautifully designed pop-up book decked out in doomy blacks about a creature who comes to visit then can't – or won't – be moved: "If it's in a word or in a look, you can't get rid of a Babadook," the tome warns. Amelia swiftly puts it away. With Samuel expelled from school and Amelia alienated from everyone except co-worker Daniel Henshall, the pair

THE VERDICT A haunting tale with deep wells of howling grief at its centre, this is one bedtime story that will stay with you for weeks. Sleep tight...

become increasingly isolated. And you can probably guess the identity of Samuel's invisible new playmate.

Scared, scarred and scary, Davis and Wiseman both give extraordinary performances. A mess of maternal contradictions, Amelia is a weary, frazzled presence, her outlook skewed by sleep deprivation, shattered patience and aching loneliness. Samuel knows she loves him, and that she doesn't always like him; the possibility of more loss and rejection looming over them like a malevolent presence. Adding to the poisonous atmosphere is the threat of the Babadook itself, an amorphous nightmare conjured from shadows and dressed in the cast-off clothes of Amelia's late husband.

It would be a mistake to give too much away about the eponymous beastie, mainly because we're still terrified of it. But you know a filmmaker's doing their job when even the title sounds scary – hell, looks scary. Expect a series of decreasing sequels explaining its origins – and avoid them. This isn't about introducing a new franchise, it's a film about fear. Fear of being alone, of death, of not being loved, of being weird, of the encroaching darkness – all legitimate parts of being alive. *The Babadook* could be a symbol for any intruder – jealousy, grief, depression – that creeps in unbidden and can't be exorcised. And that's just one of the reasons the film is so devastating. **MATT GLASBY**



THE BEGUILLED 15

DIRECTOR Sofia Coppola **YEAR** 2017

Sofia Coppola's sixth film is as tightly crafted as the corsets of the women in her accomplished study of repression and gender dynamics. That she's succinct at exploring the female experience is a given, but that she's able to do it with such wit, subtlety and brevity is a refreshing surprise.

As cannon-fire thunders during the American Civil War, a seminary for young ladies sits marooned among the fighting in West Virginia. With the slaves gone along with most of the students, a small community of girls, their teacher and headmistress remain; isolated in a crumbling mansion, scrounging for food, trapped in a limbo of French and sewing lessons.

Head Miss Martha (Nicole Kidman) and tutor Edwina (Kirsten Dunst) beguile themselves that the outside world does not exist, until one of the girls brings a wounded Union soldier home. Corporal John McBurney (Colin Farrell) reminds the school's inhabitants of secret longings, provoking tension and ultimately violence.

While Coppola's update cleaves closely to the plot points and ending of the original, her casting and script gives the key players more understandable motivation and provides greater audience empathy.

THE VERDICT Witty, menacing and steamy (in every sense), *The Beguiled* is an intelligent update and Coppola's best work to date. Oscars await.

As an opportunist who's taken another man's place on the battlefield for 300 bucks, if a kind word here, a wanton stare there and the gift of a button here gets him a pass from the trenches, he'll do it. He is as much repressed by his social standing as the school residents are by their religious beliefs and social expectations.

And those women... changing Miss Martha from a bitter crone to a worldly fortysomething makes the competition between the residents all the more intriguing. Martha wants sex while Edwina's after love and escape. Elle Fanning's saucy teen Alicia craves seduction, and the girls, attention.

Though McBurney is the prize, the women are running the show. A dinner party where each of them jostle for his attention and slut-shame each other in the most courteous fashion is an absolute delight. Coppola's lightness of touch and the skills of her uniformly excellent cast ensure this and other scenes are knowingly amusing rather than tacky.

But the playfulness is always tempered by tension and a sense of foreboding, heightened by Philippe Le Sourd's evocative cinematography. As the cicadas reach their crescendo in the heat, so the pace picks up and before you can say "over in 90 mins", folks have properly lost their shit. That too is a pleasant surprise – an awards frontrunner that plays like a popcorn movie and leaves you wanting more. **JANE CROWTHER**



He spent ages summoning the courage to tell her the dress clashed with her shoes.



BOOGIE NIGHTS¹⁸

DIRECTOR Paul Thomas Anderson **YEAR** 1997

Should you be seven feet tall, you must, at some point, have considered the potential of a life devoted to basketball. Similarly, you at least owe yourself a glance at the *Opportunities In Pornography* brochure if you have a 13-inch cock flapping between your thighs.

Boogie Nights is a rush of cinematic amylnitrate from writer/director Paul Thomas Anderson, who, at the tender age of 27, has peaked with a film which, despite the subject matter, isn't a drooly old leer into the writhing gynaecology of the porno industry. It's a wonderfully skewed fairytale charting the highs, lows, and, eventually, just-above-middles, of a group of varying avid and addled adults as they stumble through a major turning point in their careers and lives.

Burt Reynolds has never been better as director Jack Horner, the sleazy benefactor to a merry band of fresh-faced fornicators: Amber Waves (Julianne Moore) comes on strong as a seasoned, if a little sozzled, performer – the sleazy auntie to Jack's cuddly uncle; Roller girl (Heather Graham) is a horny good-time girl permanently fused to her roller-skates; Buck Swope (Don Cheadle) is an over-eager hi-fi salesman suffering from severe style oscillation; Rodriguez (Luis Guzman) is a desperate club owner hanger-on; and the wonderful William H. Macy turns in his standard permanently-worried act as Jack's AD, staggering wildly through the casual prurience, a doomed, increasingly lost soul.

And then there's Mark Wahlberg as Adams/Diggler – all coiled adolescence and corruptible pleasantry (although at times Wahlberg's range is stretched,

particularly during a clunky screaming match with his mum, when he bleats the prophetic, "Everyone is blessed with one special thing!").

But *Boogie Nights* isn't just *The Rise And Fall/Frank Confessions Of Dirk Diggler*. In retaining a sharp eye for his characters' quirks, weaknesses and dignity-free naiveté, Anderson has achieved much, much more than a porno version of *The Player*. By demystifying the whole process with hilariously dreadful behind-the-scenes set-ups and over-ambitious themed pretensions, he forces us to recognise sex as just another supply-and-demand commodity, particularly when Jack tries to fend off the inevitable home video boom with a high-minded passion for porn-with-a-plot.

Things sag a little in the middle, when Anderson shows his age with a clumsy eagerness to focus on the darker side of the biz. Instead of popping the seams more subtly, gradually cranking up the inter-personal turbulence and corporate intrusion, he can't resist letting rip with a single-scene blow-out that pointedly denotes the literal and metaphorical death of the party, the end of the hedonistic '70s and the start of the churlish, capitalist '80s. But he pulls out of the dive with two masterful scenes. The first concerns hi-fi Floyd in serious peril in a doughnut shop, surrounded by a lake of syrup and squidgy; the second recalls the edgy comic violence of *Pulp Fiction*, Dirk and the boystrying to rip off a coke dealer (Alfred Molina) as an associate ignites firecrackers in the background.

But the peak comes in an inspired twist on the *Raging Bull* mirror pep-talk, as Anderson cannily follows the rule that it's better to tease at the extent of the monster before revealing it – in all its lasso-like glory, confirming Jack's earlier seduction line, "I got a feeling that behind those jeans is something wonderful just waiting to get out." This is not a film for men with size anxiety. **TF**

THE VERDICT An indecent, exhilarating tale of success through excess told with a bawdy, bittersweet humour and carried by a stunning '70s soundtrack. A staggering blend of *GoodFellas* style, *Pulp Fiction*'s wit and good, rocking sex.



BE NATURAL: THE UNTOLD STORY OF ALICE GUY-BLACHÉ PG

DIRECTOR Pamela B. Green
YEAR 2019

Even if the subtitle of this Jodie Foster-narrated documentary is something of a misnomer (much has been written about Guy-Blaché and her films recently), the sad truth is that the story of cinema's first female director remains little known outside of scholarly circles. And given the ongoing underrepresentation of female filmmakers, Pamela B. Green's essential doc is a timely celebration of a true pioneer of early cinema, who wrote, directed and produced more than 1,000 films between 1896 and 1920.

ANTON VAN BEEK



THE BEATLES: EIGHT DAYS A WEEK - THE TOURING YEARS 12A

DIRECTOR Ron Howard
YEAR 2016

Hello? Can you hear me?" A miserable John Lennon in Shea Stadium, 1965 – and one reason why The Beatles stopped touring a year later. Yet Ron Howard's in-depth documentary (the longer, 137-minute version is superior to its chopped 105-minute alternative) is as much about the screaming fans too: a generation finding its feet amid a turbulent decade. Given the well-covered subject matter, this still feels fresh thanks to plentiful amounts of rare/unseen footage. Fab...

ALI CATTERALL



BLUE IS THE WARMEST COLOUR 18

DIRECTOR Abdellatif Kechiche **YEAR** 2013

Twenty years after the classic *Three Colours: Blue* (1993) comes another movie that takes its symbolic cue from the 'liberty' stripe of the French flag.

Based on a graphic novel, Abdellatif Kechiche's 2013 Palme d'Or winner follows Adèle (Adèle Exarchopoulos) on her path from student to teacher. Her story begins when, as a teen, she falls for Emma (Léa Seydoux), a twentysomething art student with a shock of blue hair. It's the trigger for a relationship that will define – and devour – Adèle.

Three hours long, *Blue Is The Warmest Colour* bestows epic status on a subject usually handled coyly or ignored altogether: female desire. The heightened treatment feels apt – this is first love, in all its intoxicating, devastating glory. Exarchopoulos is a revelation: appealingly awkward, palpably vulnerable and sparking serious chemistry with Seydoux.

The sex scenes are graphic, sure, but not gratuitous. What's more, the physical boldness is matched emotionally and psychologically. Whether passion or pain, you'll feel it too. **EMMA SIMMONDS**

BEFORE MIDNIGHT 15

DIRECTOR Richard Linklater **YEAR** 2013

On a train in Austria a young American, Jesse (Ethan Hawke), meets a French girl, Celine (Julie Delpy), and persuades her to get off and spend a few hours in Vienna with him. They wander, talk endlessly, fall in love and part, promising to meet again – all *Before Sunrise* (1995).

Nine years later they meet again in Paris. He's in a failing marriage, she's in a strained relationship. Again they wander and talk endlessly. Are they destined for each other? Were they always? They have to decide – *Before Sunset* (2004). So another nine years on, they're together now, settled in Paris. They've got twin girls, and on holiday in the Peloponnese. It's an idyllic happy ending for our peripatetic pair. Or is it?

Well no, of course it isn't. Richard Linklater is way too intelligent a director for anything so mushy – even assuming Delpy and Hawke, co-screenwriters with him here as they were on *Sunset*, would let him. The rare strength of the *Before* trilogy has always been its unforced naturalism: situations and dialogue that come across as totally spontaneous and convincing, with fully inhabited characters.

As with its two predecessors, *Midnight's* a film about people talking. But when the talk's this good, this absorbing and revealing and witty and true, who's going to complain? And as ever, the length of the takes is mesmerising. Check out a near-unbroken fixed-angle 20-minute take that's just the couple driving along and talking. So here's to our next rendezvous with C&J... in 2022? **PHILIP KEMP**

THE VERDICT An expectations-exceeding chapter in one of modern cinema's finest love stories. As honest, funny and natural as its predecessors.





BEST IN SHOW ¹²

DIRECTOR Christopher Guest **YEAR** 2000

Dressing up dogs in people clothes is funny. So it's no surprise to see that *Best In Show* – a comedy about canine obsessives whose puppy love borders on unrequited bestiality – gets a cheap, heaving splutter out of dressing up a Shih-Tzu as Scarlett O'Hara. But this isn't really a comedy about dogs at all. It's a comedy about people who use their pets as yapping vessels for their own doubtful ambitions.

Christopher Guest first mined laughs out of the doc format in front of the camera in the over-seen *This Is Spinal Tap* and behind it in the never-seen *Waiting For Guffman*. Given our generation's TV-literacy and thirst for docusoaps and reality-slop, it's a canny genre ripe for the warping, and on the evidence of *Best In Show*, Guest has become a master at it. It takes a crafty talent to spoof the cinematic language of documentaries while at the same time pulling gut-shudders and credible, "real" performances out of yourcast, and *The Artist Formerly Known As Nigel Tufnel* comes out laughing. You will too.

Much like the glam buffoons of *Spinal Tap*, the ensemble ingredients may be neurotic-meets-fuckwit, but the characters here are so fully drawn that even the seemingly irredeemable (notably Jennifer Coolidge's memorable melding of Anna Nicole Smith and Undead Avon Lady) come out likeable.

And while the improvised dialogue is rich and ridiculous, it's this generosity of spirit that marks out *Best In Show* as unique. In a current comedyscape dominated by cold-blooded laughter and lazy limbos below the taste barrier, it's a joy to see a truly hilarious comedy that balances its laugh-ats with its laugh-withs and races to the finale with hardly any profanities quacking from its characters' mouths.

As with all comedies, walking in cold guarantees the fiercest laughs, so giving away the punchlines would be churlish... But keep a spare rib handy for Guest's monologue on nuts that threatens to eclipse his infamous "up to 11" riff. And as for Fred Willard's non-sequitur-spouting commentator ("To think in some countries, these dogs are eaten"), paired with Jim Piddock's exasperated English pundit, he

makes Alan Partridge sound like Albert Einstein. Like the movie itself, there's a warped genius lurking behind Buck's stupidity, and if there's a funnier movie this year, this reviewer will eat a Rottweiler. **TF**

THE VERDICT

Waggish, smart and bark-out loud funny, this is classic comedy... This, in fact, is *Spinal Yap*.



THE BIG LEBOWSKI ¹⁸

DIRECTOR Joel & Ethan Coen **YEAR** 1998

The Coen brothers' eighth feature opens with a lone tumbleweed trundling over desolate scrubland, and then up and over into the smoggy sprawl of Los Angeles. Cut to a late-night supermarket, where an ageing, instantly likable shambles-in-sandals carefully examines the milk cartons for coldness and expiry date, sniffs one, and finally, with a milky moustache, writes out a cheque for 69 cents, Ralph's Shopper's Club card to one side.

This is Jeff 'The Dude' Lebowski, and he's the rarest of species: a Coen brothers character with a soul, symbolic of everything that makes this their finest feature so far, by far. Not only have the pair finally become comfortable with writing real people, but they've also put aside all that know-all studiousness and self-conscious period vernacular, and found how to fuse film literacy with accessibility.

Bridges clicks into character even in the mighty presence of Goodman, Turturro and Buscemi, and carries the movie with just the right blend of woozy elegance. The Dude's existence in his cluttered Venice bungalow is peaceful, if a little musty: he humours his jittery performance-artist landlord, takes spliffed-up, candle-lit baths and listens to old bowling league play-offs on his Walkman.

At the alley, he competes and natters with buddies Walter (Goodman), a loopy security-store owner and 'Nam vet, and Donny (Buscemi), a timid ex-surfer. They discuss his attackers, why they've kidnapped Mrs. Lebowski and how he should make the ransom drop. Appalled at the rug-micturation incident, Walter galvanises the Dude into an unholy union of Humphrey Bogart and Homer Simpson, who potters bovinely around the blunt edges of his conundrum, guzzling White Russians, barely scratching the surface.

But the Dude is merely the focus for a movie shot through with pacy, eyes-glued-to-screen compulsion, technical glitter, and an uninhibited drive towards good, dirty fun. Julianne Moore is polished and prurient

as uppity artist Maude, but best of all is John Turturro's deeply astonishing mini-role as strutting sleaze-ball Jesus Quintana, a rival bowler in a tight polyester all-in-one with racing stripe and 'Jesus' breast tag.

This is the sight and sound of the Coens letting their hair down, and you really shouldn't miss the party. **TF**

THE VERDICT

Magnificent. A multiplex-friendly critics' movie, but with a hint of *Raising Arizona* slapstick. A crime-sex-drugs-kidnap-bowling-nihilism mystery of the highest order.

BLADE RUNNER 2049¹⁵

DIRECTOR Denis Villeneuve **YEAR** 2017

How do you solve a problem like Rick Deckard? Schrödinger's proverbial protagonist has been stuck in a quantum state – both replicant and real boy – since *Blade Runner's* origami-unicorn finale. Any follow-up had to address the biggest question in sci-fi and 2049 does (sort of). But it's a testament to director Denis Villeneuve's spectacular cyberpunk sequel that the nature of Deckard's identity doesn't matter – this film has bigger artificial fish to fry.

A world away from the quip-laden superhero smackdowns and 'saber-swinging galactic romps that dominate modern blockbusters, *Blade Runner 2049* is a methodically paced, thematically rich neo-noir detective story that eschews sugar-rush action in favour of melancholy musings on isolation, identity and humanity.

In other words, it's a *Blade Runner* sequel through and through. "You've never seen a miracle," Dave Bautista's Sapper Morton says to Ryan Gosling's replicant-retiring blade runner Officer K during an enthralling opening gambit. The real miracle is that Villeneuve and co have crafted a successor to Ridley Scott's masterpiece that exceeds even lofty expectations.

Remarkably, 2049's premise (revealed in the first five minutes) has somehow been kept completely under wraps, and for good reason. It's a constantly reconfiguring mystery box of a movie. Seismic secrets are drip-fed throughout the script – penned by Michael Green (*Logan*) and returning screenwriter Hampton Fancher. The less you know the better, but here are the essentials: 30 years after the events of the first film, K unearths a secret with the potential to "break the world", putting him on a collision course with Rick Deckard. What follows is an intelligent, twisty enigma that trusts its audience to piece together the clues, the film's dream logic cohering into a satisfying, emotionally compelling whole.

If Villeneuve was a filmmaker at the top of his game with last year's *Arrival*, he proves himself an irrefutable maestro of his craft here – 2049 is the perfect vehicle for the smart slow-burners that have defined his career (*Incendies*, *Prisoners*, *Sicario*). He also

THE VERDICT An exquisite sequel that stands shoulder to shoulder with one of the greatest films ever made. Everyone operates at the height of their powers.



K needs to look where he's going, otherwise he's gonna hit the Deckard.

proves more than a match for Ridley Scott as a world-builder. Perfectly preserving the dirty, retrofitted design of the original, while moving *Blade Runner's* vision of a ravaged North America forward in thrilling ways, it's a retina-melting big-screen spectacle – VFX, cinematography, costume and production design are all sensational.

It's been specially formatted for IMAX and every inch of the colossal frame dazzles. From the smog-diffused skylines of LA's urban sprawl to the burnt-orange hues of the irradiated Las Vegas wasteland, it's utterly awe-inspiring.

As for the all-important music, Benjamin Wallfisch and Hans Zimmer's percussive, synth-heavy score is loyal to the spirit of Vangelis, and makes admirable use of pin-drop silence. But it never comes close to the heights of the original, supporting rather than elevating the material.

The same can't be said for Gosling. Far from a re-heated Rick Deckard, K is a totally different beast. Gosling delivers a performance of impressive nuance and physicality. As for Deckard, it's all-but impossible to discuss his

involvement without detonating a spoiler nuke. But if Harrison Ford's Gap get-up set off alarm bells pre-release, worry not – there's weighty material here that Ford fully commits to. He even gets a cracking chase that flips an iconic sequence from the original on its head. But it's important to note this is Gosling's movie, and better for it.

The rest of the cast – including Jared Leto's Tyrell-esque Niander Wallace, his right-hand woman Luv (Sylvia Hoeks) and Ana de Armas' Joi – all make robust additions, and harbour their own epochal secrets (naturally). The lack of an antagonist as impactful as Rutger Hauer's Roy Batty is the only significant shortcoming. And there's no getting around the fact it's a long, largely humourless experience.

Thirty-five years ago, *Blade Runner* was dismissed in the summer of *E.T.* It remains to be seen whether modern audiences will prove more receptive to this esoteric follow-up in 2017. Villeneuve's film is a continuation in every respect; it's difficult to imagine anyone making a better *Blade Runner* sequel. We truly have seen things you people wouldn't believe... **JORDAN FARLEY**

Molly's obsession with *Fast & Furious* had taken a dangerous turn.



BOOKSMART ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Olivia Wilde **YEAR** 2019

Shaking up the high-school party movie – traditionally a booze-and-babes boy's club, from *Fast Times At Ridgemont High*, through *Dazed And Confused* to *Superbad* – here comes a fiercely funny, female-centred contender at last. It's had enough of 'get liquor and get laid'. Instead, overachievers Molly (Beanie Feldstein) and Amy (Kaitlyn Dever) – who sacrificed frivolity for 'A' grades – are horrified to learn their slacker classmates also won themselves Ivy League college places.

Determined to prove they too can be rule-breaking funsters on their last night before graduation, the duo embark on a high-energy odyssey to find a secret house party. Though they're supersmart, not superbad, the fast-paced, gag-strewn trail laid by actor-turned-director Olivia Wilde is a hilariously steep learning curve for the bookish BFFs. Bouncing them through their classmates' celebrations, from a lavishly lame boat bash to a neurotic murder-mystery dinner, the episodic, risk-taking script (co-written by Katie Silberman) uses their smarts and social naivety to bring the yucks.

But what grounds everything, cleverly, is Molly and Amy's wry, excitable ride-or-die

bond, forming the emotional heart of what rapidly becomes a bosom-buddy movie. There's even an indie-ish echo of *Lady Bird*'s friend fracas, when the night's quest stretches their relationship to its limits. Wilde keeps the comedy crowd-pleasing, her peppy, music video-style visuals and hip-hop soundtrack giving the film a vivid, teenage-POV intensity. She opts for a crammed, exuberant style, whose minor wrong notes include Billie Lourd's mysterious It Girl and a teacher-pupil hook-up that's more gag than subplot. Refusing to play it safe, Wilde even stages her heroines' inadvertent drug trip as a slapstick Barbie doll animation, with shy Amy revelling in her unlikely plastic curves.

This fearlessness extends to switching up the film's 'one crazy night' plot so that it's raunchy but radical. Replacing the *American Pie* template of hungry boys and hot girls is cheerfully filthy female chat and a same-sex crush treated as an opportunity rather than a problem, *Blockers*-style. Sex, when it happens, is beautifully bungled, in an all-the-

THE VERDICT Feldstein and Dever light up a witty, whipsmart teen comedy as they fight for their right to party.

wrong-moves encounter that elicits all the right feels.

Booksmart's undeniable bonus is that its teens and their reactions feel real, not engineered for laughs. Under the shrieky idiocy of a pizza-delivery hijacking runs the exhilaration of behaving badly; meanwhile, the longed-for party dives from raucous fun to raw rejection in the time it takes to swim a backyard pool. Even in the film's tear-jerking moments, Feldstein and Dever's crazy chemistry holds everything down, Feldstein keeping bossy, big-hearted Molly flawed as well as funny. But Dever is the movie's breakout star, finding steeliness and sharp yearning under her deadpan quips. Stacked behind them are nifty cameos from Jason Sudeikis' laid-back headmaster/Lyft driver and Lisa Kudrow's well-meaning mum, convinced that "Korean face mask" is slang for sex games.

Fresh, inclusive and timely, this compassionate comedy serves up sympathy as well as satire for its high-school tribes. Party girls and boneheads alike get their moment. Dragging the teen movie from dick jokes to nicely woke, *Booksmart* knows that the kids are all right. **KATE STABLES**



They weren't
impressed with Dad's
attempt at a selfie.

BOYHOOD ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Richard Linklater **YEAR** 2014

American auteur Richard Linklater is on a noble, if impossible, mission: to distil the vagaries of human existence into cinema. Thus *Bernie* (2011) retold a tricky true-crime story mixing non-actors with Hollywood stars, and its real-life subject (played by Jack Black onscreen) came to live in the director's apartment as part of his bail conditions. *Waking Life* (2001), meanwhile, tried to capture the peculiar flux and fragility of dreams. And the *Before Sunrise* trilogy (1995–2013) detailed two kindred spirits' attempts to boff each other over the course of two entire decades.

We first meet Mason as a five-year-old child with an annoying older sister, Samantha (Lorelei Linklater, the director's daughter), a harassed single mum (Patricia Arquette), and an unreliable dad (Hawke). Over the course of the next 166 minutes we watch him move house, change schools, have his haircut, get – and lose – new, varying inappropriate stepfathers, discover girls and beer, fall in love, get dumped, go off to college, and generally find his way in the world. But just as our own memories can be the most unreliable of narrators, forgetting the facts but clinging on to abstract sensations and emotions, *Boyhood* can't be boiled down to a simple synopsis. Though the events depicted onscreen are strictly fictional, there's no getting away from the fact that we're watching a real person

growing, changing and assimilating; the little triumphs and disappointments that make us who we are.

It's not just Coltrane who shape-shifts before our eyes. Even the secondary characters age, flitting in and out of the story, getting thinner, fatter, older like child actors in a long-running sitcom. Watch closely – and there's almost no other way to look – and you'll see throughlines begin to form. Young Mason's predilection for graffiti is echoed throughout his life: in his painting over the height lines in his soon-to-be-vacated childhood home, in the emo nail varnish he experiments with at school, in the "street art" he exhibits in his room to impress girls, in the photography that becomes his final vocation. Meanwhile, his mum turns from night-school student to teacher, but can't learn to resist a series of terrible husbands. "I was someone's daughter then I was someone's fucking mum," she complains. Dad seems stuck in a cycle of perpetual immaturity, but even he grows up eventually – although not quite at the dizzying rate of his children.

As the years pass, technology improves, with Game Boys giving way to Facebook and

THE VERDICT Extraordinary in form, 'ordinary' in content, *Boyhood* is ambitious, intimate and unforgettable. It might just be the apex of Linklater's life's work.

smartphones. Pop culture repeats itself – *Star Wars* sequels come and go; Arquette reads the kids the first *Harry Potter* book, then later we see them queuing for advance copies of *The Half-Blood Prince*; the chart music targeted at Samantha remains oversexed and uniformly terrible. Gradually Mason's childish questions mature into a young man's philosophical musings and throwaway lines start to seem like lessons. "Follow your heart," says his schoolteacher as he prepares to leave for college. "Good luck. Don't forget to floss." But how could they not? We're watching a real life unfold. Well, almost.

You could accuse some secondary characters of edging towards caricature, but isn't that how we often see the bit players in our own lives? It's also harder to care about Mason during his moody teenage years, but the same could be said for most of us. Coltrane and Linklater Jr. may not be the most expressive of performers; but the point is, they don't need to be: their lack of guile in front of the camera makes their 'performances' seem less studied. Often they aren't acting so much as being.

You'll know from the nearly three-hour runtime whether this is for you, but there's no denying it's a work of unprecedented scope and sensitivity, and to watch it is to be totally overwhelmed. Sometimes you feel, in a good way, like it'll never end – in a sense it won't.

MATT GLASBY



Tom had a flashback to *Road To Perdition*.

BRIDGE OF SPIES¹²

DIRECTOR Steven Spielberg **YEAR** 2015

IN 1957, with the cold war at its frostiest, Soviet spy Rudolph Abel (Mark Rylance) is arrested in New York by the FBI. Reluctantly, lawyer James Donovan (Tom Hanks) agrees to defend him. The outcome of the trial sees Donovan incur widespread public hostility...

Donovan, yet more reluctantly, is persuaded by the CIA to travel to East Berlin and negotiate a high-impossible two-for-one hostage swap for two American captives on the eastern side. All he has to do is somehow persuade the CIA, the Soviet government and the East German government – all with their own conflicting agendas – to go along with him... It's fascinating to imagine how John Le Carré might have handled this story. But this is Steven Spielberg – so for all the treachery, bad faith and compromise involved, we still fight through to an upbeat ending.

Hanks, his furrowed brow and bewildered eyes offset by the firmness of his jaw, is as good as he's ever been as a man determinedly pushing his concept of justice against near-insuperable odds. But he's almost outacted by Rylance, whose Abel is a wonderfully sly portrait of a gifted man concealing his intelligence behind the drabest of facades.

Spielberg skilfully captures the paranoid mood of the era and the political labyrinth Donovan has to negotiate to reconcile the mutually suspicious interests involved. The tension of the climax on Berlin's wintry nocturnal Glienicke Bridge, snipers poised on all sides, is nail-gnawing. To collaborate on Matt Charman's original script Spielberg called in the Coen brothers, and their sardonic touch makes itself relishably felt. **PHILIP KEMP**

THE VERDICT Political intrigue abounds as Spielberg grippingly recreates a real-life spy-swap case of the Cold War, with both Hanks and Rylance on top form.



"If I buy you an ice cream, will you tell me all about *Star Wars*?"

BROOKLYN¹²

DIRECTOR John Crowley **YEAR** 2015

The experience of voluntary exile – and the gnawing sense of betrayal that's so often bound up with it – is known to generations of Irish expats, and it's at the core of this romantic drama from John Crowley (*Intermission*, *Boy A*), drawn with loving fidelity from Colm Tóibín's award-winning novel.

The setting's the small Irish town of Enniscorthy in the early '50s, where young Eilis Lacey (Saoirse Ronan) feels her life is going nowhere. Then comes the chance to move to New York. At first lonely, homesick and overwhelmed, she gradually starts to fit in, even to relish the tumult and glamour. And she finds love. But then a death calls her back home, – and there it seems another kind of life, another love may be on offer.

The casting is nigh-on flawless. As Eilis, Ronan subtly charts the shift from wide-eyed provincial girl to city sophisticate as much by stance and speech-patterns as by costume and hairstyle. She gets fine back-up from Julie Walters, visibly enjoying herself as her wasp-tongued Brooklyn landlady Mrs. Kehoe, Jim Broadbent as a benevolent priest, and Brid Brennan ripely malicious as a small-town snob. As the two guys our heroine finds herself torn between, Emory Cohen and Domhnall Gleeson each project charm in very different registers, and Eva Birthistle brings gusto to the brief role of a brassy blonde.

THE VERDICT Colm Tóibín's bitter-sweet novel brought impeccably to the screen, with Ronan excelling in the lead.

Equally impressive is the period recreation, conjuring up what now seems a remote age. This is a film that never insists or over-stresses its effects, but works its way quietly and irresistibly into our emotions. **PHILIP KEMP**



The standoff over who'd get the next round had begun...

CALL ME BY YOUR NAME ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Luca Guadagnino **YEAR** 2017

If only you knew how little I knew about the things that matter," drawls Elio (Timothée Chalamet) halfway through *Call Me By Your Name*. Seventeen, quietly creative, loudly bored, he's talking to the handsome grad student who's spending the summer of '83 at his parents' Italy home. It's the culmination of weeks of furtive flirtation. "What things?" asks the object of his affection. "You know what things," murmurs Elio. Indeed, we do. In a film that floats between coming-of-age ennui and heart-stopping moments of beauty, this is the first time Elio talks openly about his feelings. Up until this point, Luca Guadagnino's alluring adaptation of André Aciman's 2007 novel luxuriates in ambiguity. Between bright cups of apricot juice and tins of Illy coffee, the story unspools of Elio's crush on 24-year-old grad student Oliver (Armie Hammer), an all-American jock in tiny shorts whose breezy geniality aggravates as much as it allures.

As the duo embark on winding country bike rides and circle each other in sun-dappled courtyards, Chalamet and Hammer cast a beguiling spell. In a giant step up from playing Matthew McConaughey's son in *Interstellar*, Chalamet is remarkable, etching an unshowy portrait of a boy on the cusp of adulthood; constantly pretending, seemingly unsure how to behave. Hammer, meanwhile, is a revelation. Departing each scene with a maddening "later", he's unafraid of allowing Oliver to be unlikeable, lending this luminously optimistic film an edge that kills sentimentality in its tracks.

Guadagnino is a master of the slow build but, unlike the mounting hysteria of *I Am Love* and the shock rug-pulls of *A Bigger Splash*, this feels more urgently personal, capturing the pleasures and pains of youth with bracing sensitivity. When Elio talks of "things that matter" it's relatable no matter your gender or orientation. *CMBYN* finds a neat balance between heart and art, whether it's referencing Heraclitus or playing on Hellenic male relationships.

There are also Ray-Bans and 'Love My Way' by The Psychedelic Furs; the magic of Guadagnino's film is in its deceptively freewheeling style. In its final moments, *CMBYN* offers a powerful, emotional full stop; those things that matter have rarely been more arrestingly captured. **JOSH WINNING**

THE VERDICT Peachy keen. A luminous, sun-kissed Italian love story brimming with warmth, passion and feeling.

CALVARY ¹⁵

DIRECTOR John Michael McDonagh **YEAR** 2013

Over the course of two features apiece, the brothers McDonagh have had fascinating careers. Martin was first out of the gate with modern masterpiece *In Bruges*, which was followed by John Michael's debut *The Guard*, a fine effort albeit one arguably too in love with its own smartarse dialogue and colourful countryside saltiness. However, Martin's follow-up *Seven Psychopaths*, while it has its defenders, alienated others with its overcooked cleverness. And now there's John's *Calvary*; right up there with *In Bruges*.

Brendan Gleeson is on the form of his life as Father James, a priest in rural Ireland who is surprised by a death threat one morning as he takes confession. Challenged to meet his mystery would-be murderer a week later on the local beach to be shot in lieu of a now-dead paedophile priest, he at first puzzles over this out-of-the-blue murder date. But as we follow him in the days running up to it, he begins to find understanding of his predicament, and finally peace. Because Father James, in stark contrast to the rogues and rapists recently seen wearing cassocks in the movies, is a good man, and a good priest, and will do whatever his town needs him to.

As Gleeson spends what may be his final days tending to his villagers in a variety of ways, *Calvary* comes together as a terrific medley of tones and styles. It's got the black comedy that's been at the core of Irish writing for centuries, but also offers a deadly serious examination of faith and compassion. It's a showcase for Gleeson, but it's structured around a series of character studies ranging from Chris O'Dowd's weak butcher and Aidan Gillen's atheist doctor to Dylan Moran's depressed banker. Chief among the supporting players is Kelly Reilly, whose ace performance as James' troubled daughter (conceived before he took

THE VERDICT Anchored by a truly sensational performance from Gleeson, this unexpected blend of passion play, detective story, rural comedy and serious inquiry into faith is destined for classic status.

the cloth) manages to disguise how her character doesn't really go anywhere. It's hilarious, but the comedy grounds a straight-faced examination of how compassion and faith can interlink in a secular society. Somehow contriving to be both hopeful and fatalistic, this is a major step up from *The Guard* – and just maybe the best Irish film ever made.

ANDREW LOWRY



"Cheer up Father, *The Smurfs 2* wasn't that bad..."

COLUMBIA, E! FILMS, DISNEY



Cap doesn't help the situation when he hides Tony's helmet.

CAPTAIN AMERICA: CIVIL WAR 12A

DIRECTOR Anthony Russo, Joe Russo **YEAR** 2016

It's all been building to this. From the three-way forest throwdowns and Hulk-shaped sucker punches of *Avengers Assemble*, the prospect of Marvel's mightiest going toe-to-toe in a superhuman dust-up has been irresistibly enticing. That it arrives in cinemas little more than a month after DC's own clash of the titans failed to land a knockout blow feels all the sweeter, because *Civil War* delivers on the promise of its title.

The globetrotting plot kicks off in Lagos, where Cap and the new-look Avengers are on a mission to take down Winter Soldier survivor Crossbones (Frank Grillo). In a sequence reminiscent of Michael Mann's *Heat*, directing bros Anthony and Joe Russo significantly up their high-impact, shield-slinging action game.

The mission is a bust – the latest in a laundry list of catastrophes leading to the creation of the Sokovia Accords, a decree to police the super crew. Cap takes a stance against; Tony Stark, wracked with guilt over the creation of Ultron, sides with the Accords. Battle lines drawn, matters are further complicated by Bucky Barnes, who's implicated in a terrorist attack that puts both sides, and a certain Wakandan prince, on the Winter Soldier's tail.

In many ways, *Civil War* is the Marvel team-up sequel *Age Of Ultron* should have been. If *The Winter Soldier* was about S.H.I.E.L.D. being ripped apart from the inside, *Civil War* pulls the same trick with the Avengers themselves. But it's also

a Captain America movie through and through, further exploring *The Winter Soldier*'s major theme – the cost of freedom – while Bucky is even more integral to the plot here than in the film that bore his name.

As a piece of superhero storytelling, *Civil War* doesn't bring anything particularly innovative to the table. But importantly, given the callous loss of life going on in other comic-book movies, the human cost of the Avengers' actions is keenly felt, and addressed in a meaningful way. It makes DC's efforts to tackle the same idea in *Batman V Superman* seem thunderously dunderheaded in comparison.

"It always ends in a fight," says Bucky, and *Civil War* builds to an unforgettable main event. The airport-set battle royale ranks among the most inventive and fun scraps in super-cinema history. The characters may be pulling their punches here, but a later, three-way fight massively raises the emotional stakes, because after eight years and 12 films it's hard not to care about the people on both sides of the divide.

Chris Evans is dependably superb as Steve Rogers: the stoic heart and soul of the MCU. And though he doesn't have as much to chew

on this time round, there's little doubt why anyone would follow him into battle. Even better is Robert Downey Jr., who shows a different, more sympathetic, side to Tony Stark. He's less the swaggering snark merchant of movies past, more the elder statesman, reflecting on the consequences of his actions and desperately trying to make amends.

More importantly: how do the MCU's new players stack up? Chadwick Boseman's Black Panther has a meaty role in the story. Arriving fully formed, Boseman plays the prince of Wakanda with regal airs, charm and forceful determination. For Important Story Reasons T'Challa's extremely sullen in *Civil War*, but after donning his fancy vibranium suit, Black Panther's just as capable and acrobatically dazzling as any of the MCU's super-folk.

Better yet is Marvel's all-new Spider-Man. In a surprisingly substantial appearance, 19-year-old Tom Holland threatens to steal the entire film. His Peter Parker is perfect – nerdy, goofy and instantly endearing. And in the airport fight, he's truly spectacular, using his webs in hugely entertaining and creative ways, while his motor-mouthed wisecracking couldn't be better.

If there's a risk of the Marvel 'formula' becoming stale, there isn't any evidence of that here. *Civil War* is a damn-near-perfect popcorn crowd-pleaser that doesn't offer easy answers. Team Cap or Team Iron Man? The real winner here is Team Marvel. **JORDAN FARLEY**

THE VERDICT The superhero slugfest this summer deserved. The emotional stakes couldn't be higher, the big fight delivers and Tom Holland's Spider-Man steals the show. Up there with Marvel's very best.



Rarely has home-video footage been so haunting.

CAPTURING THE FRIEDMANS ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Andrew Jarecki **YEAR** 2003

Incredible to think that it started as a documentary about children's clowns. Filmmaker Andrew Jarecki discovered the Friedmans while interviewing David, now New York's most successful birthday-party clown. He learned how David's father Arnie, a nerdy, retired science teacher who gave computer lessons at his home, was caught ordering child porn. And he heard how an avalanche of charges from creating obscene videogames to brutal sodomy – collapsed in on Arnie, dragging his son Jesse under, too. But as Jarecki tunnelled deeper into the soul of the tragedy, he didn't find answers. He found a black hole – choked, dark and utterly irresistible. Jarecki's debut project had swerved irretrievably, to become not only a deeply traumatic investigation of a family decimated, but an exposé of US witch-hunting and a doomed interrogation of truth and innocence.

Built partly out of captivating interviews with sons David and Jesse (Seth refused to take part in the film) and their mother Elaine, *Capturing The Friedmans* also sucks in the police, prosecutors and the now-grown-up kids who took Arnie's computer classes. But there's one more extraordinary extra dimension. The Friedman boys recorded the entire affair on their home-video camera – nearly 50 hours of footage, to which Jarecki was granted full access. The result is a terrifying reality show, in which we see the fabric of a family disintegrating before our eyes, domestic supernovas of debate, sorrow and panic as well as – unforgettably – incendiary, tear-streaked video diaries.

More Errol Morris than Nick Broomfield, Jarecki refuses to platform his own opinion, instead letting the interviewees bury themselves in their own bullshit. See how witnesses were coerced by their neighbours and the police; learn how non-existent stacks of porn were used to convict Arnie and Jesse; and ponder how, despite the spectacular charges of violent sexual abuse, there was no physical evidence. But here's the kicker: Arnie is guilty. It's just that now we must confront what that really means. **TF**

THE VERDICT Difficult, unsettling and utterly compelling – feel the poisonous alchemy of social hysteria and buried secrets rot a family away.



"Psst, is Quasimodo playing Santa this year?"

CAROL ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Todd Haynes **YEAR** 2015

He used to make bracing art-core films, but Todd Haynes and classic Hollywood style have got a thing going now. After riffs on *Citizen Kane* (*Velvet Goldmine*), Douglas Sirk (*Far From Heaven*) and noir/melodrama (TV's *Mildred Pierce* remake), Haynes is a perfect fit for *Carol*, crafted from writer Phyllis Nagy's long-nurtured adap of Patricia Highsmith's 1952 novel *The Price Of Salt*. Haynes' movie is a ravishing seduction in a vintage mould: stealthy, swooning cinema to relish.

The director's control is clear the moment he segues from the title sequence across rainy '50s Manhattan streets to a charged restaurant encounter. An innocent "likewise" drips with feeling. We flash back to department-store attendant Therese (Rooney Mara) locking eyes with married mother Carol (Cate Blanchett). Sparks fly across the dead-eyed china-doll floor: one "leave the glove behind" ruse later, love blooms.

Carol's estranged husband and repressive '50s America complicate matters, but Haynes avoids heated melodrama. With slow-burn focus, he zeroes in on Carol/Therese to show how love emerges from a grey backdrop to consume them, a contrast beautifully conveyed by the film's style. Departing from *Far From Heaven*'s sumptuous flushes, Haynes and DoP Ed Lachman sketch emotional currents in smoke-stained sepia with flashes of red; Carter Burwell's score moons to their tune.

The to-die-for cast tune in too. Blanchett's full-bore charisma nails how tough a to-be-divorced mum in the '50s would have to be, yet she taps reserves of feeling for later shows of tenderness and turmoil. At another extreme, Mara's inscrutable reserve makes sense of a young woman trying to find herself, on alert for a revelatory return gaze through those popping eyes.

Some jolting shocks on a Christmas road trip are the closest Carol comes to Highsmith's twisty Mr. Ripley mode. Otherwise, everything from a sensitive sex scene to an agonising custody battle orbits around Carol and Therese's attraction with an understated focus so sure, you hardly even notice its hypnotic hold until the sublime climax. "You're in a trance," Therese is told. Likewise. **KEVIN HARLEY**

THE VERDICT Under Haynes' sure hand, Blanchett and Mara deliver a love story to melt to. Every glance means something, no strain shows: it's filmmaking as natural as breathing.



CHRONICLE 15

DIRECTOR Josh Trank **YEAR** 2011

As a high-schooler tests his fresh superpowers on an unlucky arachnid, is Josh Trank's \$15m feature debut issuing a sly challenge to 2012's squillion-dollar spandex crew? Spidey and co. better look sharp if so, because this found-footage flyweight matches advance heat with the clout to satisfy and subvert genre expectation. The first-person format is energised to max emotion, immersion and invention, a clever shift of genre focus adding what a superhero-stuffed market needs: the element of surprise.

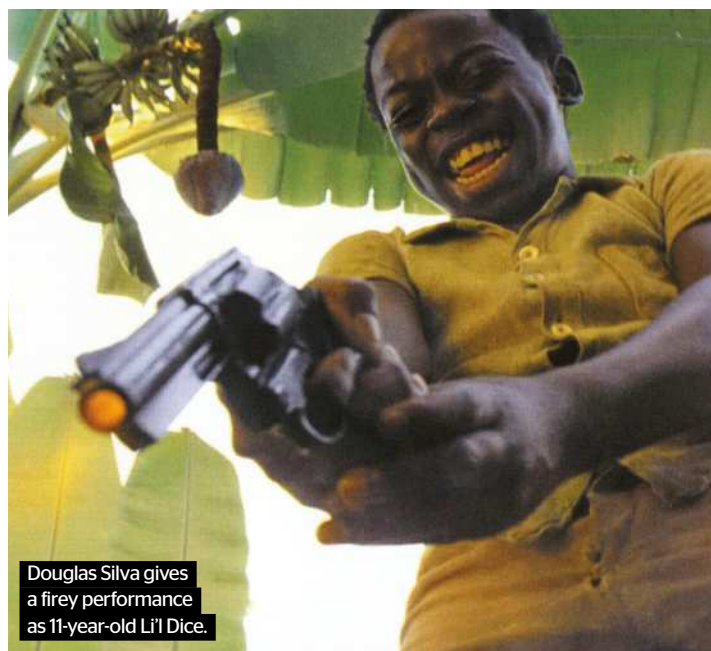
Humour and the human touch cut through origin-tale cliché to start, as three dudes at a rave explore a freaky underground hole that grants them telekinetic powers. Steve (Michael B. Jordan) is a sporty politico, Matt (Alex Russell) a brainy-but-emotionally stunted hunk. Matt's cousin Andrew (Dane DeHaan) is our eyes, an outsider whose grim home life – sick mum, dipso dad, no money – has alienated him.

This disconnect drives him viewing life through a lens, a point fully explored in Max Landis' script. We understand his voyeurism and why others think it's "weird". We're ecstatic that his prowess transcends shaky-cam cliché. That attention to detail continues as the trio test their powers: heroism's on hold while they goof about, blowing gusts up girls' skirts and – hilariously – instilling fear of teddies in one moppet.

But *Chronicle* is no *Superman*-meets-*Jackass* spoof: it honours comic-book conventions by proving their adaptability to new contexts. Natural-but-vivid performances (from DeHaan, notably), class rage and darkening philosophical notions plumb depths and reel us in. Neither is it too lofty to excite. Some cheats with the first-person format – why Matt's ex-girlfriend films her doorway is anyone's guess – are excused by the first-flight scene and the thrillingly realised climax, a cataclysm of money shots quick-cut from various recording devices (CCTV, iPhones) with no dilution of emotional focus.

THE VERDICT Josh Trank's savvy sleeper buffs up superhero and hand-held thrills. Believable then bad-ass, it brims with emotion, imagination and modern implication.

The crux of that focus is Andrew, around whom the origin plot parts coalesce. Stewed in a very 'now' fixation on self-documentation, his great power comes with great concern. The other incoming super-dudes should be equally anxious: this low-budget bolt from the blue will take some beating. **KEVIN HARLEY**



CITY OF GOD 18

DIRECTOR Fernando Meirelles **YEAR** 2002

Two little kids, aged five or six, are cornered by some 18-year-olds. Asked if they want it in the hand or foot, they begin to grizzle. The gun goes off. A kid's foot is blown wide open...

Welcome to *City Of God* (*Cidade De Deus*). It begins in the late '60s. Rocket (Luis Otávio) and Li'l Dice (Douglas Silva) are two 11-year-olds who idolise the hoods of Cidade de Deus, a godforsaken suburb on the edge of Rio de Janeiro. Events then conspire to thrust Rocket and Li'l Dice on separate roads.

The '70s see Rocket (now played by Alexandre Rodrigues) trying to go straight, chasing his dream of becoming a photographer. Li'l Dice, meanwhile, grows into Li'l Zé (Leandro Firmino da Hora), a ticking time bomb of a teenager who's killed his way to the top. Served by an army of gun-toting teenagers, Li'l Zé runs a thriving drug trade through virtue of fear. He's unstable. He's uncontrollable. And he's untouchable – until an act of brutal violence sparks an all-out turf war.

Whatever you want, *City Of God* has it. Technique? The camera moves so swiftly it leaves a slipstream. Structure? It's both playful and artful, speeding backwards and forwards within one big circle. Acting? First rate, 200 non-professionals plucked from 2,000 auditioning locals. Tension? It never lets up, a 20-minute club scene so taut it's a wonder the celluloid doesn't snap. Authenticity? Paolo Lins' titular source novel emerged from eight years of interviews. Politics? The police stand by and watch the slaughter, only intervening to collect their pay-offs.

Crucially, Fernando Meirelles' blistering movie also comes laden with emotion. Rocket's voiceover lends heart to his own story, while the volatile Li'l Zé has a touching friendship with likeable right-hand man Benny (Felipe Haagenzen). But there's more. Everywhere you look, you see characters trapped by poverty and violence, teenagers who charge towards death because, for them, it's the only way to go.

THE VERDICT Crime, conflict and coke make for an audacious Brazilian drama. You won't see a more technically dazzling, dramatically compelling or emotionally affecting movie this year.

As Meirelles puts it: "In Cidade de Deus, a 16-year-old kid is at the height of his life. He knows that if he is lucky, he'll last another three or four years." This is their incredible story, recorded to ensure their memory will last forever. Now how's that for hyperbole? **TF**

CITIZEN ASHE PG

DIRECTOR Rex Miller, Sam Pollard YEAR 2021

Early in Rex Miller and Sam Pollard's exceptional doc, we hear late tennis legend Arthur Ashe explain the difference between winners and champions. Winners, he says, are the best at what they do on a given day; champions "want to leave their sport better than they found it".

Intertwining archive footage with audio recordings and engaging interviews, *Citizen Ashe* paints an absorbing picture of a man who sought to challenge the status quo: he took up tennis to "fight the myth" that Black athletes "were all brawn and no brains". We learn that brother Johnnie took a second tour in Vietnam so Arthur could focus on his sporting career, and that Ashe was dubbed an 'Uncle Tom' by his Black peers for his apparent reluctance to join the civil-rights struggle. Initially letting his racket do the talking, he waited until a first Grand Slam win at the inaugural US Open afforded him the platform to speak out.

Shrewdly structured and edited, Miller and Pollard's film deftly links his on-court demeanour to his humanitarian work off it – showing an intelligent, graceful tactician who knew when to harness the power behind that calm, quiet facade. And, as the final act takes us from his late-career Wimbledon win to his late-life HIV activism, *Citizen Ashe* becomes a moving tribute to the legacy of a true champion. **CHRIS SCHILLING**

THE VERDICT The docu-equivalent of an unreturnable ace, *Citizen Ashe* is a captivating study of a pioneer on and off the tennis court.



Arthur Ashe with a different type of champion, Nelson Mandela.

CLIMAX 18

DIRECTOR Gaspar Noé YEAR 2018

Based, loosely one suspects, on the true story of a '90s dance troupe who had their punch spiked with LSD, this latest provocation from Argentinian director Gaspar Noé (*Irreversible*, *Enter The Void*) goes from the sangria to the satanic in the blink of a bloodshot eye.

It opens with a series of taped auditions followed by an extended – and exhilarating – rehearsal. The punch is then slurped... and Noé goes to work. Dialling the bass rumbles up to 11, he lets his untethered camera glide down nightmarish corridors and crawl along sweat-dripping ceilings. Next, the lens coils over, under and around the off-their-tits Parisian troupe as they buck, fuck and ruck to death. Well, what did you expect with that title? Mind you, the way Noé keeps up the technical dazzle and structural daring, this is really more of a tantric orgasm.

After the auteur's limp *Love* (2015), *Climax* is pumped with Viagra from its throbbing temples to its twitching toes. Its cast of professional dancers (including Sofia Boutella) resemble a Bosch painting brought to pain-racked life as vintage techno, house and electronic music soundtrack their accursed contortions. Imagine *Diversity*, with added edge, reenacting Pasolini's *Salò*, with less poo-eating. How can you resist?

JAMIE GRAHAM

THE VERDICT Divine beings plummet to hell in Noé's astonishing musical (of sorts). Not so much *Mamma Mia!* as "Mother of God!!"



There was a possibility the PTA meetings were getting a little out of hand.

THE CLUB 18

DIRECTOR Pablo Larraín YEAR 2015

If Pablo Larraín's piercing political satire *No* (2012) played like a Chilean double of Ben Affleck's *Argo* in its keen riff on recent history, his latest resembles a darker sibling to *Spotlight*. Larraín's terrifically tense, boldly mordant chamber ventures inside both a penitential house and its occupants' minds.

Larraín lays out his themes with vice-tight assurance. We meet four disgraced priests living under the rules of Sister Mónica (Antonia Zegers); they keep themselves low-key, though proof of repentance is scarce. But routine splinters when a fifth priest arrives, recognised by fisherman Sandokan (Roberto Farías), a troubled, vocal victim of the newcomer's crimes. When violence erupts, Marcelo Alonso's Father García visits the house to contain the crisis.

A series of two-handed interrogations follows, transformed into electric bouts of chafing loyalties. His flair for directing actors stokes full-bodied performances from Alfredo Castro as a self-preserved priest and Zegers, who spikes Mónica with icy poise. The dialogue is charged, the lensing expressive: DoP Sergio Armstrong makes claustrophobic work of the widescreen frame.

Tension mounts for a grimly knuckle-gnawing climactic sequence involving dogs. Larraín guides us towards a fearless examination of unresolved tensions between suffering, guilt and institutional impunity. **KEVIN HARLEY**

THE VERDICT Larraín shines a spotlight on crime and non-punishment in the Catholic church and emerges with a tale fraught with human complexity.



He woke up and wondered where the rest of his bedroom had gone.



The local tree-cutting services were ramping their feud up a notch.

CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON ¹²

DIRECTOR Ang Lee **YEAR** 2000

Flying kung fu warriors, evil witches, reckless Mongol horsemen and cratefuls of exotic hand-to-hand weapons – while being the staples of traditional kung fu movies, they’re not what you’d expect to see in an arthouse pic. Yet in the hands of genre-jumping director Ang Lee, the pretty-pretty world of fringe cinema crunches straight into hardcore chop-socky to produce a film that has, quite rightly, been labelled the first “martial arthouse” movie.

The remarkable achievement is that it doesn’t compromise either of these seemingly incompatible genres. Take a stopwatch to this and *The Matrix*, and *Crouching Tiger* wins by having longer, more varied and arguably better fight scenes. The combination of seamless wire work and the characters’ flying abilities produces chases and fights that swoop across courtyards, up walls and even teeter on the swaying tips of bamboo trees.

Amazingly, the fights aren’t action breaks, they further the characters, express emotion and are an integral part of the story. So, through combat we can see the youthful arrogance of Jen (newcomer Zhang Ziyi) as she leaps about, contrasting with the effortless dignity of Li (Chow Yun-Fat). The fighting is indistinguishable from the acting because it is the acting.

Also here is a display of China’s most beautiful, farthest flung reaches that are enough to make you weep at the wonder of it all. With an eye for colour, composition and form that marries the costumes and sets to the formality and rigidness of Chinese Qing Dynasty society, there are few films as beautifully crafted as this.

By rights, this should make more money than any Hollywood blockbuster, but the stumbling block is that audiences traditionally hold back from paying to see subtitled movies. In this case, don’t let your prejudices stop you – the language is poetic and the acting is so flawless that you understand the emotions even if you can’t understand the words spoken.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon defies pigeon-holing by succeeding as a love story, an action movie, a fantasy and a period drama. We’ve probably already seen the best acted, best shot and most exciting film of the year **TF**

THE VERDICT

With action and heart-swelling humanity, *Crouching Tiger* manages to please all of the people, all of the time. Miss it and you’re avoiding cinema at its very best.



Kevin gets ‘script’ and ‘scripture’ mixed up yet again.

CLERKS II ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Kevin Smith **YEAR** 2006

Twelve years is a long time to wait for a sequel. So long in fact, that it’s easy to forget what an era-defining, indie eye-popper *Clerks* was. Shot in moody monochrome for just \$27,000 and pocket change, its stupid-simple concept – slackers shooting the breeze instead of working their McJobs – distilled the pop-culture-but-no-future essence of Generations X, Y and Z. It was smart, it was scabrous, and it had a chick screwing a dead guy in a convenience store bathroom.

Clerks II, then: same shit, different movie, with Dante and Randal still in New Jersey and still cashing paychecks from McJobs. However, this time around it doesn’t so much define an era as mark its passing, as slacker slouching gives way to thirtysomething responsibilities like marriage, mortgages and making babies. Oh, and it’s shot in colour, not black-and-white, and doesn’t have any necrophilia.

But it is funny. Hilariously, hernia-inducingly funny. We’re talking so funny you’d rather pee in your Sprite than miss anything by going to the loo. So funny you’ll choke on your own guffaws, then take a slurp from the drink you just leaked in. That is, of course, as long as you’re not offended by the racial slur “porch monkey” or the sight of an overweight swinger playing Donkey Kong with a real, live ass of the four-legged variety.

But for all the (extreme) crudity, it’s also surprisingly touching. Smith has finally found the balance between so coarse your-mother-wouldn’t-like-it humour and sloppy sentiment that he’s been searching for since, like, forever. Riffs on the scariness of oversized clitorises cosy up next to a tender romance between Dante and Mooby’s manager Becky (Rosario Dawson, the beating heart of the movie). Then there’s the revenge of the nerd: more movie references than *Halliwell’s Film Guide*, not to mention frantic fan fights between Randal and virgin Jesus-freak co-worker Elias (Trevor Fehrman, a talent to watch) in which GoBots vs. Transformers and *Star Wars* vs. *The Lord Of The Rings* are brilliantly sorted out.

From *Mallrats* to *Jersey Girl*, Smith has proved an uneven and sometimes frustrating filmmaker.

THE VERDICT

Everything you could want from a sequel and much, much more, *Clerks II* reminds us why we love Kevin Smith.

How ironic that after vowing never to return, he’s finally found his stride by going back to the genesis of his “View Askewniverse”. Question is what will he do for an encore? *Clerks III* please, Kev.

JAMIE RUSSELL

Björk's first, and maybe last, lead performance is one to remember.



DANCER IN THE DARK ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Lars Von Trier **YEAR** 2000

The musical is probably the most maligned movie genre – and justifiably so. Nothing's more irritating than watching someone spontaneously burst into song. Everything's false: so crisp and clean, so... damn... choreographed.

So musical-haters should avoid *Dancer In The Dark* like the plague, right? Wrong. Lars Von Trier's latest – and arguably greatest – pulls off that rare trick of both celebrating a genre and subverting it. And as Selma (Björk) expresses her intense love for Hollywood musicals, we're also encouraged to consider their preposterousness. Her docile, devoted kinda-boyfriend Jeff (Peter Stormare) observes, correctly, that he's never seen anyone burst into song in real life, while Selma herself notes: "In a musical, nothing dreadful happens." In both these senses, *Dancer In The Dark* is a very different musical.

Yes, there are seven full-blown musical numbers, but each is presented as a fantasy conjured by Selma. The transition from real-life to dream is triggered by an everyday sound – clanking factory machines or the vinyl clickings of a run-off record – which build into the next number. Selma's grainy, video-shot surroundings take on a Technicolor glow, and the harsh, blurred world becomes, yes, a clean, crisp, choreographed song-and-dance. And what songs! Each tune perfectly retains composer (and reluctant lead) Björk's engagingly offbeat style, while slotting into the mood of the film without a single spark of friction.

As for nothing dreadful happening, *Dancer In The Dark* simply oozes dread, as Selma's world becomes ever more threatening. We know her eyesight is failing, so every day in the factory is an accident waiting to happen, while her neighbour and friend, Bill (David Morse), becomes ever more untrustworthy. It's important to realise *Dancer* is both a melodrama and a tragedy, and this, as much as the music, will divide audiences. Either you let it carry you away, or resist and dismiss it as OTT nonsense.

But, trust us, it's worth giving two hours of your life up to Von Trier and Björk. The former has turned in his most expectation-confounding work yet, while the latter proves she is capable of profound emotional

malleability, moulding a performance that is warm, heart-breaking and harrowing. Chances are, this'll be the most involving and traumatic cinema experience of your year. **TF**

THE VERDICT

A masterful marriage of relentless trauma and musical escapism.

There were drawbacks to being in a Jackson 5 tribute band.



DEAR WHITE PEOPLE ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Justin Simien **YEAR** 2015

Opening with national newscasters reporting on a riot at the prestigious Winchester University, where an end-of-term party encouraged white students to "liberate your inner negro", Justin Simien's savagely smart, incendiary, responsible satire then rewinds five weeks to track the escalating events leading up to the powder-keg spree.

The four principal players are Troy Fairbanks (Brandon P. Bell), head of an all-black residence; militant activist Sam White (Tessa Thompson), running against Troy in the house election and host of the titular radio talkshow; CoCo Connors (Teyonah Parris), determined to elevate her social position and to be chosen, over Sam, as the star of a reality TV show; and shy misfit Lionel Higgins (Tyler James Williams), a gay student with a huge afro. These four African-Americans, further prodded by the white staff of satirical campus magazine *Pastiche*, anchor Simien's microcosmic study of black identity and race relations in today's America.

Comprised of titled chapters, meticulous compositions, impossibly articulate dialogue, neat, patterned plotting and judicious use of 'Swan Lake' and 'Für Elise' on the soundtrack, *Dear White People* might be a little too arch and airless for some. But it's this formal rigour, the precise presentation of a hermetic world, which brings the satire into scalpel-sharp focus, allowing for the dense packaging of ideas and theories, jests and jibes, attacks and counter-attacks. No stereotype is left unturned, with Simien providing unexpected twists and layers to subvert preconceptions, while the US media is surgically scorched for prescribing narrow notions of identity and homogenised images that seek to turn African-American culture into commodities.

This is high-altitude satire that dares to press hot buttons while targeting and empathising with all. Some of the potshots are easy (Tarantino and Tyler Perry), some have the ring of a Kevin Smith-style pop-culture monologue and some thornily complex. All, however, hit

THE VERDICT Dear everyone – stop whatever you're doing and go see *Dear White People*. One of the freshest, funniest and most vital films of the year.

squrely home, delivered with quality by a fresh-faced cast that's overseen by Dennis Haysbert as Winchester's dean. As debuts go, *Dear White People* is, for all sorts of reasons, a genuine attention grabber. Be sure to give it yours. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

THE DARK KNIGHT ¹²

DIRECTOR Christopher Nolan **YEAR** 2008

We don't want you doing anything with your hands other than holding on for dear life."

It's a threat, it's a joke, it's barked by a masked hench-thug during The Joker's daring opening bank heist. It's also a mission statement from the makers of *The Dark Knight*. And you best buckle up: they mean it...

The title sets out the stall, both in theme and ambition. This isn't *Batman 2* (or 6 or 7 or however you tally it up), it's a standalone picture with its own heart and integrity. Christopher Nolan isn't interested in franchise; he's fascinated by character, by story, by people. Of all the superheroes, Batman is the only one who isn't, in fact, super. No powers supernatural or extraterrestrial: he lives in a world only a sliver of reality away from our own. Muscle, training and technology are his allies; aches, breaks and faltering will are his foes. When Alfred (Michael Caine) tends to Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale)'s post-fight contusions, he warns his master to know his limits. "Batman has no limits," comes the flat reply. Only, of course, Batman is limited by his beliefs. He'd rather break his own neck than snap the rule that has steered his crim-bashing excursions away from blunt Death Wish morality. He will be the judge and the jury, but he will not be the executioner. He will not kill. But if Batman's morality is a construct, The Joker (Heath Ledger) is a wrecking ball. Just as Wayne is contemplating an end to his crime-fighting endeavours – seeing hope in the arrival of Gotham's "White Knight", District Attorney Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart) – along comes this anarchic, mischievous terrorist daubed in "war paint", outwitting and then uniting the underworld in one aim: kill the Batman. Desperate crimes call for desperate measures, but just how far will Gotham's Caped Crusader go to save himself, his city and everyone he loves?

How far is too far is a pertinent question in the age of Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo and 42 days' detention without charge – but while the Nolans (Christopher and co-writer brother Jonathan) touch on everything from extreme interrogation to monitoring communications – in an actually quite bewildering tech-stretch

THE VERDICT A minor second-act shake can't undermine a dazzling, determined superhero classic – and Ledger puts Nicholson in the shade. With *Batman Begins*, Nolan set the bar; with *TDK* he's just raised it.

Bruce's first task at the make-up academy didn't go too well.



sequence – they don't draw glib parallels or let the War on Terror allusions overpower the entertainment. This isn't Michael Moore's *Batman*, though there's a touch of Michael Mann in the visuals, with Gotham no longer a gloomy, gothic comic-book creation, more the corrupt conurbation of *Heat*. As for those *The Godfather: Part II* promises in the pre-release pieces? Right there on the screen, in the hollowed-out face of Bale, as he contemplates the consequences of his actions. His brilliance has become almost commonplace but shouldn't be overlooked – he brings light and shade, depth and compassion to a character previous Bat-men have often made monochrome – though there's no doubting the limelight will be on the late Ledger, burning brightly as he embodies an icon. Dig out the thesaurus and run through the superlatives: chilling, gleeful, genius... It is a masterpiece of a performance. The meeja Oscar talk is tasteless, in that the Academy usually ignores comic-book entertainment and the hyperbole is because he has died, but let it be said

that it's such a fearless, menacing turn that comparisons with Nicholson don't come into it. This is the definitive Joker.

If there are gongs going, hand another to the Nolans for their script – which fleshes out previous bit-parters, with Gary Oldman benefiting as Gotham's only honest rozzler – and gives Ledger lip-smacking sequences where he can mock the "Daddy didn't love me!" motivations of lesser movie villains, by spinning different yarns to different audiences about his damaged past. Not that the film isn't interested in motivations – as evidenced by Harvey Dent's journey to the dark side (you'll have to discover that for yourself).

If *The Dark Knight* has a flaw, it's that the attention to each character results in a crammed, tumultuous movie, even at two and a half hours. There's so much going on, so much energy and ambition, that the through line becomes a little muddled. But just use that as an excuse for a repeat performance. That Mr. Nolan: he has a taste for the theatrical.

NEV PIERCE

THE DARK KNIGHT RISES ¹²

DIRECTOR Christopher Nolan **YEAR** 2011

Luckily for everyone, there aren't many points of comparison between *The Dark Knight Rises* and *Batman & Robin*. But Christopher Nolan's epic and Joel Schumacher's epic fail do share something: scenes where you truly feel the love between Bruce Wayne and his ever-faithful butler Alfred. Of course, Nolan's are a bit more understated. But they're the heart of the film, in a film with heart – not necessarily the first virtue you associate with the bedazzling Brit.

And yet, gruff, gritty and gothic though it is, *TDKR* may bring a lump to your throat that isn't popcorn-related. Its chief summer challenger *Avengers Assemble* may have bigger zingers and brighter colours, but this has one thing Whedon's wonder missed: emotional engagement; a genuine sense of jeopardy; deepening human drama. (OK, three things.) Meanwhile, it also breaks from the Nolan norm in getting to grips with key, charismatic characters who aren't all blokes. But before we let the cat out the bag, something to make clear: this is a Batman movie that's all about Batman. Where the previous chapter ceded the spotlight to Heath Ledger's movie-thieving Joker, this shifts the focus squarely back on to Bruce as he faces his toughest mission yet: retirement. "There's nothing out there for me," he mopes, eight years into self-exile following the dark night he took the rap for DA Harvey Dent's crimes, for the good of Gotham.

Holed up and hollowed out in a rebuilt Wayne Manor, this is the most adrift we've seen the character on screen. Weighing a return to battle against taking a new path, Bruce and Alfred debate Batman's future in tense, tender exchanges. You're hooked, and the fighting hasn't even started yet.

After a Bondian skyjack opening already familiar to Imax viewers of *Mission: Impossible – Ghost Protocol*, Nolan goes small and noir, a case of stolen pearls opening the door to deadlier misdemeanours. Before long, the movie's massive. The director and his co-writer/younger sib Jonathan have cooked up their most ambitious scheme yet, bunging faith, idealism, social revolution and a combustible crisis that could backbone an

THE VERDICT A smart, stirring spectacle that faces down impossible expectations to pull off a hugely satisfying end to business. Boy, you're in for a show tonight.



The Batman and Alien fan clubs were about to clash yet again.

entire season of 24 into the blender. As the scale and stakes balloon, Nolan maintains taut control; if anything the storytelling coheres sharper than *The Dark Knight*. The trick lies in holding fast to what he cares most about: the cost to a (Bat)man's body and soul. This time, it's painfully personal.

Lest this all sound itchy introspective, rest assured: there's a ridiculous amount of cool shit here. "Boy, you are in for a show tonight," drools a fat copper as the Bat-pod burns back onto Gotham's streets, new tricks up its wheels. There's also a rumbling return for the Tumbler(s), plus magnificent flying machine The Bat. Fanciful but functional, the latter's a winged symbol of what's best about Nolan's Bat-verse: the intelligently heightened realism that lets us buy the idea of a city enslaved by a half-naked muscle-man in an S&M mask. Particularly when he's played by Tom Hardy, whose Bane is a virile mix of brawn, brains and Brian Blessed (those filtered vocals proving mostly legible).

A bit camp? Wait till you see the fists of fury he lays on Bats in the film's smarting centrepiece. The other new recruit from the costumed canon, Anne Hathaway's cat-burglar Selina Kyle (never referred to as Catwoman, unless our ears deceive us), also strays from kitsch. She's a bundle of spiky fun though – not a tragic misfit à la Michelle Pfeiffer, but

a wily grifter nuanced enough in Hathaway's hands not to seem like she's just there to add a sexual frisson. Though she does that, too.

Top to toe, it's an ace ensemble, no one forgettable. Joseph Gordon-Levitt essays solid, un-dull decency as honest cop John Blake, while Bruce's holy trinity of father figures – Gary Oldman, Morgan Freeman and moist-eyed Michael Caine – are at their warmest and sagest. And Christian Bale? Never more vulnerable, likeable or willing to get his gloves dirty, pushing to new emotional depths for his final Gotham go-around.

And yes, it is *The End*, a resounding resolution for what *Batman Begins* began. Threads from that 2005 film are picked up and strengthened, bringing a staunch integrity, in every sense, to the overall arc.

Is it up there with *The Dark Knight*? Not quite. The Joker in the pack still gives part two the winning hand. But there's no shame in coming second to Nolan's Michael-Mann-with-masks masterpiece. You'll be busy agog at Wally Pfister's cinematography; the seamless interweave of genres; implied brutality without riling the censor; or the equally sly way he slips in possibly controversial elements from the Bat-mythos without risking outrage.

Third time's often the harm for superhero films. Not on Nolan's watch. **MATTHEW LEYLAND**



All dressed up and nowhere to go; three brothers see their journey go off the rails.

THE DARJEELING LIMITED 15

DIRECTOR Wes Anderson **YEAR** 2007

Top satirical website *The Onion* recently broke a story on Wes Anderson: “Fans who attended a sneak preview of *The Darjeeling Limited*,” it deadpanned, “were shocked to learn the film features a dry comedic tone, highly stylised production design and a plot centring around unresolved family issues.”

The mock news piece went on to feign similar surprise at the familiar cast, the melancholy subtexts and the Brit-bands on the soundtrack. All good-spirited fun, of course, but the spoof is starting to stick. Anderson, one of America’s most intelligent, on-the-ball filmmakers, is increasingly talked about in terms of style, not substance. The fashions and music picks receive as much attention as the movies themselves. It’s as though he crams the background with so many fascinating trinkets, people forget to focus on what’s right in front of them. That’s a shame, because every film to date grows with repeated viewing. *The Darjeeling Limited* will do the same. Powerful and meditative, it’s Anderson’s most mature work to date; an exploration of love, death and family that lingers long after its running time’s up.

Most critics’ screenings started with 13-minute short *Hotel Chevalier*, a gorgeous, funny mood-piece that gives the film’s closing scenes a little extra seasoning. The movie proper begins with a cameo from Bill Murray, too encumbered with cases to catch the train he’s

running for, a father figure who’ll be sitting out this journey. Aboard said choo-choo are Francis, Peter and Jack Whitman (Owen Wilson, Adrien Brody and Jason Schwartzman): brothers who haven’t exchanged a word since their dad’s funeral a year ago. The three are together at the behest of Francis who, swathed in bandages after a recent motorbike mishap, is eager to embark on a “spiritual quest”, locomoting across India. “I want us to be brothers like we used to be,” he pleads to his sceptical sibs, who don’t take too kindly to his control-freak insistence on providing laminated daily itineraries for their long days’ journey into light.

But as the train chugs on, we slowly discover that each of the bros is lugging their own emotional baggage: a point visually riffed on by constant reference to their elaborate personalised suitcases. Peter’s wife back home is pregnant and he can’t cope with the responsibility; Jack writes ‘short stories’ that are actually verbatim accounts of past follies and family episodes. Meanwhile, Francis’ ‘accident’ may have darker roots... (And yes, after recent real-life events, seeing Wilson bruised and bandaged does disconcert). Various

THE VERDICT A tall tale of mishaps and misadventure that settles into a thoughtful, moving journey. By turns funny, smart and poignant, it’s one of the most satisfying films of 2007.

subcontinental capers follow, the radiant backdrop almost proving a character in its own right. Before long, though, Francis spills the real reason for the trip: to reacquire the brothers with the mother who left them to become a nun. Regular Anderson viewers won’t be surprised to learn that Ma Whitman is played by Anjelica Huston – nor that she excels in a brief albeit testing role. To reveal any more would be to spoil an excursion that meanders richly before reaching a final third of high drama, tragedy and resolution... of a sort.

True, the visual tics and stupendously effective soundtrack (a mix of licks from the films of Indian master Satyajit Ray and tracks from The Kinks’ unsung 1970 platter *Lola Versus Powerman And The Moneygoround, Part One*) will conjure a sense of déjà vu for some audiences. Yet Anderson’s consistent style and sensibility are signs of a director not in a rut but in control. Every carefully composed shot bears the hallmark of genuine craftsmanship. Better still, the fastidiousness doesn’t jar against the movie’s tender message: nothing can stop life unfolding how it will; you just have to roll with it. Bold, original and ambitious, this is personal filmmaking of a rare vintage. *The Darjeeling Limited* is Anderson’s most sincere and emotionally revealing work yet. There’s never been a better time to get on board with his unique brand of cinema.

AUBREY DAY



DAVID BYRNE'S AMERICAN UTOPIA 12

DIRECTOR Spike Lee **YEAR** 2020

Filmed with fluid vigour by Spike Lee at a 2019–20 Broadway residency, *Heads* frontman David Byrne's new concert movie is part dance-theatre, part limber art-funk workout, *American Utopia* is a joyous hymn to connectivity: everyone's invited.

Across a clutter-free stage, a shoeless Byrne and his 11-piece band splinter and reconvene in flexible formation. Lee's cameras operate likewise, giving every player a spotlight before pulling back to show crowd/band in unison. Meanwhile, a spry haul of solo cuts, covers and *Heads* hits keeps the set brisk, succumbing to neither a laurel-resting best-of nor a "Here's our new album" patience test.

From tip to tail, the quality never dips. 'Once In A Lifetime' is ecstatic, 'Toe Jam' and the cover of Janelle Monáe's 'Hell You Talmbout' equally so. Even the showoff-y bit where the band prove they're playing live pops with exuberance; elsewhere, Byrne's drollery leavens the interludes. By the time 'Road To Nowhere' sends the band marching through the audience, the mood of mutual celebration peaks giddily. Come along and take that ride. **KEVIN HARLEY**



DESTINATION UNKNOWN 12A

DIRECTOR Claire Ferguson **YEAR** 2017

Personal testimonies lend a fresh perspective to the Holocaust in this meticulously researched doc focusing on 12 survivors. Comprising archive footage and first-hand accounts, the film feels vital in sharing harrowing stories of life in concentration camps, while the message is clear: even 70 years later, these survivors will never be fully free. **MATT LOOKER**



DISTANT SKY 15

DIRECTOR David Barnard **YEAR** 2018

Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds are masters of grand-scale immersion in this doc of 2017's arena tour. The 'hard blues' of recent material and vintage cuts offer thrills, before emotion levels soar for a hymnal 'Into My Arms' and heartbreaking 'Girl In Amber'. The second half mounts peak after peak, creating a sense of communal catharsis so overwhelming it raises goose-bumps on your soul. **KEVIN HARLEY**

DONNIE DARKO 15

DIRECTOR Richard Kelly **YEAR** 2001

America is covered in flakes of scalp right now. It has been since Richard Kelly's headscratcher of a debut, *Donnie Darko*, revealed itself at Sundance 2001. Some viewers dismissed it. Others proclaimed it a masterpiece. Most huddled protectively on the fence. All, however, agreed on one thing: boy, was it a headfuck.

Set in a suburban anytown in 1988, it follows the eponymous teen (Jake Gyllenhaal, mesmerising) through 28 very strange days. Donnie is troubled. Donnie is on medication. Donnie is seeing a shrink (Katharine Ross). Donnie is also seeing, rather worryingly, a malevolent six-foot-tall rabbit called Frank, who swings by to warn of the world's imminent demise. It's because of one such visit that Master Darko fortuitously eludes death, the baleful bunny luring him out of his house just as a jet engine crashes onto his bed.

Thing is, no one knows where it came from or what happened to the plane that birthed it. And that's just the beginning of this bizarre adventure: Donnie's begun seeing liquid timelines shimmering from people's torsos, pertinent clues suggest that he read up on time travel, and a dotty old woman who's forever checking her mailbox suddenly seems mightily important...

So what is *Donnie Darko*? Suburban satire? Psychological thriller? High-school flick? Coming-of-age drama? Sci-fi mindb(1)ender? The answer, of course, is all of these, but it also take potent swipes at Reagan's me-me America, as well as touching on spiritual matters and somehow finding time for a moving romance.

It's this spirited refusal to be boxed, married to a befuddling climax that demands a second viewing, that has flummoxed many of our Stateside cousins. Shame, because the conundrum critics should be poking at is how a 26-year-old writer-director nobody can whip up a debut with so many intriguing characters and so many possible readings – yet keep it tight, intimate and assured. How can he explore such surreal, fantastical territory, yet make Donnie a poignantly recognisable screw-up? And how can he extract note-perfect performances from his cast, yet have the technical nous to match his people skills?

THE VERDICT *Donnie Darko* is a dazzling achievement. It'll have your brain doing exhilarating somersaults.

Of course, nitpickers will point to the movie references and bursts of pop culture dialogue as examples of Kelly being just another geek with a movie camera. But they're wrong: this is startling filmmaking. **TF**



Jake Gyllenhaal: a young talent who surely has a bright future.



Ferguson, Zendaya, Bardem and Chalamet face the sandy vastness.

DUNE 12A DIRECTOR Denis Villeneuve YEAR 2021

Like his last two movies, *Arrival* and *Blade Runner 2049*, Villeneuve's third sci-fi in a row is jaw-dropping in its invention and boldness. While the film will play on small screens via Warner's HBO Max streaming channel in some territories, there can be no doubt, you'll be doing yourself a huge disservice if you see this on anything less than the biggest screen you can find.

The year is 10191. Duke Leto Atreides (Oscar Isaac), of the powerful House Atreides, is assigned to be the fief ruler of Arrakis. A sparse desert-scape that makes Tatooine look positively inviting, this Sahara-like planet just happens to be the source of melange – a powerful, sought-after drug also known as 'spice'. A sacred hallucinogen that can even prolong life, it has become regarded as one of the most valuable substances in the universe.

Mining 'spice' is hazardous, with Arrakis plagued by dangerous giant sandworms that grow up to 400 metres in length, living beneath the arid surface as they hunt for food. But that's not enough to stop Leto, who takes his son Paul (Timothée Chalamet) and his concubine Lady Jessica (Rebecca Ferguson) to the planet. With them comes the battle-hardened Gurney Halleck (Josh Brolin) and hot-shot pilot Duncan Idaho (Jason Momoa).

Young Paul must take on the mantle of becoming his father's successor, but it's no easy path. Early on, the witch-like 'Truthsayer' Gaius Helen Mohiam (Charlotte Rampling) subjects Paul to inordinate pain by instructing him to place his hand inside a simple-looking

box. He passes what will be the first of many tests; this is a coming-of-age story played out against the most hostile of backdrops.

In a story that deals with loyalty and betrayal, *Dune* also blends the personal with the political, as House Atreides faces the machinations of the rival House Harkonnen that previously managed the spice harvesting. Stellan Skarsgård's hideous, slug-like Baron Vladimir Harkonnen is a superb antagonist, part Jabba The Hutt, part Colonel Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now*, as he plots the downfall of Leto and his clan with a violent and bloody coup.

Co-scripted by Villeneuve with Eric Roth (*A Star Is Born*) and Jon Spaihts (*Doctor Strange*), this sprawling adaptation barely has time to introduce us to the Fremen, the oppressed native people of Arrakis to which Zendaya's Chani and Javier Bardem's chief Stilgar belong. With their eyes bright blue due to exposure to 'spice', they're a distinct-looking group who understand Arrakis better than most.

As absorbing as *Dune's* plot is, it's the world-building that will leave your mind blown. The costumes, production design and visual effects are all elite-level, perfectly harnessed to bring Villeneuve's vision of Herbert's opus to thrilling life. From suits used to recycle the body's moisture in the desert to helicopters with rotor-blades that flutter like

THE VERDICT Denis Villeneuve has achieved the near-impossible: made a riveting adaptation of a classic sci-fi novel, creating a world that begs to be revisited.

mosquito wings, this is science fiction to get utterly lost in.

No doubt, some will carp that the film stops at the notional halfway point, building less to a climax than to anticipation for Paul's journey in the second half of the book. Some characters are also given little space to flourish, like Dave Bautista's Harkonnen ally Glossu 'Beast' Rabban, although he makes a sizeable impression when he does appear.

Yet there's so much to admire. The enormous sets by Patrice Veremette, beautifully lensed by DoP Greig Fraser, truly transport you to both the faraway future and, improbably, the near past. Villeneuve's *Dune* feels like a film that pays homage to the 1960s sci-fi that Herbert's book helped define; the shadow of Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* looms large.

Amid a fine ensemble, Chalamet stands tall, shouldering his most mature role yet. His journey from boy to adult is the heart of *Dune*, and the actor embraces it wholeheartedly. A word, too, for Sharon Duncan-Brewster, who impresses as Fremen ecologist Dr. Liet Kynes – gender-swapped from the book and previous screen incarnations.

In the end, it's not so much the performances you'll remember as the universe that surrounds them. When the sandworm makes its first appearance, you'll have your first genuine OMG moment – in surely the most remarkable scene you'll see all year. Pray that Villeneuve's *Dune* is the adaptation fans have waited a generation for. Prepare to have your breath snatched away. **JAMES MOTTRAM**

DUNKIRK ¹²

DIRECTOR Christopher Nolan **YEAR** 2016

A real-life retelling of a pivotal moment during WW2 might seem an unexpected choice for the writer/director/world-builder of original blockbuster fictions. Yet the classical, elegiac *Dunkirk* is still unmistakably a Christopher Nolan film. Like many of Nolan's previous projects, it's multi-layered, non-linear, precision-calibrated, epic in scale – and even boasts Bane himself rocking a shearling coat and shouting through a face-obscuring mask.

But while many of those clever, clockwork creations thrilled and confounded, Nolan has long been criticised for a certain clinical coldness. No such problem here – heartfelt and moving, *Dunkirk* may be teeth-clenching stuff, but it's also the auteur's most unapologetically emotional and accessible film to date... and it could be the movie to finally get him into the Oscar-winners' circle.

Rather than take an impersonal God's-eye overview of the events of May 1940, when 400,000 troops were pushed back by German forces to the beaches of Dunkirk to face death and defeat if they weren't rescued, Nolan dissects his film into three separate narrative tracts. The respective strands cover land, sea and air – an approach that immerses you in the boots-on-the-ground reality for the blood-and-guts men (civilian and military) battling to change history.

After opening with a young soldier – with the aptronym Tommy (Fionn Whitehead) – escaping gunfire through the streets of Dunkirk only to arrive at the crowded, desperate beaches, those narratives unfurl in different times: the story of troops on the shore begins a week before the climax; the journey of Dorset sailor Mr. Dawson's (Mark Rylance) sea-based rescue mission starts a day ahead; and the tale of two fighter pilots, Farrier and Collins (Tom Hardy and Jack Lowden), kicks off an hour before in the skies over the Channel.

As the stories weave in and out of each other, we see key life-threatening incidents (a downed Spitfire, a torpedoed ship, a sinking fishing boat) from different perspectives, with each replay informed by increasing investment in characters and a 360-degree understanding of the logistics at play. The cumulative effect is both thrilling and devastating. We're deftly shown the misinterpretations that fuelled troop hostility towards the RAF (unseen from the beach, it was assumed the fighter

THE VERDICT Haunting, thrilling and emotional, *Dunkirk* is a prestige pic with guts and glory that demands multiple views. Especially in IMAX.



Truly epic in scale, *Dunkirk* demands a visit to your nearest IMAX cinema.

squadrons had simply abandoned their comrades) and the constant peril every man was in despite apparent deliverance. Think you're safe aboard a naval medic ship? That a bailout went OK? That the proximity of help will save you in oil-slick water? Think again...

Playing as briskly and tensely as any escape thriller with mouth-agape-impressive in-camera effects, the movie constantly asks audiences to consider what they would do in a series of relentless, deadly situations while highlighting the acts of bravery, honour and kindness that exemplify the famous Dunkirk Spirit. A white lie to protect a shellshocked soldier here, a last-ditch fight despite running on empty there, the faith of an ordinary father speeding to save a man in memory of his fallen son... small moments in the bigger picture that build to the ultimate show of British stoicism in a flotilla of little ships as Hans Zimmer's insistent, Shepard tone score (driven by the sampled ticking of Nolan's own wristwatch) gives way to the stirring strains of Elgar's emotive 'Nimrod' variation – challenging viewers not to shed a tear. Manipulative? Probably. Flawlessly executed? Yes.

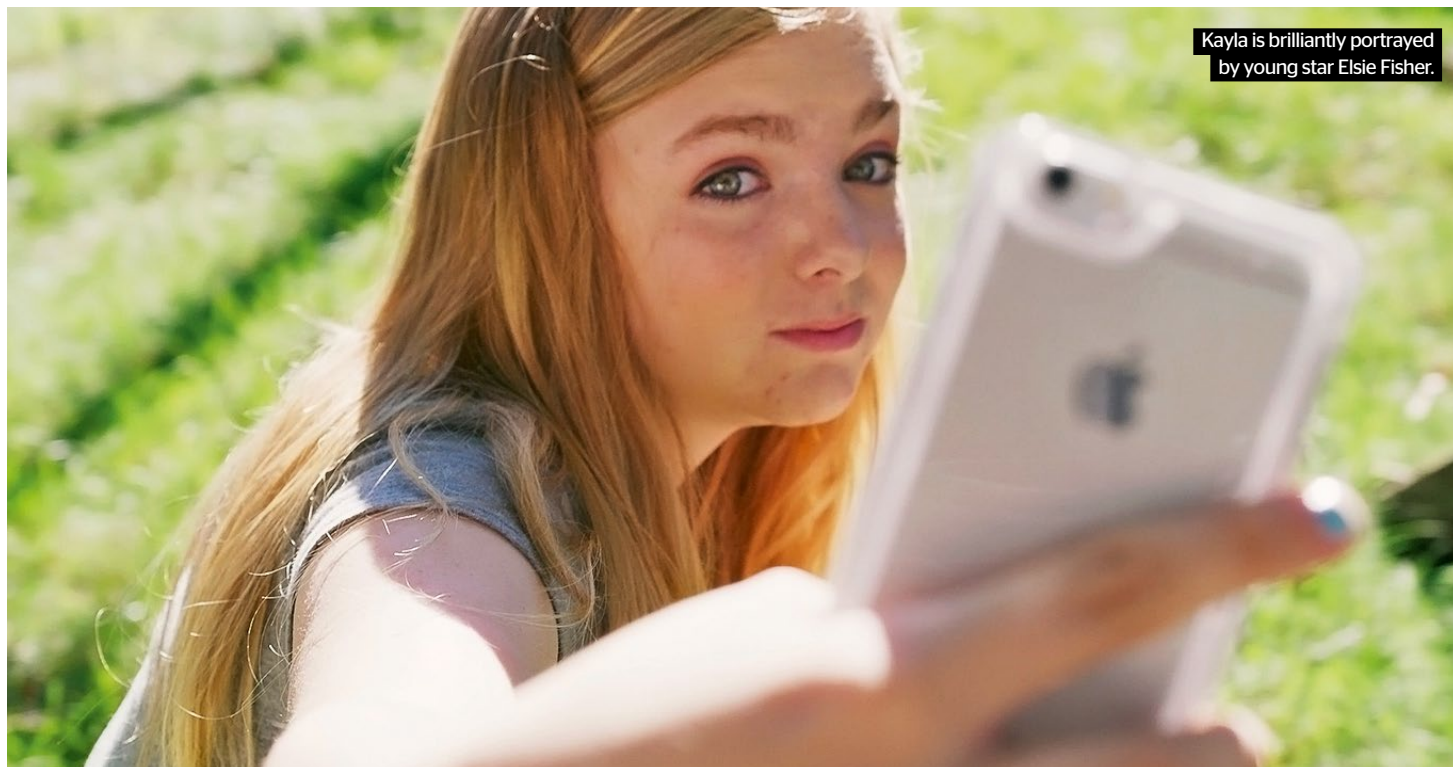
A true ensemble piece, *Dunkirk*'s cast may have little dialogue, and limited individual screen time, but all are (pardon the pun)

uniformly excellent – yes, cynics, even that One Direction bloke. While the young guns provide the derdoing, the more seasoned cast bring the gravitas and feels. Special mention must go to Rylance's delightful, nuanced patriot, Hardy's dexterity in portraying emotions from behind an oxygen mask in the confines of a cockpit and Kenneth Branagh's Shakespearean naval commander – when, eyes brimming, he utters the word "home", it'll break you.

But they, of course, are not the stars of the show. What really makes *Dunkirk* so immediate, so visceral, are the period-correct vintage planes and boats fitted with innovative cameras to create literally breath-holding moments underwater, in the sky and on the sea. Hoyte Van Hoytema's beautiful, terrifying lensing – dizzying dogfights, suffocating sinkings and a cinematography-award moment when a Spitfire lands on sun-gilted sand – ensure that what could have been complicated and depressing is rendered with complete, focused clarity.

Thoroughly modern in its approach, yet classical in style, it's a film that will appeal as much to fans of his Batman film as it will to WW2 scholars, and ultimately, the Academy come gong time. **JANE CROWTHER**

Kayla is brilliantly portrayed
by young star Elsie Fisher.



EIGHTH GRADE 15

DIRECTOR Bo Burnham **YEAR** 2018

On paper, it would be easy to dismiss *Eighth Grade* as just another high-school movie, infused as it is with the standard quotidian of Gen Z academic life from mean girls and crushes to clueless parents and teachers. And directed by a 27-year-old man, no less. What could the trials of a 13-year-old girl possibly teach an audience outside her demographic? But Bo Burnham's authentic, warm and compassionate study of the struggle to connect and the human condition is utterly universal and a joy for any viewer, regardless of gender or graduation date.

Following a 'quietest in class' middle schooler in the last weeks of term before she moves to the larger shark-pool of high school, *Eighth Grade* charts the wobbly journey of Kayla (Elsie Fisher) from wannabe vlogger trying to live by the rules she espouses in gauche self-help videos, to a teen comfortable in her skin and optimistic about her future. Without a makeover, glow-up or epiphany in sight.

That route is littered with recognisable mortifications, inequalities and social clangers. The cool-girl pool party Kayla is forced to go to in a hideous one-piece is a particularly delicate balance of cringe and courageousness, while her awkward interactions with school hottie Aiden (Luke Prael) are charmingly callow. She's hideously embarrassed a lot – by her dad (Josh Hamilton), her sexual inexperience, her

clothes, her teachers... But mostly by her dad, who tries to talk to her when she's screen-glued over dinner, protect her when she meets new friends and understand her mercurial moods and appetites.

But *Eighth Grade* isn't interested in mining laughs from the cruelty and fontrum of these perfectly calibrated moments. Nor is it looking to judge kids, parents or school, much less the social media that is so integral to the story. And it doesn't shy away from the darker implications of wanting to grow up so damn fast, as Kayla falls prey to an unscrupulous older boy on the backseat of his car.

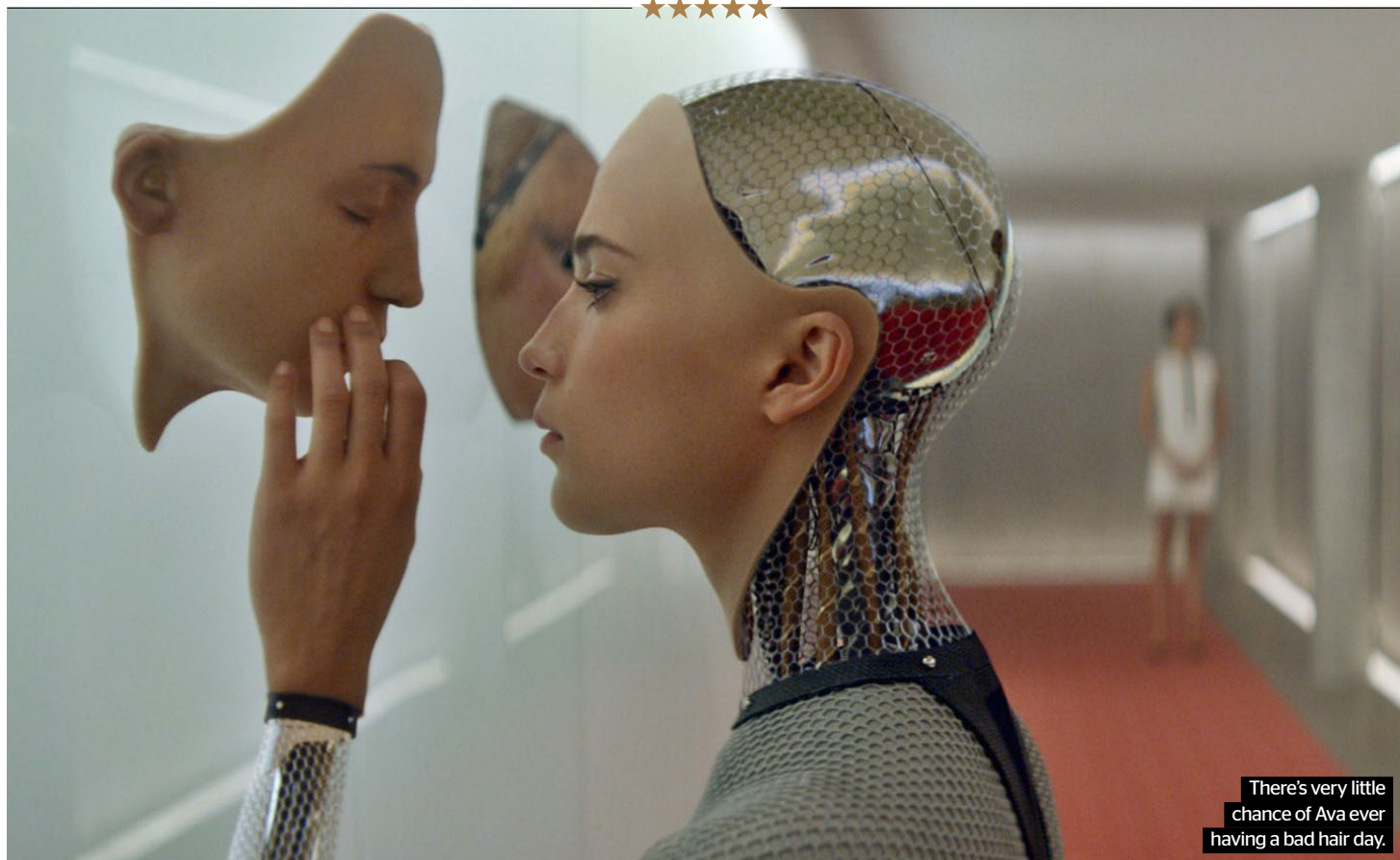
What makes this such a wonderful and moving experience is the empathy and kindness with which Kayla is observed. Burnham's background as a teen star, his exhaustive YouTube research and his determination to take his subject completely seriously result in heartwarming veracity. That believable, halting teen cadence is expertly harnessed and, when it's combined with an intimate, sympathetic eye, *Eighth Grade* sometimes plays like a documentary or improv. Kayla seems fully rendered and real. And that makes her triumphs – however small – feel legitimate, earned and special. Her near-delirium at discovering

THE VERDICT TL;DR: Powerful, emotional, funny, smart and empowering, *Eighth Grade* scores a perfect A. NBD.

a hip high-school girl (Emily Robinson) may be genuinely interested in her is infectious. A maladroitness date with a bungling suitor is as delicious to watch as the sauces he proffers. And a fireside chat with her dad that is up there with *Call Me By Your Name*'s papa pep talk is sure to prompt joyous tears. But Burnham doesn't shy away from the harsher realities; a backseat scene with an older boy is so insidious and tense that it can only be viewed through anxious fingers, limbs twisted in tension.

Burnham's penmanship would be nothing without the right performances, though. While Fisher is an absolute find – fearless and affecting whether she's being brattish or brave, hurt or happy – she is supported by delightful, naturalistic turns that reflect Kayla back at us all the more brightly. Doing wonders with a mere look, Hamilton's dad emanates love despite his foolishness. And Jake Ryan's breath-holding nerd is a genuine delight.

Together they represent the goodness, hope and optimism that exists in a world where school terrorism drills, bullying and sexual harassment are an undeniable part of 21st-century adolescence. They, and the film, remind us that behind all the bullshit, humanity ultimately craves connections – and the most important of those is the one with ourselves. Nothing short of profound – expect to see it in end-of-year top 10 lists even if it's missed its awards window. **JANE CROWTHER**



There's very little chance of Ava ever having a bad hair day.

EX MACHINA 15

DIRECTOR Alex Garland **YEAR** 2015

What do you do when you have everything? That's one of the many questions posed by Alex Garland's chrome-slick, ultra-contemporary thriller set in era where technology can make geniuses into gods.

Oscar Isaac charms and unnerves as reclusive prodigy Nathan, the brains behind a wildly successful Google-esque search engine. Caleb (Domhnall Gleeson) is the good-natured programmer who wins a contest to stay with his employer in his isolated mansion and take part in a 'Turing test' – a thought experiment to assess the humanity of A.I. Ava (Alicia Vikander). The twist – Nathan's A.I. has a human face but a robot body. Caleb can see that Ava is a robot but can she still convince him that she has independent human consciousness? So begins an itchily taut three-hander set in the windowless rooms and corridors of Nathan's custom-built palace, a modern billionaire's playground replete with mod-cons, where motivations and manipulations are constantly shifting.

The title is just right. From the Latin 'from the machine' it evokes the phrase 'deus ex machina' or 'god from the machine' – meaning the moment in a script where a plot niggles is miraculously resolved by the introduction of an unexpected element or character. And Garland's story is both ancient and new. What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be a woman? And what happens to

a man who is left alone and given everything he could ever desire except, perhaps, love and human companionship?

It plays like *Frankenstein* meets *Blade Runner* via Hitchcock haunted by the ghosts of Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, in a film that's both highly literate and steeped in tense cat-and-mouse chills. Thematically epic – it demands to be seen at least twice and should fuel hours of debate – structurally it's as lithe as Ava's perfect mesh frame. Three players. Two locations. Sparse dialogue. Crisp, clean cinematography from Rob Hardy who also lensed more classical fare such as 2013's *The Invisible Woman* and this month's *Testament Of Youth* (also starring Vikander), with production design that speaks as loudly as Garland's carefully chosen words. Making his debut as director, Garland looks set to become a cinematic prodigy himself.

"Is it strange to have made something that hates you?" Ava purrs – her velvet venom as much an indication of her humanity as anything Nathan's rigged test can reveal. This is a gorgeous monster, which, like Ava, demands to be seen. **ROSIE FLETCHER**

THE VERDICT A fable of genius, hubris and madness; an ultra-modern cat-and-mouser... there's a lot going on here. But don't think for a second this is troublesome critic-fodder. It's thrilling.



EX LIBRIS: THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY 12

DIRECTOR Frederick Wiseman **YEAR** 2017

This long (three hours 15 mins) but exhilarating love letter to the NYPL's 92 branches is the peak of ace Frederick Wiseman's portraits of institutions. From Patti Smith to Elvis Costello, Richard Dawkins and black-history lectures, all New York life is here. Wise, sly and thoughtful, it's a hymn to vibrant community spaces. **KATE STABLES**



Moments later, they were beamed up.

A FANTASTIC WOMAN ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Sebastián Lelio **YEAR** 2017

Rich in music and empathy, Chilean director Sebastián Lelio's 2013 festival hit *Gloria* was a vivacious study of a middle-aged woman's longing for life. That flair for female-centred, emotionally keen drama blossoms in his follow-up. First wrenching, finally uplifting, *A Fantastic Woman* traces a grief-lashed trans singer's tireless pursuit of respect.

We first encounter Daniela Vega's Marina in a bar, hitting the right notes as she sings to older lover Orlando (Francisco Reyes). But a brutal twist of fortune follows when Orlando dies from an aneurysm. Though reeling with shock and sorrow, Marina faces a battle to assert her rights to hospital officials, suspicious cops and contemptuous family-members: sensitivity and understanding are not priorities on their plates.

Even before Orlando's son Bruno (Nicolás Saavedra) and ex-wife Sonia (Aline Küppenheim) fire off fusillades of toxic bile and brutality, variable indignities are landed on Marina. Bruno claims Orlando's dog, Sonia his car. Neither gives any thought to what Orlando would have wanted, or to Marina's right to mourn.

Balancing notes of compassion emerge too, via Marina's stoned sister (Trinidad González) and Orlando's bumbling brother (Luis Gnecco). Yet issue-movie politics don't dominate *A Fantastic Woman*. Instead, it cleaves closer to a heartfelt, first-person human drama of resilience via a lead performance brimming with charismatic fortitude.

Despite her constant forward motion, Vega grounds Marina with a composed intensity of still, focused feeling. Even with extra emotions at stake, she hits every note with intuitive precision. Whether she's staring the camera out, battling against fierce winds for a silent movie-ish set-piece, or jumping on an enemy's car in a rare show of anger, Vega brooks no doubt in her immersion.

Honouring her tenacity with tenderness and reserves of contained rage, Lelio and DoP Benjamín Echazarreta pin the camera close to Marina. Meanwhile, Marina's internal perspective is beautifully evoked in Matthew

Herbert's mellifluous score, whether he's summoning dreamy depths of yearning or letting off steam for a fantastical rave-up interlude, where the sense of life-affirming release is palpable, and fully earned. **KEVIN HARLEY**

THE VERDICT Defiant, determined, Vega delivers a star-making turn in a drama of embattled grief, directed with heart.



Olivia went all out in her audition for the role of Cruella De Vil.

THE FAVOURITE ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Yorgos Lanthimos **YEAR** 2018

Greek auteur Yorgos Lanthimos takes the costume drama out to lunch in a majestic, licentious romp that plays like an extended verbal sparring match. The combatants: ailing monarch Queen Anne (Olivia Colman), her political advisor Sarah Churchill (Rachel Weisz) and Abigail Masham (Emma Stone), a penniless upstart out for personal gain.

The real antagonists are the arrogant male fops whose attempts to manipulate their queen and alter Britain's course are continually thwarted by ladies whose guile, style and wiles outstrip their own.

If you've seen Lanthimos' previous English-language features *The Lobster* or *The Killing Of A Sacred Deer*, you'll already be familiar with his deadpan aesthetic, eye for the absurd and skill at generating insidious unease. All of the above are present and correct in *The Favourite*, though this time they are allied with a vein of pathos.

When we first meet Colman's Anne she is a testy, gouty horror, a slave to ill health, gluttony and petulance. Gradually, though, we see a tragic, lonely and forlorn figure in perpetual grief for 17 children lost to miscarriage and sickness. Colman expertly conveys how readily such a creature would respond to the tough love she receives from Weisz's Sarah. Yet Anne also takes a mischievous glee in playing her companions off against each other, knowing it is she who ultimately holds the cards.

The imperious Weisz is no less compelling as Anne's coolly controlling consort, while Stone, sporting a spot-on English accent in her first period role, craftily makes us root for underdog Abigail even as her actions veer towards the despicable. Elsewhere, Nicholas Hoult proves a pompous, preening pleasure as Robert Harley, an ambitious Tory determined to curtail a war from which Lady Sarah and her husband (Mark Gatiss) lucratively profit.

With his whip pans, fish-eye lenses and Kubrickian steadicam, DoP Robbie Ryan rewrites the period-drama playbook with the same playful irreverence Sandy Powell brings to her anachronistic, stylised costumes.

THE VERDICT Three formidable females form a deliciously entertaining triangle in an audacious frock opera.

It all adds up to a spiky, unconventional delight that surprises and intrigues as much as it moves and disquiets. Historical lesbian sex farce might not be a genre yet, but this is a fine way to get the ball rolling. **NEIL SMITH**



FACES PLACES ^{12A}

DIR. Agnès Varda **YEAR** 2017

French New Wave director/icon Agnès Varda teams up with French photographer/installation artist JR, young enough to be her grandson, and hits the road to meet the residents of various villages before plastering their oversized photos on the sides of buildings. Along the way they hear life stories, reveal bits of their own, ponder the creative process and swing by Godard's house. A profound and immensely moving delight. **JAMIE GRAHAM**



FIRE AT SEA ¹²

DIR. Gianfranco Rosi **YEAR** 2016

Winner of the Golden Bear at Berlin, Gianfranco Rosi's documentary shines a powerful spotlight on the migrant crisis. Filmed on the Sicilian island of Lampedusa, it provides a snapshot of local life as migrants pass through the area. Rosi offers a simple, stark contrast between quiet moments of everyday life and tragedy as mass fleeing results in sunken boats, horrific injuries and death. **MATT LOOKER**



FOR SAMA ¹⁸

DIRECTOR Waad al-Kateab, Edward Watts **YEAR** 2019

A first-person video diary shot in war-torn Aleppo, Syria, between 2012 and 2016, *For Sama* offers an immediacy and emotional intimacy that devastates. Waad al-Kateab is the woman behind the camera. In 2012, she is 26 and studying marketing at Aleppo University, where she joins fellow students in protests against President Bashar al-Assad's oppressive dictatorship.

Over the next four years, as bombs rain down and many flee, she will marry Hamza, a doctor who helps found a volunteer hospital that treats more than 6,000 civilians. She also gives birth to daughter Sama, whom al-Kateab's poignant voiceover addresses throughout.

For Sama unflinchingly records blasted buildings and obliterated families, positioned up close and personal as bodies overspill hospital beds and mothers wail for their lost children. It would be unbearable were it not for the indomitable human spirit on display, or the moments of miraculous joy, such as a heavily pregnant woman and her baby being saved when it seems certain that both will die.

For Sama arrives on these shores trailing a clutch of festival awards from across the globe, and deservedly so. Al-kateab's courageous, compassionate camera refuses to look away as so much of the world did. Here, with the help of co-director Edward Watts, hundreds of hours are fashioned into something extraordinary. **JAMIE GRAHAM**



FISH TANK ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Andrea Arnold **YEAR** 2009

There's only one fish in *Fish Tank*. It gets killed. There's also a horse. But that goes too. There's even a little bit of hope for 15-year-old Mia (a brilliant Katie Jarvis), when friendly, hunky Connor (Michael Fassbender) starts making her single mum (Kierston Wareing) happy. But that gets snuffed out sharpish. The point? Good times are hard to hold onto in Andrea Arnold's *Red Road* follow-up. Life's a bitch and then you die...

Taking place on a Barking council estate, the title refers to the claustrophobia of growing up in a place where vulnerable but hard-nosed children seem destined to repeat the mistakes of their neglectful parents. In depicting this gloomy setting, Arnold paints it as it is with teens swearing, boozing, smoking and screwing; the more punches thrown, the more affecting the film becomes.

But what Arnold lacks in rose-tinted specs, she makes up for with a magnifying glass that homes in on details to bring *Fish Tank* to life, with dialogue so spiky that levity gets mixed into the sobriety. Hers is a Britain swamped in *X Factor* obsession where Mia practises dance routines for a way out. Everything is thought of. From the wallpaper in the family flat (palm trees) to the songs ('California Dreamin'), Arnold hints at a life outside the enclave. "I'd be safe and warm/If I was in LA." Good luck.

Like *Red Road*, this is raw, unfussy filmmaking, often unbearably tense with exceptional scenes conveying strong emotions characters would rather keep bottled up. Witness the neon-soaked family dance-off. Witness Fassbender and Jarvis doing what they shouldn't. When the air is thick with insults, it can take moments of silence and action to say what's on one's mind.

Three years on from her debut, Arnold cements her place

THE VERDICT A powerful, poignant and beautiful film, Arnold crafts Brit realism at its best. The title? Every fish wants to swim in the ocean. It's just not always possible.

as a director of serious note. It will be interesting to see if she can change tack, maybe make a romcom, maybe not, but by creating the best British film of the year, she's proven there's real talent here. And it doesn't look like that's leaving anytime soon. **JONATHAN DEAN**

FANTASTIC BEASTS: THE CRIMES OF GRINDELWALD ¹²

DIRECTOR David Yates **YEAR** 2018

J.K. Rowling is back. As in *really* back. If 2016's *Fantastic Beasts And Where To Find Them* expanded the universe she first introduced with the *Harry Potter* stories, then *The Crimes Of Grindelwald* takes things not just wider but deeper. Given this is part two of a mooted five-movie series, Rowling – who again scripts – isn't even halfway done yet.

It begins in 1927, at the American Ministry of Magic, where the dark wizard Gellert Grindelwald (Johnny Depp) had been held for six months since his capture at the end of the original *Beasts*. He's had his tongue removed in order to curtail his powers of persuasion, but that doesn't stop him mounting a dramatic escape. Cut to London, three months later: Newt Scamander (Eddie Redmayne) arrives at the Ministry where his brother Theseus (Callum Turner) works, along with Leta Lestrange (Zoë Kravitz), Theseus' fiancée.

Sibling rivalry notwithstanding, Newt is there hoping to overturn the international travel ban imposed on him after his role in the events surrounding Grindelwald's arrest. Grindelwald, it transpires, is gathering followers to create a new world order ruling over all non-magical beings.

Key to this is the disturbed Credence Barebone (Ezra Miller), now ensconced in a freak show in Paris as he seeks to find his real lineage. "Desperate for family, he's desperate for love," coos Grindelwald, all too willing to exploit Credence's power for his own ends. But Grindelwald is not the only one looking for him. Unbeknown to the Ministry, Newt is asked to track down Credence by Hogwarts' very own Professor Albus Dumbledore (Jude Law).

THE VERDICT Rowling's universe just got bigger and more complex, but Yates never forgets to sprinkle stardust on top.

Joining Newt is his no-maj friend Jacob (Dan Fogel), who arrives in London with Queenie (Alison Sudol). Jacob's memories of their earlier encounters have been restored, but he's now under an enchantment. Soon enough, they're all off to France, with Queenie's sister Tina (Katherine Waterston) also in pursuit of Credence, for an adventure that comes vividly to life in the hands of director David Yates, who relishes bringing '20s Paris to the screen.

Each frame is filled to the brim with detail, whether it's goblins cleaning windows on floating lifts or a contraption hoovering round the Ministry of Magic. Nor are the 'beasts' forgotten, from baby nifflers cheekily popping champagne corks to the beautiful seaweed-skinned kelpies, some Japanese water demons and one lion-like creature that can travel 1,000 miles in a day.

The film really hits its considerable peak in its revelation-heavy final third, with a showdown at Père Lachaise. In a film about brothers and sisters, surrogate or otherwise, the *Beasts* family tree gets all the more thorny, as hitherto unknown – and complex – relationships are unveiled.

Meanwhile, the leather-clad Grindelwald's rally weaves threads to our own Muggle world. It's not hard to link this bleached-blond madman's rise to that of the far right. While the original cast led by Redmayne pick up easily where they left off, the newcomers fit in seamlessly. Law is spot-on with Dumbledore, making a character so indelibly played by Richard Harris and Michael Gambon his own. As for Depp, he plays Grindelwald with sinister menace, but never overcooks it. Credit Yates, too, for ensuring darkness is seasoned with light. "I think this might be the best moment of my life," says Newt, as his brother gets zapped. Even in the bleakest of times, there's reason to smile. **JAMES MOTTRAM**



THE FLORIDA PROJECT ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Sean Baker
YEAR 2017

Explosive and exuberant, *Tangerine* made a splash in 2015, thrusting its iPhone lens into a subculture of transgender sex workers in LA. Now shooting in 35mm, director Sean Baker, again co-writing with Chris Bergoch, once more scrutinises a marginalised community – this time the 'hidden homeless' who live week to week, day to day, in cheap motels.

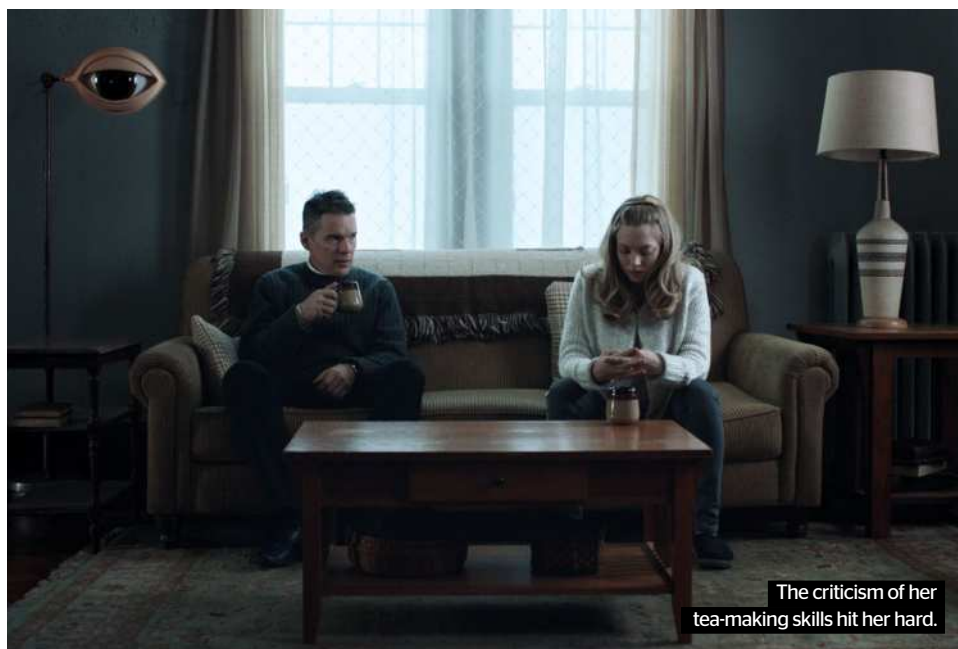
Sounds like a tough watch? It's not. Or rather it is, when it should be, but it also plays like a roughed-up Amblin movie, as gobby six-year-old Moonee (Brooklyn Prince) and her pals tear around parking lots, along highways and through lush green fields over a long, hot summer. Moonee's combative mum Halley (Bria Vinaite), meanwhile, loses her stripper job and starts scamming to make the rent.

Set in the shadow of capitalist behemoth Disney World, *The Florida Project* brims with brio and boasts crackerjack performances from a non-professional cast (Vinaite, a revelation, was found on Instagram), plus Caleb Landry Jones, Macon Blair and an A-game Willem Dafoe as the motel's level-headed manager Bobby. It's light on plot and high on energy and life – a movie worthy of mention in the same hot breath as Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* and Loach's *Kes*. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

THE VERDICT Poverty and poetry, delinquency and deluxe wonder... this child's-eye view of lives on a knife-edge is terrific.



Eddie Redmayne and Katherine Waterston ramp up the darkness...



The criticism of her tea-making skills hit her hard.

FIRST REFORMED 15

DIRECTOR Paul Schrader **YEAR** 2017

Situated in the fictional town of Snowbridge in upstate New York, the First Reformed Church is a white clapboard box with its steeple jabbing accusatorially at the grey heavens. It is presided over by Reverend Ernst Toller (Ethan Hawke), whose sparse life is one of genuflection, scratching nightly entries into his journal and trying to raise funds to fix the organ in time for the church's reconsecration in this, its 250th year.

Soaked in guilt and whiskey, Toller is pained in mind, body and spirit, unable to forgive himself for advising his son to enlist in the Iraq War – he died in combat – and bent double by stomach pains that are likely cancer.

And yet the burdens on his psyche and soul are set to increase: pregnant parishioner Mary (Amanda Seyfried) asks him to counsel her husband Michael (Philip Ettinger), an environmental activist distraught at the desecration of Mother Earth. Meanwhile, Edward Balq (Michael Gaston), the billionaire industrialist who is funding the church's reconsecration, is poisoning the environment, and Toller feels increasingly unable to turn a blind eye to this unholy communion between religion and the American right.

It's been 21 years since writer/director Paul Schrader's last masterwork, *Affliction*. Since then, he's struggled to hit the ecstatic highs of his early screenplays and best directorial efforts. But now Schrader's back with a belter.

THE VERDICT Paul Schrader's best for 20 years. A stunning study of one man's flaws and an apocalyptic vision of mankind's fate.

Toller – superbly played by a pinched, slope-shouldered Hawke – is, like *Taxi Driver*'s Travis Bickle, another of God's lonely men. Hell, he even plonks Pepto-Bismol into his whiskey to soothe his roiling guts, an action surely meant to evoke disturbing memories of Travis gazing blankly at the Alka-Seltzer that so famously fizzed in his glass.

Like *Taxi Driver*, *First Reformed* is a volatile mix of gravitas and grindhouse, its oppression turning to rage and madness. Stop the film two-thirds of the way in and you'd never believe the images to come, as lust and violence, levitation and transcendence take over and the film veers into the realms of exploitation cinema. This is the Schrader of *Cat People*, *The Canyons* and his last two movies *Dying Of The Light* and, especially, *Dog Eat Dog*. Come the indelible finale, the camera, like the characters' emotions, has cut loose to swirl giddily.

Not all viewers will take the leap of faith required to follow Schrader as he casts off his stripped-back aesthetic for such heated imagery. But this is galvanising moviemaking, suggesting the auteur hasn't mellowed with age. It's a picture that burns with pain, desire and anger – the rage directed both outwards and inwards. And far from being simply *Taxi Driver 2*, it is the summation of a career.

Here, old bottles are filled with new variations on trusty themes; the full-bodied flavours of environmentalism, terrorism and America's twin building blocks of Christianity and capitalism uncorked and rolled around the mouth before being spat out. It's a film worthy of worship. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

FREE SOLO 12

DIRECTORS Jimmy Chin, Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi **YEAR** 2018

Rescuing Han from Jabba the Hutt? Easy, compared to what gangly climbing ace Alex Honnold attempts in this exhilarating documentary. Faced with El Capitan, a 3,000-foot-high sheer wall of granite in Yosemite National Park, Alex is obsessed with becoming the first person to scale it without ropes, harnesses or (shudder) any protection whatsoever.

Married directors Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi and Jimmy Chin (the latter also a pro climber) follow Alex's meticulous planning for his assault. He's a bundle of contradictions: easygoing yet fiercely focused, garrulous but deeply introverted. What drives a guy to risk his life like this? Whether getting an MRI scan to explain his head for heights or trying to reconcile his unusual hobby with a new romance, Alex is fascinating even when safely on terra firma.

But this doc truly comes alive, like Alex, when just a toe-hold away from certain death. The obvious point of comparison is 2008 Oscar-winner *Man On Wire* (*Free Solo* itself is already part of this year's awards conversation). Except, that is, nobody actually filmed Philippe Petit's walk between the Twin Towers. Even here, the crew has understandable qualms about whether to roll camera on Alex's perilous pursuit. What are the ethics of allowing a friend to risk their life? What if the filmmakers cause Alex to fall? When he takes a tumble during training, the enormity of the situation hits home.

Ultimately, you'll be glad that filming went ahead. Capturing Alex's every microscopic adjustment of posture and position in vertigo-inducing detail, the final act is as tense and spectacular as any action movie. There's only one word to describe it: gripping.

SIMON KINNEAR

THE VERDICT Making Tom Cruise's missions look decidedly possible, this is your new favourite real-life action movie.



PICTUREHOUSE, DOGWOOF



Getting a cat from a certified animal rescue was getting more complex by the week.

GLADIATOR 15

DIRECTOR Ridley Scott **YEAR** 2000

From its opening frames of hand-to-hand butchery and unblinking conflict, *Gladiator* simply grabs you by the balls and never lets go. This is visceral film-making at its finest, painted on the grandest of canvases, and yet, one which maintains the finest eye for detail. It is, in short, an awesome achievement. Boasting a cast of thousands, remarkable digital effects, and a gripping saga of revenge, its ultimate success nevertheless boils down to the work of two men.

For Ridley Scott, *Gladiator* is a return to form after spending the better part of a decade wandering in a post-*Thelma & Louise* wasteland (*G.I. Jane*: why, Ridley, why?). Here he takes a genre that has been on life support for 40-odd years and pounds it back into glorious existence. True, Scott is little concerned with historical accuracy and will be hammered for the film's multiple transgressions. But like Stanley Kubrick's schizophrenic *Spartacus* – *Gladiator*'s closest screen relative – it's also a work that will triumphantly stand the test of

time. The atmospherics are so strong that you can almost smell the sweat pouring from the Colosseum as Crowe battles man and beast for the entertainment of the Roman masses.

But, wisely, Scott's chief concern remains mythic storytelling, following Maximus' path from hero, to slave, to celebrated gladiator, to de facto revolutionary, a stoic empowered as much by his own inner strength as his skills in the arena. It's the stuff that ignites the Roman world which surrounds him. It's also the stuff from which great cinematic heroes are born. For all the epic majesty worthy of Cecil B. DeMille or David Lean, Scott's greatest accomplishment is simply keeping his camera on Russell Crowe.

THE VERDICT *Gladiator* will never be confused with the decline of the Roman Empire. Instead, it marks a return to epic film-making worthy of *Ben-Hur* and *Spartacus* with breathtaking technical advances... A star is born. And his name is Russell Crowe.

In a sense, Crowe is playing the same character that he did so well in both *LA Confidential* and *The Insider*: the brooding and indomitable, but reluctant hero. Unlike those previous efforts, however, *Gladiator* has blockbuster written all over it. If *LA Confidential* and *The Insider* heralded the New Zealander's arrival as a leading actor of his generation, *Gladiator* is his passport to stardom. Oliver Reed also turns in a solid performance in his final role, while Djimon Hounsou, as Maximus' gladiator sidekick, Juba, shows post-*Amistad* career longevity.

The only annoying fly in this ointment is Joaquin Phoenix. Perhaps Phoenix has been short-changed by *Gladiator*'s screenplay, but his hammy 'quest for love' is just too much to swallow. Rather than anticipating a showdown between two worthy rivals, you sometimes wonder why Crowe doesn't just put the little emperor over his knee and give him a good spanking. Still, this doesn't detract from what can only be described as a gloriously entertaining thrill-packer of truly epic proportions. **TF**

GOMORRAH¹⁵

DIRECTOR Matteo Garrone **YEAR** 2008

After *Gomorra* fades to black, shiver-inducing stats flash on to the screen like nails being hammered into a coffin. Italian organised crime has offed more people in 30 years than the entire Israeli-Palestine conflict; the Camorra of Naples has murdered 4,000 people, more than any terrorist group... Following hard on the bleakest, most hopeless ending in recent memory, these footnotes hit straight to the belly. *GoodFellas* this ain't. Everybody wants to be a gangster in Scorsese's Italian-American epic, while Matteo Garrone's crime saga suggests nothing could be more wretched. It's a deglamourised shot of wake-up juice that strips a brutal reality bare.

But let's backtrack. Maybe you've never heard of the Camorra. Maybe you thought organised crime was all about the Sicilians and the Mafia, about godfathers and wiseguys. You'd be wrong. The Neapolitan equivalent – a clan neck-deep in blackmail, drug trafficking, prostitution and murder – is the last word in nasty. It's conducted a reign of terror for centuries, with its influence reaching into the city's most respected pockets and spewing outwards into global big-business. And no one dare say a word against it. Except that writer Robert Saviano has said something, in long, excoriating, finger-pointing book form. Now's he under police protection. *Gomorra* is the fiercely angry movie of that book.

Filming with a cold-light-of-day realism, the breakneck camerawork traces five

THE VERDICT A searing, epic vision of a city in the grip of gangland terror. The multi-stranded plot takes some unpacking, but the characters, camerawork and unflinching realism compel like a gun to the head. The best gangster saga since *City Of God*.

separate stories. There's Don Ciro (Gianfelice Imparato), the money-runner delivering Camorra handouts to families of members who are in the clink; Totò (Salvatore Abruzzese), the 13-year-old already feeling the tantalising allure of gang life; Pasquale (Salvatore Cantalupo), an expert tailor who unwisely starts doing clandestine work for the gang's machinating Chinese competitors; and Roberto (Carmine Paternoster), a graduate embroiled in a corrupt plot to offload toxic waste. Most compelling are the adventures of Marco and Ciro (Marco Macor and Ciro Petrone), two gun-happy teens with enough pubescent brio to try and go it alone on Naples' mean streets.

It's a challenge keeping up – there is easily enough material here for a blistering TV series. But Garrone keeps a steely grip on things from the off; a sense of dread takes residence in your gut within the first five minutes and refuses to budge throughout. There's a fury and purpose to his direction that seems intent on squeezing the gangster life of any last glimmer of romance. Accept that every mobster movie you've ever seen is rose-tinted nonsense. Now take a dip in this icy plunge-pool of a picture.

SAM WIGLEY



THE GREEN KNIGHT¹⁵

DIRECTOR David Lowery **YEAR** 2021

Don't let the genre trappings fool you. For all the swords, scenery, mythical creatures and talking animals, this is *not* a boilerplate fantasy, which shouldn't come as a surprise if you've followed the mercurial career of director David Lowery thus far. Here, the filmmaker behind *Ain't Them Bodies Saints*, *Pete's Dragon* and *The Old Man & The Gun* adapts a 14th-century Middle English poem into a foreboding Arthurian epic.

Dev Patel stars as Gawain (no one can seemingly agree on the pronunciation), the king's disreputable nephew. One Christmas, Gawain beheads the titular tree-like beast (Ralph Ineson), cursing himself to receive the same fate "one year hence". So off he sets on a picaresque journey of self-discovery in an attempt to manifest his own version of knightly honour, traversing a craggy landscape and taking a battering in the process. He encounters thieves, giants and temptation, and gains a vulpine companion en route.

The cast is impressive, from Sean Harris' King to Alicia Vikander in an intriguing dual role and Ineson's bark knight. But it's Patel who really shines, delivering his best performance yet as he's put through the ringer. Taking more cues from Andrei Tarkovsky than Peter Jackson, *The Green Knight* is a dense, mysterious fable that evades easy interpretation and demands rewatching. It's sure to frustrate some with its narrative ambiguity, but striking images and a deeply ominous tone ensure you're rapt throughout. **MATT MAYTUM**

THE VERDICT Lowery conjures a fantastical world full of visual poetry while Dev Patel dazzles in the lead role.

ENTERTAINMENT, OPTIMUM, WARNER BROS

Showing flagrant disregard for the bird-reserve's rules of conduct there.



GRAVITY ¹²

DIRECTOR Alfonso Cuarón **YEAR** 2013

Last year, it was *Life Of Pi*. Last month, it was *Captain Phillips*. Next month, it's *All Is Lost*. Hollywood is currently serving up a slew of survival stories – though arguably none are more awe-inducing, eye-saucering or nerve-jangling than Alfonso Cuarón's dizzying space spectacle *Gravity*. Like the title suggests, this is an astronaut adventure whose pull is hard to resist.

By the time 90 stomach-shrinking minutes have elapsed, you'll feel like you've been bumped around the heavens. Rarely, if ever, has there been a 3D blockbuster that takes the science of space travel more seriously – and Cuarón underlines this with the opening caption, "Life in space is impossible." No oxygen, no water and no way for sound to travel, existence in the thermosphere, some 375 miles above Earth, is no joy-ride.

We begin as a space shuttle hoves into view. Soon enough three crew members float about their business, making repairs to the Hubble Telescope. One is Matt Kowalsky (George Clooney), a veteran astronaut on his final mission, which – judging by the cocksure way he goes about his job as he tries to set a spacewalk record – is probably just as well.

Alongside him is mission specialist Shariff (Phaldut Sharma) and nervy medical engineer Dr. Ryan Stone (Sandra Bullock), out on her first NASA journey and not finding the soothing tones of Houston's Mission Control (Ed Harris, in a neat nod to his role in Ron Howard's *Apollo 13*) in any way calming. Yet as she fumbles her tools, Cuarón handles his with unbelievable precision, as he and long-time regular cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki elegantly unfold the film's entire prologue in a stunning, unbroken 13-minute take.

With the Earth beaming away as backdrop, such is the majesty of this scene, you begin to appreciate why it's taken Cuarón seven years to follow up his 2006 future-set thriller *Children Of Men*. The physics of zero gravity are perfectly realised. And the astonishingly immersive 3D (all achieved via a post-production conversion) pushes beyond even *Avatar* – explaining why James Cameron has dubbed this "the best space film ever".

But hold on to your helmets: *Gravity* doesn't even hit the 15-minute mark before alarm bells sound, as Mission Control suddenly reports that debris from a nearby Russian satellite is hurtling towards them. Kowalsky's years of



The commute home was going to be tortuous.

experience snap into focus, just as Stone's lack of mission miles almost sees to their demise, as both narrowly avoid a perfect storm of shrapnel that slices through everything (including the shuttle) in its path.

With Stone sent spinning and tumbling, the camera queasily places us firmly in her space-suit – the first indication that Bullock, and not Clooney, will be the main focus of *Gravity*. Disoriented, and with her air supply dwindling, Stone's panic-breathing gets louder and louder as she careers out of control; rarely has cinema felt this visceral, this life-and-death, as the remorseless, black universe opens up in front of us.

What follows is an unparalleled space survival story – less *Cast Away* than cast adrift. It's made all the more urgent by the fact virtually everything (oxygen, fuel, even sanity) is running on empty. The less said about what happens the better, but when Cuarón shows us what a shrapnel storm can do, you're left in no doubt that the clock is ticking for our heroes.

To begin with, Clooney seems to be phoning in his performance, as if his rakish lawyer from *Intolerable Cruelty* had blasted off into space. But don't be fooled, for that insouciant charm works its magic in a later standout scene where

advice and alcohol all play an unexpected part. But mostly he's second fiddle to Bullock, who delivers what could be the performance of her career here – a high-wire act that blends physical dexterity, emotional vulnerability and mental toughness.

Written by Cuarón and his son Jonás, as much as *Gravity* deals with survival, it's also about such primal feelings as isolation, loneliness and fear. All three are embodied by Stone, a woman left bereft by a past personal trauma who, even in the face of death, isn't sure what she has to live for. If the exposition is clunky, it's one of *Gravity*'s few ham-fisted moments, ushering its protagonist on a classic Hollywood arc of redemption and renewal.

In the process, Stone emerges like a contemporary cousin to Ellen Ripley – an ordinary woman put in an extraordinary situation, calling upon every fibre of steel and innovation she can muster. Cuarón, creating an almost hallucinogenic experience at times, almost pushes it too far in the climax, as what seems to be the final obstacle gives way to another. But by this point, you won't care; you'll be too busy getting your breath back.

JAMES MOTTRAM

THE VERDICT A stunning space saga that takes off for new technical frontiers without leaving its humanity behind. Ground control to Major Oscar...

HALF NELSON

15 **DIRECTOR** Ryan Fleck **YEAR** 2007

Sprightly music, jaunty voiceover) Meet Dan! (Shot of Ryan Gosling crumpled in a corner, nostrils fizzing with coke-snot) He's a high-school teacher who inspires the kids...

(Slo-mo sequence of him joshing with schoolboys and girls)...but plays truant from his life lessons. (Dan flopped on the sofa, shark-eyed and skeletal) When classroom cutie Drey discovers his naughty little secret... (Toilet door opens to reveal Shareeka Epps' shocked face; cut to Gosling fumbling with his crack-pipe)...they form a friendship that will change both their lives! (Freeze on them together, all chewed-up but wistful.) Ho-hum, then? An inner-city *Dead Poets Society*... *Dangerous Minds* with Michelle Pfeiffer replaced by some mopey Canadian with a pompous little goatee... Is it hometime yet? Park your cynicism. *Half Nelson* is the first great film of 2007 and while Gosling's tranquil, truthful, hyper-subtlety was never going to best Forest Whitaker's grandstanding in the Oscar bearpit, he's still delivered a naturalistic and nuanced masterclass in the art of screen acting.

Gosling's ground for expression is made fertile by his director's smartness. Fleck isn't interested in clumsily rubbing our noses into social 'issues' or Hollywoodising drug-chic. Like Lodge Kerrigan's Keane, *Half Nelson* is more close-up character scrutiny, staring

down the scarring horrors of addiction and self-destruction, drawing us into the shadows of one man's meltdown.

Gosling tears into the challenge like a man prepossessed, illuminating Dan's inner turmoil not with frothing rants or feeble stoner-babble, but with control, slightness, delicacy: barely darting eyes, mini-shrugs, quarter-smirks, jittery flutters of fear and self-loathing. He's a warm personality being slowly frozen over; a man engaged in a cold war with his own toxic nature. There he is, marooned in his one-bedroom cocoon; sprawled under the TV tray, pretty and vacant, regarding the twittering answerphone and honking alarm clock with blank confusion/amusement.

While Gosling layers in the sighs and slopes and scowls with breathtaking economy, Fleck burrows his watchful but unfussy handheld up close into his clammy pores, tracking every twitch. But he also takes great care to craft a compulsive backdrop. For a (good) start, he ditches the easy option of a hip-hop mix-tape in favour of wistful ambience and trembling electronica, dropping something stronger only when strictly necessary. Likewise, there's no screaming match with the starchy headmistress, no corny CGI flights of drug-fried fantasy. Conversations – and confrontations – are, as in real life, jagged and tongue-tied; never

laboured or cinematic or neatly capped with quotable zingers. Fleck's people act like people, not movie characters.

Gosling may be bagging the backslaps, but *Half Nelson* is really a tale of two performances. Shareeka Epps plays Drey with precisely the right flavour of prematurely mature, mottled innocence; she's a melancholy (not petulant) teen cast into latch-key limbo by an absent dad and wage-slave mum. Epps is Gosling's dramatic mirror, shedding light and soul around Dan's dark heart, and when the film makes a rare meander into basic plot-shifting, she's the emotional glue that keeps it gelled.

Doubters might tire of the convenient classroom theorising and the kids' to-camera historical interludes. And, after endless scenes of Gosling looking caned and pained, you'd be forgiven for craving a little clarity to warm up the restraint. But then you just wouldn't be looking hard enough, particularly in the scenes where Fleck's roving lens sponges up the truth of Dan and Drey's awkward rapport. Check the long, languid silence when Drey asks him, "What's it like to smoke that stuff?" and he spies his chance to redirect her before she makes his old mistakes and falls in too intimately with a dealer.

Wisely, Fleck only hints at the reasons behind Dan's decline and sticks to his grand theme: dialectics, or the conflict of opposites ("Two forces, pushing against each other"). Dan teaches – preaches – about all conflicts having a 'turning point'. Being discovered mid-puff by Drey is the pivot that sets him on a shallow ascension to self-discovery. "Second chances are rare, man," he tells a student. Dan and Drey's friendship isn't cute or kooky; it's a bond based on a mutual yearning for change. She needs a beacon – however tarnished. He needs something to save before he gives up on the idea of being saved himself.

Sounds like fun, eh? Well... Depends on what you plan to get out of 90-odd minutes in a dark room. If you're gagging for a short-term sugar-blast, gorge on 300. If you fancy a skip to rom-com reality, try Music And Lyrics. But if you're up for a little truth and beauty, something challenging and nourishing; the kind of story that steals into your bones and echoes long after the lights come up...

ANDY LOWE

THE VERDICT A riveting study in dislocation and connection, hurt and healing, with Gosling revealed as potentially the most gifted actor of his generation.

24's newest villain
smuggles a nuclear bomb
into school in his flask.





HAMILTON PG
DIRECTOR Lin-Manuel Miranda
YEAR 2020

The original 2015 cast recording of Lin-Manuel Miranda's now-classic musical is the Holy Grail of musical theatre. Most would give a lung to have been where it happened: a treat reserved for the fortunate few who bagged a seat at New York's Public Theater and then Broadway.

This pulsating, rap-fuelled ride used the life of US founding father Alexander Hamilton to probe the aspirations, contradictions and divisions of the nation he helped build. Laid low by Covid, this is an ideal time to drop this 2016 chronicle of the piece in its prime.

Introduced in an exhilarating opener that spans 20 years in four minutes, idealistic immigrant Hamilton (a dazzling Miranda) is a free-thinking firebrand whose strategic acumen helps Washington win the him enemies over two densely plotted acts, whose array of characters and machine-gun wordplay might have the uninitiated yearning for a textbook.

But no prior knowledge is needed to enjoy the rap battles, pistol duels and betrayals that festoon this startlingly contemporary history lesson. There's fine turns from Leslie Odom Jr. (Hamilton's rival Aaron Burr), Jonathan Groff (a preening George III) and the rest of the flawless ensemble. Only the separately filmed close-up inserts jar, their cinematic artifice never quite gelling with the audience-witnessed spectacle. But do not throw away your shot at seeing the original cast make history. **NEIL SMITH**

THE VERDICT A stage sensation flawlessly depicted on screen.



Bilbo suddenly wasn't sure if he had any Vienetta in the freezer.

THE HOBBIT: AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY 12

DIRECTOR Director Peter Jackson **YEAR** 2012

The year 2012: a good one for archers, Michael Fassbender and swearing bears. Fantasy movies, not so much. *Wrath Of The Titans* was bigger, more personal and just as dull as its predecessor. *John Carter* wound up in the red. *Mirror Mirror* or *Snow White & The Huntsman*? Hard to say which was grimmer. But luckily, hope is not lost for fans of lairy dwarves...

Back in his wheelhouse after tripping over *The Lovely Bones*, Peter Jackson's return to swords, sorcery and beards deserving of their own postcodes is fantasy how it ought to be. True, there's a sense that we've been here and back again before – especially as *An Unexpected Journey* follows a similar roadmap to *The Fellowship Of The Ring*, with a motley group questing across perilous lands. But in the tussle between déjà vu and Jackson's ability to draw you into richly conceived otherworlds, it's the latter that emerges champ.

Besides, the Kiwi auteur does take risks. Making three films out of three books is one thing; doing the same with one relatively terse volume, something else. In terms of key incidents, *AUJ* doesn't burrow too far into Tolkien's *The Lord Of The Rings*-predating novel. Yet it rarely feels like Jackson has had the rolling pin out, overstretching the material.

Tolkien wrote a book for kids, but Jackson hasn't made a movie for them. This trip to Middle-earth treads a pleasing middle ground between the whimsy on the page and the portent of the later

books/earlier films. It's a delicate balance between, on the one hand, singsongs, camomile tea and cute, ailing hedgehogs; and on the other, lopped limbs, chilly hints of evils to come and wild-eyed wolf-monsters that get right up in the viewer's grill thanks to Jackson's 3D.

It was perhaps to be expected, but not all the dwarves emerge as rounded personalities on this first showing. But still, Ken Stott makes a thoughtful Balin (the snowy-haired one), Stephen Hunter avoids getting slap-stuck as Bombur (the fat one) and there's an Aragorn-y vibe to Richard Armitage's Thorin, the leader of the pack who brings brooding focus to the simple but emotive theme of wanting to find a home.

For the title character, meanwhile, it's all about getting off your arse and seeking new horizons. Peter Jackson worked around Martin Freeman's *Sherlock* schedule to nab him as Bilbo. You can see why. Elijah Wood's Frodo may have carried an incalculable burden but he was, frankly, a bit of a whinger. Freeman's Bilbo likes a moan too, but the part gives the Brit licence to show off his sitcom-honed comic touch. Not that there's anything showy-offy about his subtlety; as *The Office* viewers will recall, he's a master of the deadpan putdown and makes exasperation seem understated.

He also straddles the tone's comic/dramatic divide. Just when you worry his self-effacing performance is getting lost in the monster mash, along comes a centrepiece confrontation with Gollum (Andy Serkis, showstopping as ever). Freeman's the all-too-human face of Jackson's gargantuan vision, his performance indicating that the emotional stakes will keep pace with the ramped-up challenges ahead. **MATTHEW LEYLAND**

THE VERDICT Charming, spectacular, technically audacious... in short, everything you expect from a Peter Jackson movie. A feeling of familiarity does take hold in places, but this is an epically entertaining first course.

Stepping on Legos never got any less painful.

HEREDITARY

15 **DIRECTOR** Ari Aster **YEAR** 2018

Forget jump scares and boogeymen. There are gasp-worthy images and shocking moments, but *Hereditary* trades in a more insidious, lingering kind of dread, one that'll slowly burrow under your skin and have you squirming in discomfort. As with many films of this ilk, with gradual reveals and frequent left turns, the experience will be best served if you don't know too much about the plot before you go in.

The film opens on an obituary, announcing that family matriarch Ellen Taper Leigh has passed away. Annie Graham (Toni Collette), the woman's daughter, channels her grief into her artwork ahead of a gallery showing of her immaculate dioramas, which recreate scenes from her life in miniature. Not all is well within the Graham family. Outcast daughter Charlie (Milly Shapiro) is struggling to fit in at school; at night, she frequently leaves her bed to sleep in the treehouse. Son Peter (Alex Wolff) is sullen and withdrawn in a way that's not unusual for a high-schooler. Husband/father Steve (Gabriel Byrne) stoically tries to keep the family stable through this trying time.

In the aftermath of Ellen's death, tensions escalate within the family, and unsettling events increase in frequency – many of them relating to Charlie and her disturbing pastimes. The contents of her sketchbook are enough to give you the shivers, and she can occasionally be spotted carrying a headless pigeon around school. When it all gets a bit too much for Annie, she surreptitiously attends a grief

counselling group, where she meets kindly Joan (Ann Dowd), who introduces her to the idea of a séance...

That barely scratches the surface of what's going on in *Hereditary*. Themes of mental health and the psychological damage passed down through generations permeate, as does the heartache of parenthood and adolescence (and conflict between the two). Ellen clearly wasn't an easy mother to live with, and her influence still has a souring effect after her death; the roots of this family tree are rotten.

Holding the story together is an exceptional quartet of performances. Collette is at her career best in a hugely demanding role that requires her to truly run the gamut. She evinces pain, fear, grief, despair and self-loathing, and is always totally gripping, never shying away from the character's own darker side. Every role here is complex; everyone seems guilty of something, and everyone suffers. Byrne also reminds us how good he can be in a lower-key role, and Shapiro and Wolff are both incredible finds: Shapiro is intense, and a great conduit for scares, but crucially she's also hugely empathetic, and Wolff (previously seen transformed into a Dwayne Johnson avatar in *Jumanji*) proves

THE VERDICT A tour-de-force turn from Toni Collette powers one of the most affecting horrors in recent memory. Genuinely unsettling in a way few genre efforts are: you've been warned

a powerhouse performer as he goes toe-to-toe with Collette.

This is an insanely assured debut from writer/director Ari Aster. Artfully composed without being pretentious or distancing, *Hereditary* plays with some neat visuals – including the frequent framing of the family home as if it's one of Annie's dollhouse-sized creations – but these are more than just flashy tricks. They add to the oppressive atmosphere, as the house itself takes on a sinister presence. There's also a day-to-night transition that's unlike anything you've seen before. The discordant sound design adds much to the unsettling effect, in a way that recalls the off-putting frequency Gaspar Noé had humming through *Irreversible*.

Besides the sustained terror, *Hereditary* is also often heartrending and asks uncomfortable questions about family relationships. There are even moments of dark humour that don't so much punctuate the atmosphere as accentuate it. What's also remarkable is that Aster manages to stick the landing after generating such a sustained campaign of mystery and suspense. You might still have questions when the credits roll, but you won't feel short-changed.

It's a film that you don't so much enjoy as endure. But if you've got the constitution for it, it's unlikely a film will make you *feel* more than *Hereditary* this year. But don't go to the cinema alone. And make sure you leave a light on for when you come home. You won't be sleeping without it... **MATT MAYTUM**



I LOST MY BODY 12A

DIRECTOR Jérémy Clapin **YEAR** 2019

Based on a novel by Amélie screenwriter Guillaume Laurant, this French animation about a severed hand trying to reconnect with its owner is a darkly funny adventure-drama that's packed with pathos.

After escaping a Parisian hospital, the independent hand traverses the city – fending off oncoming traffic, erratic pigeons and feral rats along the way – in an impossible quest to rejoin the body it once belonged to, that of clumsy loner Naoufel. The latter's unfortunate circumstances – and his budding romance with whip-smart librarian Gabrielle – are unpacked in flashbacks that also bring us ever closer to discovering the cause of the hand's violent separation.

On the one, ahem, hand, this is a study of scaled-down, ground-level danger, where there's great comedy to be found in the detail. On the other, it's a meditation on fractured identity, heightened by the hand's poignant hope for reconciliation. Director/co-writer Clapin sensitively combines melancholy with an ultimately life-affirming message.

It won the Critics' Week Grand Prize at Cannes, has been snatched up by Netflix and given a starry dub with Dev Patel (Naoufel) and Alia Shawkat (Gabrielle). But it's still the unconventional premise, captivating artistry and profound themes that really grab you.

MATT LOOKER

THE VERDICT A deeply affecting and intimate tale that rings right through the nerve-ends.



IDIOT PRAYER 12 DIR. Nick Cave, Robbie Ryan YEAR 2020

Filmed at London's huge Alexandra Palace mid-lockdown, Nick Cave's gig pic is a not-quite-a-concert movie – no audience – with a sure grasp of its moment. Played solo at the piano, Cave's variably weeping/wild songs speak resonantly of loss, distance, and tested resolve. Bathed in expressive, warming light, the performance emerges as part elegy for what's lost, part plea for sustained connection. Cave's maximalist craft and charisma charge a minimalist occasion with magnetism and meaning. **KEVIN HARLEY**

THE ICE STORM 15

DIRECTOR Ang Lee **YEAR** 1998

Ang Lee is fast making a huge name for himself. With the brilliant *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman* and the award-winning *Sense & Sensibility* under his belt, this talented director has now turned his perceptive eye towards angst in the USA. Yes, this is a period social drama. But it's also one of the finest of its genre you will ever see. The problems of a suburban family stuck in their affluent '70s Nowheresville – it's based on Rick Moody's 1994 novel – represents a cinematically stunning evocation of the American nation in a time of spiritual unease. Imagine the *Brady Bunch*, but really pissed off.

The family and the individuals within it form the core of *The Ice Storm*. It's a character-driven yarn; no-one really does a lot, and nothing much seems to happen. But the pacing and emotional content of the movie are impeccable. It remains utterly unromantic throughout, and it's laced with bittersweet, ironic humour of the "hey family, there seem to be one or two communication problems between us" variety.

Furthermore, certain characters (Sigourney Weaver in scary, adulterous vixen mode) are unforgiveably self-serving and cynical. And Kevin Kline's powerful performance has a breathtaking assuredness.

The end result is a movie that brilliantly captures the zeitgeist of a country right on the cusp of radical upheaval – and a family on the brink of meltdown. Better still, Lee doesn't bludgeon this message home in chunkily staged sound-bites and melodramatic histrionics, but with a gentle, persuasive subtlety, focusing on the development of the characters and their emotionally complex personae.

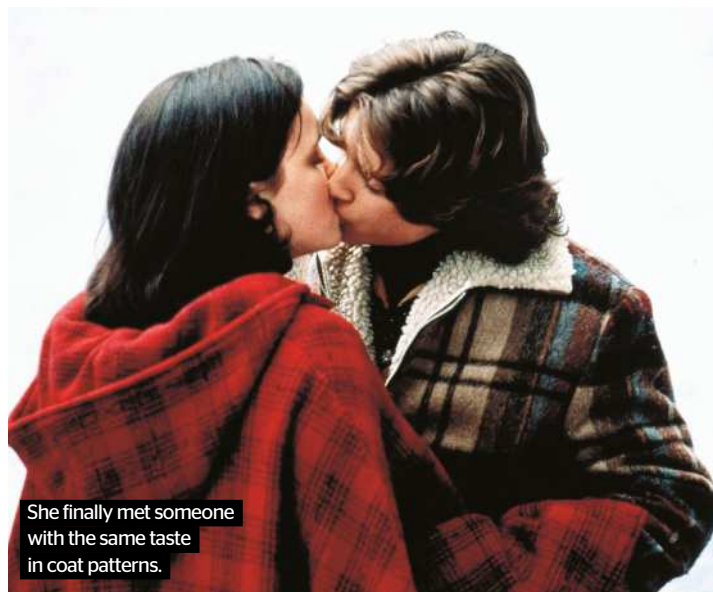
The proverbial ice storm, which arrives near the film's dénouement, is a frozen meteorological outpouring of violent proportions. Its narrative purpose is to bring simmering matters to a head for both the family and (metaphorically) America as a whole.

And it's here that *The Ice Storm* throws up a deliberately downbeat

sequence so mesmerising and intense that it sails precariously close to the sharp edge of perfection.

THE VERDICT The tribulations of a '70s family facing change. It won't be to everyone's taste, but this is intelligent, observant, exceptional film-making. A glittering snowflake among the Hollywood slush.

It boasts stunning performances from an ensemble cast, ridiculously accurate late-'70s-era sets, consistently haunting cinematography and a poignant, literate, perceptive and masterfully crafted script. Expect Oscars by the bucketload, and its immediate elevation to classic status. **TF**



She finally met someone with the same taste in coat patterns.

IN THIS CORNER OF THE WORLD ¹²

DIRECTOR Sunao Katabuchi **YEAR** 2016

It's set in Hiroshima and takes place during WW2. But this Japanese anime is not a story of nuclear annihilation. Rather, it's one of survival; of persevering young housewife Suzu (voiced by Rena Nounen), who comes of age years before the bomb drops.

Adapted from a noughties manga by Sunao Katabuchi (a former Ghibli animator best known for 2009's *Mai Mai Miracle*), *ITCOTW* is a tender, sobering film; a moving portrait of the stress endured by the female homefront. Suzu's fight is not with the Allies – it's with meagre rations, as she faces a daily battle to feed three generations of her family.

Katabuchi captures this hardship in a hand-drawn style that's beguilingly beautiful. There's a striking contrast between the foreground – all bright greens and gentle blues – and the cold greys of warfare in the distance. When air raids do come, the blacks and oranges are jolting. The attacks finally break Suzu's spirit. And when the horror becomes too much, the film 'breaks' as well, with white lines dancing across a black canvas, crumbling before they can form concrete shapes. The implication is clear: there's no easy way to convey this kind of suffering. **STEPHEN KELLY**

THE VERDICT An exquisite portrait of Hiroshima before the bomb that conjures a powerful sense of what – and who – was lost.



THE IRISHMAN ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Martin Scorsese **YEAR** 2019

The Irishman is, unmistakably, a Martin Scorsese picture, the long, deep shadows of *Mean Streets*, *GoodFellas* and *Casino* stretching through much of its 209min runtime. But it's also colder and more distant than its predecessors, with the mob lifestyle rendered less glamorous, more utilitarian. Themes of ageing, guilt and death haunt the film, as we follow the tumultuous gangster life of Robert De Niro's Frank Sheeran. This is Scorsese's summation, his twilight masterpiece, his *Once Upon A Time In America*. This is an engrossing and haunting epic. **JAMIE GRAHAM**



IT FOLLOWS ¹⁵

DIRECTOR David Robert Mitchell **YEAR** 2014

Most of us spend our teenage years haunted by something – constant embarrassment, the crushing weight of expectation, excruciating haircuts. Perhaps it's because, like ghosts, we're trapped between two different worlds, the prisoners of feelings we can't quite escape or express. Often it's the twin spectres of sex and death that hang the heaviest, and horror films aren't shy in making this connection explicit. Often very explicit: "Sex equals death" being one of *Scream*'s cardinal rules.

Based on his own recurring nightmares, and spiked with a sense of what he terms "interactive anxiety", writer/director David Robert Mitchell's follow-up to debut drama *The Myth Of The American Sleepover* (2010) knows the work of Craven, Carpenter and Argento as surely as it knows what it's like to be young and afraid. The first girl we meet flees hysterically from her home, screeching off in her car to the beach. Something's after her – that brilliant title a promise rather than a threat – but it's only when we get to know suburban teen Jay (Maika Monroe, *The Guest*'s breakout star) and her Scooby gang of friends that the threat starts to take shape. After Jay has sex with nervy boyfriend (Jake Weary), he chloroforms her, ties her to a chair in an abandoned building, and explains that he has passed on the eponymous curse; that 'It' will now follow her, instead of him. "It can look like anyone," he warns. "Sometimes I think it looks like the people you love just to hurt you..."

The ensuing scenes of supernatural stalking reach *The Grudge* levels of intensity, the camera panning nervously through 360 degrees as it watches, waiting, for something to come and get Jay while she's at school, at home, walking the silent, spooked *Halloween*-esque streets. Try as she might to shift it, the sense of unspeakable, unstoppable menace is relentless – almost as relentless as Rich Vreeland's pounding electronic score, which power-drills *Suspiria* chords into the brain. Bar a few Oedipal interludes, grown-ups are nowhere to be found in this dreamy teen hinterland, as if Mitchell has transplanted the metaphysical disquiet of M.R. James' best ghost stories on to *Stand By Me*'s listless, adult-free summer. The result is one of the

THE VERDICT

A horror film that will haunt your waking hours for weeks. Every frame of *It Follows* is stamped with nameless dread.

most fearsome, original chillers of recent times, its central conceit a subtle, supple metaphor for all kinds of teenage angst, sexual trauma or any of the shadows that latch onto us when we're young, and never quite pass. **MATT GLASBY**

INSIDE OUT U

DIRECTORS Pete Docter, Ronaldo Del Carmen

YEAR 2015

Fittingly for a movie set inside someone's head, Pixar's 15th feature is a fireworks display of fizzing ideas and bursts of imagination. By some distance the animation giant's finest since *Toy Story 3* kicked the stuffing from us all in 2010, it shows just why director Pete Docter (*Monsters Inc.*, *Up*) and the rest of Pixar's key creatives call themselves the 'Brain Trust'.

The heroine/host of *Inside Out* is 11-year-old Riley (Kaitlyn Dias), whose happy Minnesotan childhood abruptly bites dust when her parents (Kyle McLachlan, Diane Lane) decide to up sticks to San Francisco. Until now, the five Emotions that marshal Riley's thoughts and feelings (they reside inside Headquarters, operating a control panel and looking out through the windows of her eyes) have been captained by Joy (Amy Poehler), a round-faced saucer-eyed cherub dressed in sunny yellow. Three of the other four Emotions – needle-thin, purple Fear (Bill Hader), short, square, crimson Anger (Lewis Black) and recoiling, green Disgust (Mindy Kaling) – have been on the periphery of things, while hunched, pouty, blue Sadness (Phyllis Smith) has lurked so deep in the background as to be almost out of sight, out of mind. But now, with Riley hating her new house, unable to make friends and losing her mojo on the hockey ice, Sadness is suddenly working front and centre.

Riley's misery in Minnesota is only the outside story. The inner journey sees Joy and Sadness get accidentally locked out of Headquarters, lost in a candy-coloured mindscape of vast dimensions. In order to return and wrestle the controls from Fear, Anger and Disgust, they must navigate a vast zone packed with seemingly infinite memories, each one a glowing sphere, and such distinctive regions as Imagination Land, Dream Production, Subconscious and Abstract Thought. Joy, of course, tries to lead the way, but it is only by accepting Sadness that a solution might be found.

Even by the standards of the Pixar bods, who make it their business to mix brain with heart in order to entertain adults as much as kids, this is, well, heady stuff, sure to boggle fragile little minds. And there's more, too, with Personality Islands, a literal Train Of

THE VERDICT Like the *Toy Story* trilogy, *Inside Out* is about leaving childhood behind. It's not quite as moving as those films but it is A-grade Pixar, full of Sadness and Joy.



"Let's watch one more cat video on YouTube. I promise, this is the last one."

Thought and a prized vault of Core Memories that have shaped and shaded Riley's spirit. This last, especially, is a tricky concept for nippers to grasp, even before it's revealed that Riley's increasingly downbeat mood can filter perception to show old events in a different light – Core Memories, forever golden, are suddenly tinged blue for they now represent that which has been lost. As the voices in Keanu Reeves' head might say in unison, Whoa.

But even as the bigger-brained concepts pass the little ones by, they'll be dazzled by the bright animation of the retro-styled interior landscapes, and by the darker, more realistically rendered 'real world'. *Inside Out*, like all Pixar movies (yes, even *Cars 2*), is a technical marvel, and the perilous journey undertaken by Joy and Sadness is sure to command attention, with its collapsing panoramas representing Riley's crumbling innocence. It's scary stuff, on several levels, which makes the presence of Riley's former imaginary friend, Bing Bong – part cat, part dolphin, part elephant – a welcome inclusion, his affable bumbling dovetailing with Poehler's indomitable, sing-song radiance (she makes Dory sound depressed) to add grins to grimaces.

Also arriving thick and fast are the gags, be it hilarious glimpses into the workings of other people's minds, the dumping of needless memories to make room for new ones ("There go the names of all the US Presidents") or a delicious explanation as to the origin of earworms. It's sterling stuff, with one throwaway gag pertaining to YA vampires providing the biggest laugh you'll likely hear in a cinema this year. Oh, to peek inside the Brain Trust's heads – those trains of thought rocketing hither and thither must look like time-lapse footage of Waterloo Station.

Given Pixar's recent favouring of sequels, *Inside Out* deserves applause for bringing such a dazzling original concept to our screens, even if it does harbour a passing resemblance to classic *Beano* strip *The Numskulls*. That said, this, more than any other Pixar movie, demands a sequel, trilogy or more, much as Francois Truffaut revisited his *The 400 Blows* hero, Antoine Doinel, throughout life. Can you imagine what will be going on in Riley's head when she becomes a teenager, or goes to university and discovers mind-altering substances, or hits middle age? You know that Pixar can; it's a no-brainer.

JAMIE GRAHAM

THE IMPOSTER ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Bart Layton **YEAR** 2012

The *Imposter* has the concept of disappearance deep in its DNA. First there are disembodied voices, fading credits, the pounding, purifying Spanish rain. Later, witness testimonies trail away in horror, and departing figures bleach themselves into the oblivion of sudden sunlight. Bart Layton's beautifully crafted documentary begins with the vanishing of Nicholas Barclay, a 13-year-old Texan boy, in June 1994. But its central character is Frédéric Bourdin, an extremely damaged young Frenchman longing to lose himself in the illusion of another identity. "As long as I can remember," he says, "I wanted to be someone else, someone who was acceptable." He chooses Nicholas.

Despite not looking or sounding like Barclay, and being discovered by police three years later and 5,000 miles away, in Spain, Frédéric disguises himself – terribly – as the boy, now grown-up, and is welcomed with open arms by his grieving family. A compelling liar, Frédéric confesses his pathological Pinocchio-ing straight to camera, with Nicholas' sister Carey and

THE VERDICT Creepier than *Catfish* and as cinematic as *Man On Wire*, this is an unnerving story immaculately told and a strong contender for doc of the year.

mother Beverly chipping in separately as credibly heart-sick witnesses. The reason neither of them questioned the inconsistencies in his tale is painfully simple: they needed to believe him.

Layton is just as skilled a storyteller as his subject, fleshing out these incredible, often conflicting accounts with whatever comes to hand: talking-head interviews with family members and state officials; home-video footage that crackles with static; snatches of conversations. Sometimes he intercuts police phone calls with clips from '70s detective shows such as *Kojak*. Elsewhere, he dramatises moments with stunning neo-noir reconstructions benefitting from the contributions of DoP Erik Wilson and editor Andrew Hulme.

In lesser hands, such technique might feel like a cheat. After all, documentaries are about establishing the truth, however ugly, not colluding in a fantasist's beautiful cruelties. But this is a documentary about fabricating stories, the allure of deception and how quickly the facts can vanish into the ether.

The effect of Layton's efforts is to give credence to each of the claimants, so it's possible to feel sorry for Frédéric even as the horrendous weight of his actions hits home. One glimpse of Carey's traumatised eyes says it all – not everything can be washed away, no matter how much we pretend it can. **MATT GLASBY**



THE INNKEEPERS ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Ti West **YEAR** 2011

A haunted hotel on the verge of closure, choking its dusty last over one final weekend as the ghosts of residents past mournfully stalk the corridors and hallways... Welcome to the unlikeliest romcom of 2012! OK, Ti West's latest chiller, following his excellent satanic-panic period piece *The House Of The Devil*, isn't a cheesy chick flick, but behind the nerve-shredding (and it is terrifying) *The Innkeepers* is an indie slacker-com at heart. Think *Clerks* meets *The Shining*.

Set and shot in The Yankee Pedlar Inn – a real hotel in Connecticut locals believe is actually haunted – it follows Claire (Sara Paxton) and Luke (Pat Healy), twentysomething college-drop-out would-be paranormal investigators charged with manning the front desk and taking care of the remaining guests before the hotel shuts down for good.

First and foremost a character piece, it hangs out with Luke and Claire as they kill time chatting, drinking and laughing at the annoying local barista (an excellent cameo from next-big-thing Lena Dunham). They also dick around with EVP equipment, pretending to be

THE VERDICT The best hotel horror since *The Shining* is a character piece, a comedy, a love story and a wee-inducer that marks Ti West as one of the most capable genre-wrights around.

ghost hunters and freaking themselves out with tales of spook-in-residence Madeleine Mallory, 'The widow of the Pedlar', said to roam the halls. Miles from her *Last House On The Left* or *Shark Night* scream-queen persona, Paxton is goofy and pixieish, while Healy's a loveable nerd. It's largely a two-hander with interludes from the eclectic guests – most notably an unselfconscious turn from *Top Gun* icon Kelly McGillis as washed-up actress-turned-spiritualist Leanne Rease-Jones. If there's an over-reliance on false scares in the first half, it's rectified by the final act, as playful ghost games turn menacing.

The location is a gift, a kitsch mix of chintz and glitz which suits West's storytelling perfectly. Set in the modern day, steeped in Victoriana, with an unhurried, finely crafted early-'80s feel, *The Innkeepers* is both old and new, fresh and gorgeously nostalgic.

Just like in *The House Of The Devil*, *The Innkeepers* takes its time to build, cranking up the tension as your sympathy for Claire and Luke deepens. But unlike *House*, *The Innkeepers*' pay-off completely delivers. Wincingly frightening, sad and satisfying, at its heartbreaking conclusion *The Innkeepers* treads a carefully ambiguous path which resonates long after the creepy final coda. It's one of the scariest, and best, horror films of recent years.

ROSIE FLETCHER



The hotel lift was out of order due to the usual deluge of blood.

The only known photograph of an undergraduate awakening at sunrise.



"At least I still have this lovely saucer of milk..."



INSIDE LLEWYN DAVIS ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Ethan Coen, Joel Coen **YEAR** 2013

Everything you touch turns to shit – like King Midas's idiot brother!" yells Jean (Carey Mulligan), ex-lover of hapless folk singer Llewyn Davis (Oscar Isaac). She's not far wrong. The Coen brothers take a particular delight in losers – think H. I. McDunnough (Nicolas Cage) in *Raising Arizona*, Jerry Lundegaard (William H. Macy) in *Fargo*, Larry Gopnik (Michael Stuhlbarg) in *A Serious Man*, and plenty more. But Llewyn, artistically talented but socially and professionally inept, ceaselessly imposing on friends' waning tolerance (and their sofas) is perhaps the most consistently hapless of the Coen roster of screw-ups. "There must be someone in the five boroughs who isn't pissed at me," he muses despondently – but by this stage in the game, there probably isn't.

The Coens, always exact to place and period, locate Llewyn's sad tale in the Greenwich Village folk-music scene of the early '60s. Although at one point our hero makes a fruitless trip to Chicago, which throws him into the company of an elderly bluesman

(Coens regular John Goodman) and his driver (Garrett Hedlund), who mumbles incomprehensible beat poetry to himself. As ever with the brothers, there's a relishable gallery of supporting roles, from an unhelpful lift operator to the Jewish-Chinese couple who've decided to call their son Greenfung.

Scene-stealer supreme, though, is a self-possessed marmalade cat who Llewyn keeps getting saddled with, and who turns in one of the all-time great feline performances. Said moggy also gives rise to one of those unforgettably left-field Coen lines of dialogue. No spoilers, but it involves the word 'scrotum'.

As they did with the bluegrass of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, the Coens flaunt genuine affection for the music genre they're featuring, while still sending it up when they want to. There's a wicked parody of the Clancy Brothers' raucous tones, and one of the many highpoints is a performance of the film's sole original number, 'Please, Mr. Kennedy', a jaw-droppingly inane ballad composed by Jim (Justin Timberlake), Jean's on and off-stage partner. Like most of the songs, it's played out in full. Isaac, who proves to have a strong singing voice, performs the folksongs in perfect period style and succeeds in making Llewyn, for all his prickliness, an unexpectedly likeable, melancholic figure.

PHILIP KEMP

THE VERDICT The Coen brothers are on top sardonic form with a winning tale of an incorrigible loser. *Inside Llewyn Davis* hits the right note on every level, from period vibe to performance (human and feline).



JOKER IS

DIRECTOR Todd Phillips YEAR 2019

There's a case to be made that the Joker didn't need a definitive on-screen origin story, but two hours spent in the company of Joaquin Phoenix's clown prince is guaranteed to put a (nervous) smile on your face. Going to deeper, darker and more disturbing places than any comic-book movie to date, *Joker* isn't just a captivating character study, it's a superhero – or should that be supervillain? – movie like no other.

Radically different from contemporary comic-book cinema structurally, tonally and morally, *Joker* has more in common with *Taxi Driver* and *The King Of Comedy* than it does with *Avengers Assemble* or *The Dark Knight*. On multiple levels, it's the most challenging, subversive and nihilistic comic-book movie ever made. Needless to say, pint-sized Bat-fans should steer clear.

We're first introduced to Arthur Fleck (Phoenix) applying make-up in preparation for his day job as a clown-for-hire, his face contorted into a horrific half-smile, half-cry grimace – the result of a neurological condition that causes involuntary, pathological laughter. Arthur's therapist is providing little relief, and that's before the practice is shuttered. Living in a shabby apartment block with his infirm mum, and getting nowhere as a stand-up comedian, Arthur is habitually treated with contempt or outright hostility. But his life only truly starts to spiral after a violent encounter on a subway car kickstarts a terrifying transformation.

Mirroring Arthur's descent is Gotham's own decay. It's 1981. Rubbish is piling up, 'super rats' are having their fill and Thomas Wayne (Brett Cullen) is running for mayor. Far from the altruistic entrepreneur of Bat-dads past, Cullen's Wayne is a loathsome one-per-center who unapologetically declares Gotham's citizens 'clowns' on TV. At a time when the obscene economic divide between rich and poor grows greater by the second, *Joker* has its finger on the political and social pulse in daring ways. Simply put, Gotham is a powder keg and the Joker is perfectly placed to light the fuse.

It should come as little surprise that Phoenix is staggeringly good here. That he's

THE VERDICT More character study than comic-book movie, and anchored by an Oscar-worthy Joaquin Phoenix, *Joker* is a bravura blockbuster that proves you don't need superpowered scraps to dazzle.



found a fresh take on a character as well worn as the Joker is one thing – that it feels just as definitive as Jack Nicholson and Heath Ledger's indelible interpretations is another altogether. Physically and psychologically, it's a horrifyingly funny performance. Losing 52lb for the part, Phoenix twists his skeletal frame into unsettling configurations, while he runs in a broadly comic way that looks like he has oversized shoes stuck to his soles at all times.

Rather than the gleefully sadistic criminal mastermind of the comics – this is an origin story, after all – Arthur's defining characteristic is that he's ill. Phoenix engenders such powerful empathy for Fleck that some of the horrifying setbacks he faces, including a mental-health care system that profoundly fails him, are genuinely upsetting. By the film's charged, devilishly brilliant final act, you feel Fleck's rage at the injustice of a bankrupt world so overwhelmingly that, while his actions can't be justified, they can be clearly understood.

That *Joker* was directed and co-written by Todd Phillips – best known for the *Hangover* trilogy – makes this all the more remarkable. Unexpectedly, Phillips and the Ace of Knives have turned out to be the perfect marriage of filmmaker and material; practically every

choice is on the money. The early '80s aesthetic is so convincing it almost feels like a film made by a Scorsese contemporary. And the precision deployment of numerous rug-pulling revelations only works because Phillips and co-writer Scott Silver are storytellers willing to kill DC's golden geese.

If there's a shortcoming, it's that *Joker* exists squarely in Scorsese's shadow, but it gets away with brazen thievery by openly acknowledging this. In a knowing inversion of his role in *The King Of Comedy*, Robert De Niro plays a beloved late-night host on whose talk show Arthur dreams of appearing. Several supporting roles are also a little thin – Zazie Beetz as a neighbour who takes a shine to Arthur being the clearest example. But this is the Joker show from first to last frame, and Phoenix brings the house down. Sure, he's not performing magic tricks with pencils, or bringing Gotham to its knees with laughing gas, but this Joker is every bit as valid and fascinating as the ones before him, and works better for not being chained to a larger universe.

If the result of the DCEU's failure to hit on a successful, consistent tone in its films is radical standalones of this quality, it may be the once-struggling studio's smartest move. **JORDAN FARLEY**



Uma Thurman's Bride goes back to Asics.

KILL BILL: VOLUME 1 18

DIRECTOR Quentin Tarantino **YEAR** 2003

A black screen, choked breaths panting from the speakers. Fade in to a close-up of Uma Thurman's bloodied face, eyes rolling in terror as her tormentor wipes blood from his knuckles. The name Bill is stitched on his handkerchief. "Do you find me sadistic?" he asks. "This is me at my most masochistic." Bill points a gun at his victim, who we now see is lying on the floor in a bridal gown, obviously pregnant. "It's your ba—" she begins, Bill stopping her dead with a bullet to the brain. Cue titles.

Divided into two movies (*Volume 2* is out in February) and a succession of chapters, *Kill Bill* sports the most basic of plots: awakening from a coma four years after being left for dead, The Bride sets out to kill Bill, head of an assassin squad. First, however, she draws up a "death list" comprised of his minions, determining to run swords through them all before she turns her deadly attentions on William.

Why doesn't she simply off Bill and get it over with? Partly because she needs to ascertain his whereabouts. Mainly because this is a samurai movie. There are questions of honour to be pondered, ethics to grapple with – and let's face it, logic has no place in sword'n'slash pics. Not when it gets in the way of a bloody good showdown. Or 10.

It's a point worth labouring, this being the kind of film that some people won't get, not understanding that *Kill Bill* is set in a parallel universe. Fifty per cent Past Movies La-La Land, 50 per cent the inside of Tarantino's giddy head, it's

THE VERDICT Tarantino's back with a ballistic bang, taking 'lowly' exploitation cinema to vertiginous heights. So good it deserves mention in the same breath as *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*.

a lurid world with no room for realism. Exhibit A: The Bride flying to Tokyo on a fake passenger plane with a whacking great sword by her seat. Exhibit B: our heroine taking out 100-odd trained killers in the movie's action showpiece, a stunning showdown at a vast restaurant called The House Of Blue Leaves. Exhibit C: the comic book/*Shogun Assassin*-style violence, each beheading and lopped-off limb accompanied by, quite literally, fountains of blood. Yes, there are moments of wince-inducing brutality, but mostly the violence is played for laughs and, at times, abstract beauty.

Get the point and you're looking at a genre(s) masterpiece. It's also very much a Tarantino masterpiece, QT's fingerprints being smeared over every inch of his beautiful baby. It's all here: the sudden shifts of tone, the flip-flopping time structure, the supercool slo-mo, the exquisite humour, the pitch-perfect performances and, of course, the trademark dialogue.

Yet, vitally, there are also appreciable tweaks to keep thing fresh. Most notably, the script is spare by QT's standards, less words allowing the helmer to flex his impressive action muscles. But it's not just the flurry of graceful, powerful set-pieces that set *Kill Bill* apart from his other work. It's not even his decision to dabble in animation. There are also other, less ostensible factors, like opting for a score-based soundtrack over his usual collection of retro tunes, or the virtual absence of male characters. *Volume 1* boasts excellent pacing and a natural climax to stand strong as a film in its own right. Even better, it also leaves you gagging to see *Volume 2*.

QT claims he doesn't see *Kill Bill* as a movie but as a "happening", saying he dreams of audiences standing throughout the film, too jazzed to sit. You know what? He might just get his wish. **TF**

KUBO AND THE TWO STRINGS PG

DIRECTOR Travis Knight

YEAR 2016

Gawd bless Laika, America's last bastion of mainstream stop-motion wonder. Ironing out the imperfections of curios *Paranorman* and *The Boxtrolls*, its latest is a visually and sonically sublime journey across a fantastical ancient Japan, with a story that will yank the heartstrings clean out of your chest.

Kubo (Art Parkinson) is a young boy with a missing eye and music-fuelled origami magic running through his blood. After unleashing the wrath of vengeful gods, Kubo embarks on a quest to recover an unbreakable sword and impenetrable armour, teaming up with a grumpy Monkey (Charlize Theron) and a beefy samurai Beetle (Matthew McConaughey), forming an unlikely makeshift family in the process.

Taking in encounters with Harryhausen-homaging skeletons, dizzying sword fights and battles with neon dragons, it's hard to overstate quite how awe-inspiringly beautiful Kubo's blend of stop-motion model-work and CG environments is. Heartfelt and funny, the script and top-notch voice acting possess a charm that will disarm even the most cynical. Sure, it hews a faintly predictable path, but it proves there's plenty of life in stop motion yet. **JORDAN FARLEY**

THE VERDICT Visually astonishing and touchingly told, *Kubo* is utterly wonderful. If there's any justice, it'll be a monster hit.





Orbital's new, more aggressive marketing was doing wonders for CD sales.

KILL LIST¹⁸

DIRECTOR Ben Wheatley **YEAR** 2011

Hitman Jay (Neil Maskell) hasn't lifted a trigger finger in eight months. Money's low, his wife's (MyAnna Buring) spirits are lower. Then best buddy/co-killer Gal (Michael Smiley) comes round for a roast and a chat in the basement. He's been offered a lucrative assignment: kill some people, on a list. Moral salve? They're bad people, probably. Besides, it's time Jay "got back on the horse..."

Anyone who saw jobbing TV director Ben Wheatley's 2009 feature debut *Down Terrace* – a galvanising mix of kitchen sink, soap, crime drama, Shakespearean tragedy and piss-taking comedy shot in eight days for £6,000 – will go into his slippery sophomore effort with a toehold on what to expect. Just don't be surprised if that toe is then hacked off and sent to you in the mail...

Set in a Sheffield that's dingy and banal yet infused with the mystic malignancy of the surrounding countryside, *Kill List*, like revenge, is best served cold. Which means you should content yourself with a glance at the star rating and know only that it's a film you must discover for yourself.

Can't resist? OK, we'll proceed with caution... *Kill List* builds with nary a jar or jolt from naturalistic domestic drama to Grand Guignol horror movie via a succession of small-talk stakeouts culminating in grubbily violent hits.

It's also a mystery movie, a road movie and a grotesque riff on Arthurian legend, and is influenced as much by John Cassavetes, Alan Clarke and Ken Loach as is by *Witchfinder General*, *The Wicker Man* and *The Blood On Satan's Claw*. It doesn't stop there, either. Sift through the escalating carnage and you'll find a study of friendship, an examination of masculinity and some credible political asides.

Admittedly, after so much (re)invention, the final act emerges as something of a horror staple, and the savage climax is guessable – not least because it's nearly identical to that of a much lesser movie from last year (a case of strange quirk rather than pilfering). But Wheatley negotiates the home straight with

THE VERDICT Authentic dialogue, pitch-perfect performances and seductively scuzzy images comprise a film funny and bleak, tender and cruel, serious and 'out-there'. British horror has rarely hit these heights since the mid-'70s.

brute force and unwavering control, his mastery of mood and technique unleashing a visual and aural assault that's all the more shocking for the moments of eerie quietude and inappropriate politeness that punctuate the bloodlust. When you're not screaming "What the fuck?" you'll be screaming, full stop. **JAMIE GRAHAM**



It doesn't matter how big you are when you step on a Lego.



Harry suddenly realised Perry had pulled this trick on him at least three times before, just for a snog.

KING KONG 12 **DIRECTOR** Peter Jackson **YEAR** 2005

Let's be clear. *King Kong* 2005 isn't flawless. But it also isn't another committee-driven, box-ticking, beige blockbuster. It's the work of a visionary director with developing technical skill; pouring heart, soul and a slosh of independent spirit into a project which, under more mainstream control, would surely have imploded like a big-star supernova.

While Jackson was constrained by the sheer volume of *Rings* material, here he's set free to steal the soul of his boyhood obsession. His raging passion for the simian superhulk doesn't so much leap off the screen, it hides under your seat, follows you home and takes you out from behind while you're brushing your teeth.

With Black's sly, venal turn as producer Carl, Jackson has channelled a character who jabs at all he finds distasteful about the Hollywood sausage-machine he remains peripheral to. For such a long-faced lightweight, Brody does a sturdy job of turning

THE VERDICT Epic escapism. A two-hour movie ironed out to three. Like it matters. Kong is king and Jackson is the geek who's inherited the movie-Earth.

Jack from buttoned-up scribbler to action badass with a dirty white vest, while Watts is a wonder, all willowy and winsome with big, bright, haunted eyes. "You're all I've got!" she tells a craggy mentor. If only some alpha-ape man would come and sweep her away...

It's a good hour before Venture's hull crumples against the jagged edge of Skull Island – and another 10 or 15 minutes before we catch a glimpse of the chimp. But Kong is a colossus. Far from the original's comical stiffness, Jackson's ape is alive with emotion. He strides, he stomps, he snorts, he leaps, he lunges, he roars, he snores. He lives. Every inch of his fuzzy fur prickles with vitality: his howl, his growl, his yawn, his scowl, his fluffy great gut, his imperious strut. Best of all is his grumpy old-man face. It's as if the crew are naughty boys who've woken him from a nap and no, they can't have their ball/blonde back.

By blending CGI and Serkis' studied physicality, Jackson has hit the right note of authenticity – casually evolving the reality/FX hybrid the two began with *Gollum*. This Kong isn't just a brute force of nature. He feels. Attacked, he howls with outrage. When Ann tries to escape, he sulks. The crucial Kong-Ann

relationship has been carefully cranked to just the right level of tenderness and dignity. The scene where Ann tries to cheer Kong up with a spot of vaudeville is a joy, but a later sequence where the two, er, go ice-skating is destined to divide audiences between dreamy sighs and embarrassed guffaws.

Apart from Kong, the film's other key CGI character is Skull Island itself. Mostly, the sound design lends believable beef to the CGI, but a stampeding brontosaurus sequence feels too videogamey – a daft attempt to out-dinosaur *Jurassic Park*.

Still, Kong vs. T-Rex? Try Kong vs. three T-Rexes, in a titanic, 20-minute brawl featuring head-locks, arm-chomps, wrestling tussles, judo-flips, stumbling and tumbling in one great onslaught of rumble and rhythm.

Jackson never loses sight of the story's essence: doomed romance. The finale still throbs with tragic majesty, as Kong conquers Man's highest point – king of his captors' world – and, with one last sparkle in his eyes, he slides away, and the fall is a silent eternity...

King Kong is a \$200 million labour of love. "I feel like a kid again," he said, recently. You will, too. **ANDY LOWE**

KISS KISS, BANG BANG 15 **DIRECTOR** Shane Black **YEAR** 2005

They call it metafiction: the art of messing with the rules of fiction – "often playfully and self-referentially", the dictionary has it – and dealing with its creation and conventions. Like if we were to use 'me' or 'I', which *Total Film* never does, and type: hell, it's five in the morning, I've been writing this for hours and haven't seen my wife for days. So you'd better bloody like it, okay? That'd be metafiction. Sorta. Kinda. Oh never mind...

Kiss Kiss, Bang Bang is the most, er, metafictional (read: smart-arse) movie of the year. It is also one of the best; brutal, caustic, full of bracing violence and frank sexuality. To some critics, that reads like a rap sheet. To us, it's a white-hot resumé. Shane Black, then, is back, the screenwriting wunderkind who was a 22-year-old *Lethal Weapon* and *The Last Boy Scout*, before being given *The Long Kiss Goodnight*. For the last decade, Black's been living off the liposuctioned fat of La-La Land and storing up enough corrosive bile to burn down the Hollywood Hills. His blistering directorial debut is the result...

"I'm retired. I invented dice when I was a kid," says Harry (Robert Downey Jr.) to a vacant neo-Californian floozy he meets in

the opening party. She doesn't bat a botoxed eyelid. And so a tone is set – a tone that veers from self-referential sneering to surprisingly soulful, thanks to Downey Jr. It's easy to see how the material could have proved smug with a less experienced actor in the lead. But it's Downey's genius to marry the knows-it's-a-movie material, the convoluted, Raymond Chandler's-got-nothing-on-this plot and the incisive, no-one's-that-quick dialogue with a sense of a person at the centre of it; an emotional nub around which the chaos pivots.

This is clearest in the bed scene (not the way you think) with the 'Pink Hair Girl' (Shannyn Sossamon), with Consequence and Downey Jr.'s face shows the damage. Black flicks on the genre blender and through the puree of smarts and sarcasm peeks a jagged edge of reality: particularly in the child abuse past of fading actress Harmony Faith Lane (Michelle Monaghan). Everyone here is damaged goods; even throwaway exchanges hint at dark histories. Harry asks Perry (the excellent Val Kilmer) if his father loved him, "Well, he used to beat me in Morse code, so it's possible".

Black has name-checked James L. Brooks as an inspiration and others will inevitably nod to Tarantino, but Howard Hawks is the

template-setter. Harry and Perry's friendship is the film's pulse and they're typical Hawksian heroes – human and warm beneath a veneer of incompetence and invulnerability. Perry is the professional and his sexuality is somewhat immaterial. The clincher is Monaghan's jaded Hollywood hopeful: self-aware, funny, able and tinged with sadness. Monaghan is both lucky and good as the small-town girl from Embrey, Indiana, who has seen her dreams trampled on Sunset Boulevard; who regards an uninvited grope as "no biggie" and wryly slags off a past-it rival only a year older than she is.

The film takes its title from a book of criticism by the late critic Pauline Kael, who once saw the words on an Italian movie poster and suggested they were "the briefest statement imaginable of the basic appeal of movies". There's a risk its stylised cream could curdle with repeat viewing – but it's the most outrageous fun you'll have at the flicks this year. A grubby noir tale of sex and violence underpinned with friendship and love. **NEV PIERCE**

THE VERDICT Essential. Killer acting, gripping action and hilarious one-liners. Quote-whoring this shameless had better get us on the poster.



Russell Crowe and Guy Pearce both put in star-making turns.

L.A. CONFIDENTIAL IS DIRECTOR Curtis Hanson YEAR 1997

C rime pics are everywhere. There are comedy crime movies, action crime movies, metaphysical crime movies, sly and wry narrative fractures masquerading as crime movies, even romantic crime movies. We've been so over-exposed to murder, robbery and police procedure – both on television and in the cinema – that what used to be a genre in itself has now become the conventional canvas upon which every modern story is painted. It's a background noise of gunshots and shouting so familiar that we barely notice it any more.

But *L.A. Confidential*, uniquely, is a pure crime movie. Rather than use criminal activity as a plot-driving framework, it wrestles with the utter essence of the genre. There's more than enough action in the film's two-and-a-quarter hours to satisfy the most thrill-hungry viewer, but *L.A. Confidential* is made stunning, rather than merely gripping, through both the strength of its characters and the brutal rigour of its moral analysis.

The genius of the film – and it is a film of genius, without a doubt – is that it holds an investigation into the human soul's capacity for evil, while somehow still managing to be funny, thrilling, lively, shocking and unremittingly entertaining.

It was a mixture potent enough to garner a Palme d'Or nomination at the usually Hollywood-phobic Cannes, and has invited favourable comparisons with such screen legends as *Chinatown* and *The Godfather*. For

this reviewer, *L.A. Confidential* is superior to the former; it's richer, more dynamic and less reverentially styled.

Director Curtis Hanson is not a man familiar with this kind of acclaim. His last feature was the lame *The River Wild*, which would still have seemed outdated if it had come out five years earlier, when ridiculous psycho movies were in vogue. Before that he gave us the commercially successful, but utterly dreary, *The Hand That Rocks The Cradle*, and *Bad Influence*, with James Spader and Rob Lowe, which had a likeable edgy premise, but never rose above the gimmicky.

But with this, Hanson – fired up by the extraordinary power of James Ellroy's breathtaking novel to the extent that he took on scripting and production duties as well – has risen to an oxygen-requiring height of achievement. The adaptation of the book is exceptionally accomplished: he adds several new elements, condensing and clarifying a ferociously complex story, while still preserving its spirit and power.

The script is matched by an ensemble of intensely committed performances. Kevin Spacey is as attractive, funny and sad as ever, while *Babe*'s James Cromwell is perfectly cast as the fatherly Dudley Smith. Danny DeVito, although hardly stretching himself, is

THE VERDICT A nigh-on perfect interpretation of a remarkable book, as violent as it is intelligent, as moving as it is brutal. A must-see for any film fan.

similarly suited to the role of Sid Hudgeons, sleazy tabloid editor. Kim Basinger is both untouchable and slutty as the film's only significant female, far more a symbol than a real person (Ellroy can't write women, rarely even bothering to).

But the most extraordinary work by far comes from the two main leads: Russell Crowe – wonderful in *Proof* – and Guy 'Mike from Neighbours' Pearce – entertaining in *The Adventures Of Priscilla, Queen Of The Desert*. Both have matured far beyond expectation, and produce driven performances of gulp-inducing physicality. James Woods is the only actor previously capable of taking on an Ellroy-written lead – in the grotesque *Cop*, from an early, immature novel – and Pearce in particular has some of his shattering unpredictable presence.

With this volume of intensity up on the screen, backed by such a daring and well-crafted script, snappy design and an unerring sense of pace, *L.A. Confidential* is, quite simply, a magnificent movie. On one level, it's as complicated and baffling as *The Big Sleep*, on another a perfectly-arc'd sweep of character into action.

It's one of the most intelligent thrillers ever made. It's populated with characters whose every action is illegal or, at best, immoral. It's got the best hanging-someone-out-of-a-window-to-make-them-talk scene you'll ever see. For all these reasons, and so many more, it's imperative that you see this film. **TF**

LA LA LAND

12 **DIRECTOR** Damien Chazelle **YEAR** 2016

Set in contemporary Los Angeles, this glorious throwback to both the MGM musicals of the '40s and '50s (such as *Singin' In The Rain* and *An American In Paris*) plus Jacques Demy's sublime, bittersweet French fancies of the '60s (such as *The Umbrellas Of Cherbourg* and *The Young Girls Of Rochefort*) kicks off with cinema's most memorable traffic jam since Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend*.

La La Land is that kind of movie – in love with other movies. Swooping, pirouetting, the camera picks out drivers on a gridlocked flyover as they spring from their vehicles for a synchronised song-and-dance number that grows ever more elaborate and elated until viewers' hearts can't help but join in with all this cartwheeling.

What follows never demonstrates quite the same jazz-hands pizzazz, but that's no bad thing. Instead we're treated to something altogether more tender and melancholy. The journey begins as we follow wannabe actress Mia (Emma Stone) to a party and later, all alone, into a bar, lured by sad, sweet piano music. It would make for a gorgeous meet-cute if the pianist didn't barge past her as she approaches, and if they hadn't crossed paths already, their cars jammed end to end on that clogged freeway, where they flipped each other the bird.

The pianist is Seb (Ryan Gosling), and Chazelle rewinds from the moment he bursts past Mia to show us just how he got from the flyover to this point, making us privy to his dream of one day opening his own jazz club. Fate

THE VERDICT Could have been a grand folly but instead it's just grand. Will make audiences break into grins like its characters break into song.

determines that Seb and Mia will meet again, and tumble into love. But that's the easy part...

No lesser talents than Francis Ford Coppola (*One From The Heart*) and Scorsese (*New York, New York*) have been here before, freighting Golden Era-style musicals with anguish, resentment and failure. But for all their joys (and sorrows), those films didn't have Justin Hurwitz's numbers, by turns buoyant, bombastic, flirtatious, nostalgic and mournful.

They also didn't have a career-best Stone, with eyes bigger than a Studio Ghibli heroine. Or an A-game Gosling, summoning all of his chronic cool, sardonic smirks and heart-melting charm, then tossing in the goofball humour he found on *The Nice Guys* for good measure.

Both Stone and Gosling can carry a tune, with any splinters in their voices only adding to the ardour and fragility. They also dance beautifully, making up in style and elegance what their routines lack in complexity. This is a musical about feeling, not finish, and a magic-hour soft-shoe shuffle backdropped by the glimmering lights of LA is impossibly romantic.

With its vivid lensing, colour-coded costumes and striking production design that glides from pepped-up naturalism to Technicolor soundstage spectacle, *La La Land* brims with such indelible moments.

It also never loses sight of the sacrifices that go into attaining a dream. In this sense, *La La Land* complements *Whiplash*. While the intensity is dialled back from that movie's incessant verbal volleys and occasional physical abuse, there is real emotional punishment on display. *La La Land* is a sophisticated, fervent movie, at once old and new, joyous and heartbreaking, personal and universal. Sing it from the rooftops. **JAMIE GRAHAM**



THE LIVES OF OTHERS 15

DIRECTOR Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck **YEAR** 2006

An outstanding political thriller by first-time writer/director Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck – so outstanding it beat out Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* for last month's Best Foreign Film Oscar – *The Lives Of Others* unfolds in East Germany during the '80s. At that time Stasi employed 100,000 officers and 200,000 informants in order to "know everything" about the country's citizens. *The Lives Of Others* examines the chilling realities of existence under a totalitarian system.

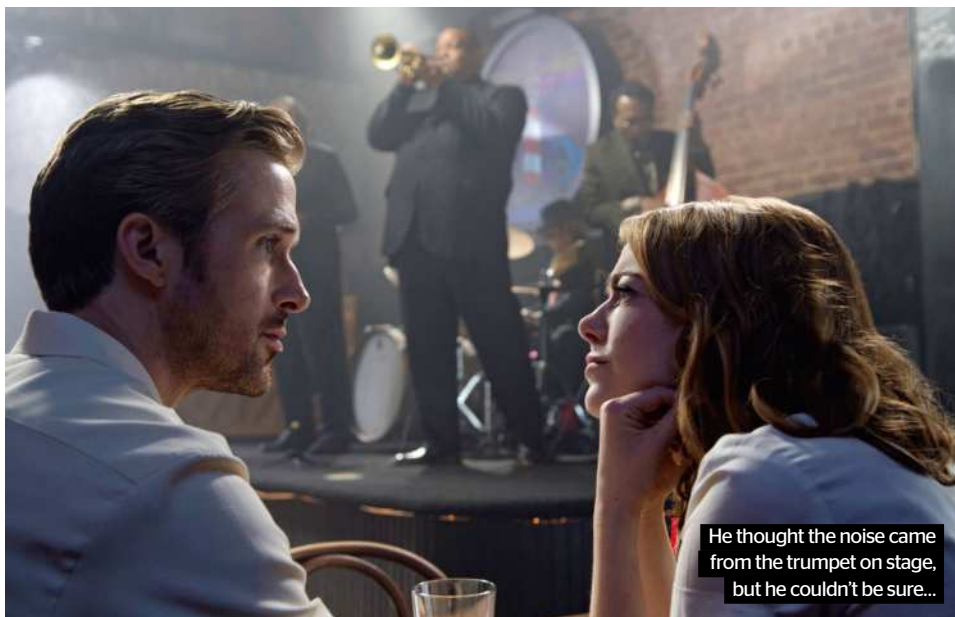
We first meet Stasi Captain Wiesler (Ulrich Mühe) as he coldly and brutally interrogates a suspect. Apparently without family or friends, he seems drained of human emotions – a man who lives for his work. It's with some eagerness, then, that he accepts an assignment to spy on playwright Georg Dreyman (Sebastian Koch) and his actress girlfriend Christa-Maria Sieland (Martina Gedeck). If he proves that Dreyman is a subversive, he will earn favour with his boss Grubitz (Ulrich Tukur). But there's a problem: the lonely spy is beginning to have doubts about the ethics of his work...

Shot in metallic greys, sickly greens and oppressive beiges, *The Lives Of Others* reeks with an atmosphere of fear and doubt, its protagonists haunted by life-threatening dilemmas. Should Dreyman risk the wrath of the authorities by writing an anonymous article about the suicide rate in the GDR? Will Wiesler risk his life's work by obeying his conscience and fudging his orders?

Mühe gives an impressive, pared-down performance, winning our sympathy as he slowly reveals the humanity beneath Wiesler's stern façade. Yet his character arc is subtle, unforced – just as the film itself ratchets up tension without ever recouring to melodrama.

A stingingly relevant, resonant drama in which individuals dare to confront a regime's abuse of power. **TOM DAWSON**

THE VERDICT Newcomer von Donnersmarck's Stasi-era thriller is a masterful achievement, both suspenseful and poignant. Superb.



He thought the noise came from the trumpet on stage, but he couldn't be sure...



THE LAND OF THE ENLIGHTENED ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Pieter-Jan De Pue
YEAR 2016

Pieter-Jan De Pue's dazzling semi-doco follows a band of Afghan children as they roam their pitiless, beautiful country amid the detritus of conflict. We see them trading bullets for opium, harvesting poppies and setting off explosives as if they were fireworks – while US troops shoot it out in the hills. A unique, stunning window to an extreme world. **ALI CATTERALL**



LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT ^{12A}

DIRECTOR Bi Gan **YEAR** 2019

The premise – a man searches for his lost lover – is simple. Beyond that, all bets are off in Bi Gan's dizzying drama. It's a cryptic quest that culminates in an audacious, unbroken 59min take that's a marvel of atmosphere and logistics. Gan fuses auteur influences (Lynch, Noé, Wong Kar-Wai) with such bravery, that he could well become their equal. **SIMON KINNAR**



LIFE ITSELF ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Steve James **YEAR** 2014

The late Roger Ebert knew the importance of direction. That Ebert chose Steve James to direct this exceptional doc, based on his own memoir, says much about its subject's character. Ebert always believed in cinema as a machine for generating empathy, citing James' *Hoop Dreams* as a classic example.

Critical peers debate his legacy here: did Ebert's famously populist, "thumbs up" approach to cinema dumb things down, or help to pioneer the internet's renaissance in grassroots criticism? But a truly rounded, complex character emerges, especially in the central relationship with TV show co-host Gene Siskel, Ebert's equal and opposite.

Yet, there was more to Ebert than watching movies. James reveals parallel lives: the student editor who spoke out for civil rights; the rambunctious reporter nearly destroyed by alcoholism; the mischievous screenwriter behind Russ Meyer's manic *Beyond The Valley Of The Dolls*.

Latterly, of course, there was Ebert the cancer sufferer, robbed of his voice but reaching readers via his blog. Ordered by Ebert to show "the full reality", James achieves an unvarnished, desperately sad portrayal of this once-towering figure reduced to frailty and discomfort. Ebert eventually becomes too ill even to reply to emails – yet the film's power lies in how it keeps his voice alive. **SIMON KINNAR**

THE LOST CITY OF Z ¹⁵

DIRECTOR James Gray **YEAR** 2017

We meet Fawcett (Charlie Hunnam) in 1905 at a crossroads: a capable colonel in the British Army hamstrung by what an elitist old fart describes as an "unfortunate choice of ancestors". To progress, he takes a two-year Royal Geographical Society (RGS) expedition to map the Bolivia-Brazil border, leaving his patient missus (Sienna Miller, radiant) behind and teaming up with a wookiee-like fellow cartographer, Costin (Robert Pattinson and his immense beard). The punishing journey, both mentally and physically, is heaven/hell – complete with horrific piranha attacks, starvation, terrifying tribal run-ins and a bonkers fever dream of an opera in the middle of the jungle. And this odyssey is the nucleus of Fawcett's lifelong passion for finding evidence of a lost civilisation he calls 'Z', as well as the push-pull between family life and the call of the Amazon.

Charting Fawcett's heroic adventures over several expeditions, his involvement in WW1 and his spats with the stuffy RGS, Z muses on themes of elitism, patrimony, gender equality and destiny, via Gray's poignant screenplay and Darius Khondji's truly beautiful cinematography. Aside from niggles that characters discuss world events with a knowing prescience ("There could be another war..."), Z guides viewers on their own journey through exhilaration, trepidation, wonderment and ultimately, faith.

Key to that arc is the triumvirate of Hunnam (exuding decency and charisma from every pore), Pattinson (bringing wry comedic timing and the voice of sanity to proceedings) and Miller, once again giving great wife (see *American Sniper*, *Foxcatcher*). The fact she's a fully developed character, that family sacrifice and the resentment fostered by absentee fathers is given as much credence as the derdoing, provides refreshing modernism. The result is an emotionally satisfying experience – and one that'll have you googling Fawcett as soon as the lights are up.

THE VERDICT With lush visuals, intelligent performances and a lingering lyricism, this is an instant classic that cements Hunnam's star power.

It's those nuances of script and performance that also ensure the devastating impact of the ambiguous, beautiful finale, a sequence with Hunnam as rhapsodical as any Malick movie and a final shot with Miller that's both haunting and strangely uplifting.

JANE CROWTHER



Fawcett finally understands that eternal truism: the jungle is massive.



LIFE OF PI PG DIRECTOR Ang Lee YEAR 2012

Adaptations of supposedly unfilmable novels are currently arriving at a rate of knots from smart, audacious directors: *Cosmopolis*, *On The Road*, *Midnight's Children*, *Cloud Atlas*... But leading the pack is Ang Lee's thrillingly conceived and executed take on Yann Martel's Booker Prize winner.

Cracking the most daunting literary codes has felled many an accomplished filmmaker, from Mike Nichols (*Catch-22*) to David Lynch (*Dune*). The omens weren't looking good for *Life Of Pi*, with one auteur after another in the frame then out of it (M. Night Shyamalan, Alfonso Cuarón, Jean-Pierre Jeunet). But then Lee arrived as a shining knight, wielding superior pixel power and warm-blooded empathy.

The Taiwanese director – who's always had a knack for an adap (*Sense And Sensibility*, *The Ice Storm*, *Brokeback Mountain*) – has done handsome justice to Martel's spellbinding 2001 fable about one boy's supreme efforts to survive a tragic shipwreck. *Pi*-hards will delight at Lee's strict devotion to Martel's prose, with only minor deviations to enrich the brew.

What he's engineered is a lush, liquid 3D masterwork that delivers one breath-snatching image after another, kicking off with French India's faded colonial grandeur and segueing into a tidal wave of marine magnificence: spectacular typhoons followed by turquoise serenity; the prodigiously staged sinking of an animal-crammed freighter; a nighttime ocean aglow with luminescent sea life... *Life Of Pi* is a marvel of cinematic artistry; it's also a riveting tale of adventure and endurance, Lee deftly integrating sombre themes into his ocean vistas.

Pi is portrayed by three actors. Newcomer Ayush Tandon is the Indian boy growing up in family-owned Pondicherry Zoo, who reveals how he acquired his bizarre name and arrived at his all-encompassing embrace of three religions: Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. *Slumdog Millionaire*'s Irrfan Khan is award-worthy as the Toronto-dwelling adult Pi, recounting his story in flashback to Martel (Rafe Spall) in Lee's most significant deviation from the source.

Last not least, bearing the brunt of the narrative, is Suraj Sharma as the teenage Pi, who leaves India for Canada with family and menagerie aboard the Japanese cargo ship *Tsimtsum*, only to watch it sink in a savage storm. He's left to fight for survival aboard a lifeboat, his fellow castaways an injured zebra, an orang-utan, a hyena and a ferocious tiger whimsically named Richard Parker.

In his first acting role, Sharma proves to be both awesome discovery and mild disappointment. The former as he rises valiantly to the challenge of bringing the resourceful Pi to life; the latter as Pi's emotive musings on subsistence and enlightenment, expressed so movingly on the page, aren't conveyed as potently through his performance. It's a game, auspicious effort, though.

Pi's feline tormentor, on the other hand, is a monumental creation, vividly brought to life

THE VERDICT A riot of saturated colour and delirious imagination, Ang Lee's adap radiates spirituality. But it's also a simple, thrilling and gently uplifting tale of a boy, a boat and a tiger. Take the plunge.

with a mix of animatronics, CGI and reality. Like Caesar in *Rise Of The Planet Of The Apes*, Richard Parker is another bold leap forward for emotionally resonant digital characters: magnificent, frightening, heartbreaking, and an unceasingly compelling manifestation of wonder within the narrative tapestry. Martel's spiritually minded prose, which comes steeped in meditation and metaphor, tips its hat to God-belief while also striking a humanistic chord, maintaining an edge of ambiguity that allows both believer and atheist room for manoeuvre.

There's a glut of big ideas to wade through in *Life Of Pi*. As Spall says at one point, "It's a lot to take in, to figure out what it all means." But metaphysical musings are more the icing on the cake, as the film also satisfies as an adrenalinised, death-defying high-seas adventure.

Where Lee has tinkered, he's done so with care and an eye to audience sensibilities: gone are the novel's most horrific animal suffering, the obsessive minutiae of oceanic survival and a hallucinatory episode where Pi dreams up a conversation with Richard Parker. It's a shrewd move leaving it out: there's enough magic realism here to satiate the greediest appetite. And besides, it probably wouldn't have sat well with the film's triumph-of-the-spirit dramatic arc. As for the novel's grimly repellent but resonant coda, it remains intact.

Ultimately, it's a tale that revels in unfettered imagination and the possibilities of storytelling, as well as the fierce avoidance of "dry, yeastless factuality" in life. Viewers will embrace Lee's vision with the same fervour as Martel's readers. **MATT MUELLER**

Even out here, Winslow couldn't escape Wake's pungent vapours.



THE LIGHTHOUSE 15 **DIRECTOR** Robert Eggers **YEAR** 2019

Back in 2015, Robert Eggers made a blistering first impression with New England horror *The Witch*. He makes an even stronger second one with his follow-up, an oppressively nightmarish two-hander starring Robert Pattinson and Willem Dafoe as lighthouse keepers who go mad after a devastating storm strands them on their temporary island home.

The Lighthouse is shot in exquisite, full-frame monochrome – an aspect ratio that adds to both the squirming claustrophobia and period aesthetics – with a custom orthochromatic filter that brings every pore, blemish and twitch of insanity on the stars' faces to the fore.

On *The Witch*, Eggers immersed himself in contemporary scribbles and dialect tapes to pen the film's period-authentic dialogue. The same is true of *The Lighthouse*, co-written by Eggers and his brother Max, who initially came up with the premise. The pair have given Pattinson's Ephraim Winslow the period-perfect verbiage of a Down East Maine farmer, and Dafoe's Tom Wake a maritime poetry delivered in a voice that Winslow, at one point, describes as sounding like "a goddam parody" of a Captain Ahab voice. Only Dafoe could play a pirate in a film this serious and get away with it.

The research has paid off; the dialogue is nothing short of magnificent. It's a bit like hearing Shakespeare for the first time – half the

dialogue simply washes over you as you pick up fragments of meaning from context. But Eggers, Pattinson and Dafoe emphatically make their point where it matters, including two breath-snatchingly brilliant monologues featuring some of the most creative cursing in years.

The wordplay needs to be on point, as a great deal of *The Lighthouse* is simply verbal spats and drunken revelries between Winslow and Wake, their relationship blowing hot and cold depending almost exclusively on how sober they are. And it goes without saying that Dafoe and Pattinson are superb, running the gamut over the film's two hours. Anyone still perplexed by the idea of *Twilight*'s Edward Cullen playing Batman need look no further for confirmation that he'll pull it off with ease.

Dafoe's Wake is the grizzled veteran of the lighthouse business, Pattinson's Ephraim his latest in what may be a long line of assistants. Wake refuses to treat Winslow as his by-the-book equal, however, forbidding him from going anywhere near the light at the pinnacle of the island's looming tower. We see glimpses of Wake illicitly basking in the heavenly glow, as though he's absorbing some celestial energy from it. The draw of the forbidden fruit gnaws at Winslow each day as he's forced to do menial

tasks – polishing the brass, shovelling coal into the furnace and attending to the sulphurous cistern – day in, day out. Wake's last partner, we're told, went mad raving about "sirens and merfolk". It isn't long before Winslow starts having his own mystical visions of screeching mermaids and slithering kraken tentacles.

Eggers' gliding camerawork is full of portent in the first half, but as the storm intensifies, he ratchets up the ferocity. It's hard to imagine a more potent portrait of isolation in the harshest of environments. Eggers hasn't lost his knack for an artfully composed tableau that burns into your brain with nightmarish iconography, either. Mark Korven's score is remarkable, while the sound design includes a relentless foghorn that threatens to send viewers mad, let alone the characters.

Good job, then, that *The Lighthouse*, for all its serious-minded menace, is also surprisingly funny. A running gag about Wake constantly passing wind never fails to raise a smile despite being a literal fart joke, and many of the more dramatically heightened scenes are punctuated by humorous ripostes. Another comic highlight is the full-on staring contest Winslow has with an anthropomorphised seagull.

Narratively, there are few surprising deviations, but still, this is peerless filmmaking from a director who's emerging as one of contemporary horror's true greats. **JORDAN FARLEY**

THE VERDICT Proves *The Witch* was no fluke. Dafoe and Pattinson dazzle in a luminous exercise in maritime madness.

LOOPER 15

DIRECTOR Rian Johnson **YEAR** 2012

Miller's Crossing. The Royal Tenenbaums. Magnolia. Three Kings. All films by modern American directors who already showed considerable early promise with their first two movies, only to hit the ball right out the park with number three. Rian Johnson does just that with *Looper*, an extraordinary time-travel tale that's as intricately and elegantly constructed as the pocket watch Joseph Gordon-Levitt's hitman Joe keeps close by.

Much like Johnson's 2005 debut, the Gordon-Levitt-starring high-school noir *Brick*, *Looper* comes complete with its own lexicon, starting with the title. A 'looper' is a specialised assassin. His job – not a particularly complex one, it must be said – is to bump off mob targets that arrive hogtied, hooded and helpless, then dispose of their corpses. The twist is that those marked for death are being sent back from 30 years in the future – 2074 to be precise – when time travel has finally been invented.

Practised so the Mafia can hide their dirty laundry in the past, the only rule is "never let your target escape" – even if that target happens to be your future self. This is called

"closing the loop". When the Mafia think it's time to retire their assassin, they send his future self back to be shot by his 2044 self.

With us so far? The job comes with a stash of gold bullion, strapped to Gordon-Levitt's future self, as a 'retirement' pay-off. In other words, go enjoy your next 30 years before the loop – and your life – is closed.

The situation only gets stickier when future Joe (Bruce Willis) arrives in the past with his own agenda – a Shanghai surprise that will throw everyone for a loop. We could tell you more, but then we'd have to kill you. It has something to do with The Rainmaker, a mysterious Keyser Söze-like figure who has been closing all the loops in 2074, but we've already said too much...

Undeniably, *Looper* is conceptually big, bold and brave enough to stand alongside *The Terminator*, *Back To The Future* and Willis' own *12 Monkeys*. "This time-travel crap fries your brain like an egg," says Jeff Daniels' Mafia mentor Abe. Yet Johnson pulls together a plot that plays fair with the genre's internal logic. It's a world where carving a message in your arm will leave a scar for your future self to read

or where further physical trauma can literally leave you cracking up.

Crucially, for all its tick-tock plotting, there's an emotional core to *Looper*, bringing gravitas to its grand design. Themes of nature vs. nurture, family, redemption and undying love circle around these morally ambiguous characters – issues that come sharply into focus with the arrival of Sara (Emily Blunt), a shotgun-wielding single mother who allows Joe to take refuge on her farm.

Leaving behind the self-conscious rapid-fire dialogue of 2005's *Brick* and the overcooked quirk of his 2008 follow-up *The Brothers Bloom*, Johnson beautifully constructs a world in which hope and possibility are on offer (even if it's in the past).

One of the movie's real high points is its vision of tomorrow's world. *Looper*'s future is not so different that it seems alien to us; its rendering is as subtle as the prosthetics that pad out Levitt's face: far-away backdrops, skyline shots, a floating vehicle here and there... Yes, you can see the *Blade Runner* influence in Ed Verreaux's production design, but never to the point of slavish homage. Just the occasional jarring oddity – some characters can float coins with a mysterious telekinetic power – puts Johnson's universe askew from ours.

It doesn't want for action, either. Never mind the heavy artillery Willis flaunts in *The Expendables 2*; when he finally picks up some hardware in *Looper*, it's one of the most thrilling face-offs since he tore up the Nakatomi Plaza. If there's a flaw, aside from certain plot-points that defy Johnson's own logic, it's that the director lets the pace dip a little too much prior to this, in the farmhouse scenes. Although the latter interlude does allow Blunt to flourish in one of her best dramatic roles since *My Summer Of Love*.

Gordon-Levitt, coming off the back of *The Dark Knight Rises* and *50/50*, caps a terrific 12 months with a performance brimful of maturity. Likewise, Willis gives us Bruce without the smirk, showing the same wistful sadness he deployed in the obviously influential *12 Monkeys*. As for the bravura flash-forward, in which we see the transition from Gordon-Levitt to Willis, it's the moment you realise Johnson's hit a home run.

JAMES MOTTRAM

THE VERDICT The best sci-fi movie since *Moon*. The best time-travel yarn since *12 Monkeys*. And one of the best films of 2012. You'll immediately want to see it again.





THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING 12A

DIRECTOR Peter Jackson **YEAR** 2001

Banish those Harry Potter comparisons from your brain. Peter Jackson's long-awaited movie adaptation of *The Fellowship Of The Ring* may be based on a hugely popular book and involve wizards, magic, monsters and special effects galore, but it has as much to do with Potter as *Saving Private Ryan* has to do with *The Famous Five*.

This isn't some happy, kid-friendly adventure – it's the story of how an entire world is plunged into war. Well, to be precise, it's the story of how that war starts, focusing on the first stage of unassuming hobbit Frodo's (Elijah Wood) quest to take down the dark lord Sauron by lobbing his evil magic ring into the fires of bad-guy-stronghold Mount Doom.

On the way we meet a wide array of supporting characters, including fiery-tempered dwarf Gimli (John Rhys-Davies), feisty she-elf Arwen (Liv Tyler), rugged, heroic ranger Aragorn (Viggo Mortensen) and powerful wizard Gandalf (Ian McKellen).

Sadly, though, we don't really have time to get to know many of them properly, despite the hefty three-hour running time. This is *The Fellowship Of The Ring*'s only weakness; if you haven't already read the book, then the whirl of fantastic names, references and brief introductions will leave you a little confused.

However, this isn't to say Jackson and co-writers Fran Walsh and Philippa Boyens have botched the adaptation. Far from it – it's hard to see how anyone could have better condensed JRR Tolkien's text, with Jackson and the others keeping the dialogue true to the book without it sounding overly theatrical or campy. It's just that there's so much to take in, those who aren't Tolkien-savvy won't catch all of it on the first bounce. You'll be so swept away by Jackson's ambitious realisation of Tolkien's world, you won't be bothered too much by missing the odd plot detail.

THE VERDICT Breath-snatching beauty, blood-chilling terror, orc-slicing action... in bucketloads.

This isn't the pristine, digitised universe of *The Phantom Menace*, but something grittier, darker and more immersive. Effects house Weta seamlessly blends the beautiful New Zealand landscapes with some Oscar-beckoning virtual creations, and shows admirable restraint with CGI, relying on more traditional make-up effects when pixels aren't really needed. Then there's Jackson's deft handling of the action, keeping things pacy despite several rest-stops, and delivering some feverish, frenetic swordplaying set-pieces.

Most notable is the Mines Of Moria sequence, which is surely up there with *Gladiator*'s chariot battle and *The Matrix*'s lobby shoot-out in terms of action-movie high points. With its scurrying goblin army, roaring cave troll and the towering, flame-whipping Balrog, it'll jam your heart in your gob and hold it there, beating wildly, for a good half-hour.

But as too many plopbusters have reminded us, great effects simply aren't enough. So you can thank the gods that Jackson has assembled a strong, spark-striking cast. Wood, in particular, handles Frodo's descent from happy-go-lucky adventurer to tragedy-courting hero with subtlety and sensitivity, while the relatively unknown Mortensen perfectly captures Aragorn's rugged charisma and mystique.

But it's McKellen's Gandalf who stands tallest. It must be hard to play someone who you're told brims with power without making it too hammy, but McKellen manages it effortlessly. Gandalf may be a fearsome, spell-slinging wizard, but, thanks to McKellen, he's easily the most accessible and 'human' character portrayed.

Pointed hats off to Jackson, then, for delivering on his promise to stay faithful to the book and produce a movie that'll make the hairs on your feet tingle, rather than unleashing another horrendous sword-and-sorcery clag-beast. George Lucas and Chris Columbus take note, because this is fantasy film-making at its spine-shivering best. Roll on *The Two Towers*... **TF**





The last thing you want to see when you open the bathroom in the morning.

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE TWO TOWERS ^{12A}

DIRECTOR Peter Jackson **YEAR** 2002

Anticipation can be a dangerous thing. It can play tricks with your mind, turning a few trailer-bled images and enthusiastic cast and crew quotes into an “unmissable epic masterpiece of epic proportions”. Or whatever. For *The Two Towers* there’s been 12 long months of such expectation, after we’d been blown away by the first part of Peter Jackson’s Tolkien adap, *The Fellowship Of The Ring*.

So it was with great caution that *Total Film* approached Part Two. We identified the niggles (a few unnecessary elf episodes, some too-gently-inclined character arcs) and viewed the CG developments in the harshest light possible. But did that stop us from getting swept up in the grandeur of Jackson’s vision and the high drama of Tolkien’s tale? The answer is a resounding, joyous NO.

The Two Towers pitches Middle-earth into all-out war as Aragorn and the reborn Gandalf The White help defend the kingdom of Rohan against Saruman’s orc army. Frodo and Sam continue towards Mordor to destroy the One Ring, joined by creepy former Ringbearer Gollum, while Merry and Pippin flee their Uruk-hai captors to encounter the arboreal Treebeard.

THE VERDICT *The Two Towers* was always going to be the toughest book to adapt, yet Peter Jackson pulls it off. Part Two is easily as exciting, involving and visually inventive as Part One.

With the Fellowship split and the quest narrative of the first movie largely abandoned, *Towers* is a far more adult affair than its predecessor. And the cast more than meet the challenge. Viggo Mortensen deftly handles Aragorn’s transition to central hero, exuding all the charisma you’d expect of a Leader Of Men. Elijah Wood, meanwhile, has a tougher job because Frodo’s struggle is internal. He succeeds, effectively portraying someone whose sanity is being whittled away.

But the most impressive performance has to be from Gollum – and we’re not just talking Andy Serkis’ superbly strangled vocalisation. The character design and motion-capture animation are groundbreaking, with every tic and facial expression never less than disbelief-suspendingly perfect. The scene in which the wretch’s venomous Gollum and pitiful Sméagol personalities wrestle for supremacy stands out as the film’s finest.

Then there’s the much-vaunted Helm’s Deep episode, the climactic battle scene in which a few hundred men make their last stand against 10,000 Uruk-hai. Taking his lead from the likes of *Zulu*, *Braveheart* and *Henry V*, Jackson delivers one of cinema’s most thrilling war sequences, keeping the audience on a sword’s edge throughout, while making well-judged cutaways to the other storylines. It may take a while to get to this immense clash but, boy, is it worth the wait. Much like the movie itself, really. **TF**



THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE RETURN OF THE KING ^{12A}

DIRECTOR Peter Jackson **YEAR** 2003

The End. What else could you have done in the time it took from *The Fellowship Of The Ring*’s curtain-up to seeing those two words appear at the close of *The Lord Of The Rings*’ climactic chapter? Whatever it could have been, it’s highly unlikely it would have left you feeling as emotionally sated, with such a rich, bittersweet sensation ebbing slowly from your consciousness as Peter Jackson makes sure *The Return Of The King* does.

Cine-history logic dictates it really shouldn’t be this way. From *The Return Of The Jedi* to *The Matrix Revolutions*, Part Threes are often the weakest. Well, since he embarked on his ambitious quest to turn Tolkien into blockbuster seven years ago, Peter Jackson’s broken enough rules not to leave this one unsnapped too.

But then, this isn’t just another franchise instalment. Rather it’s the final, glorious act of a nine-and-a-bit hour movie. We’ve had so much time to invest our attention and sensation in this story; more than six hours already to be drawn in and made to understand precisely what is at stake for Frodo, Aragorn, Gandalf and Middle-earth. We’ve been pulled

carefully – sometimes gently, sometimes violently – but always with the utmost care toward this. And virtually every moment of *The Return Of The King* pounds the message home: This. Is. It.

For the first hour and a half, the tension is nearly unbearable. In fact, for the characters, it is unbearable, leading to a series of painful fractures: Pippin and Merry are pulled apart; Aragorn finally gives Eowyn the brush-off; shattered Gondorian steward Denethor sends his loyal son Faramir to certain death; and Gollum drives a splinter into Frodo and Sam’s bond.

Then everything explodes, with the trilogy’s brightest, most vertiginous highlight: the Battle of Pelennor Fields. As the combined forces of Rohan, Gondor and Aragorn’s undead legions meet the orc hordes face on, your endorphins will flood your brain, leaving you blubbering like an overwhelmed child. The towering mumakil crush horses and riders underfoot. The screeching fellbeasts bring talon-shaped death from the skies. Fully armoured battle-trolls rampage through streets of the white city. And two armies swarm together, filling the multiplex screen with a clash of such power, you almost expect the canvas to rip.

This movie will be rewatched, re-enjoyed and rightly revered for decades to come. All nine-and-a-bit hours of it. **TF**

THE VERDICT A worthy conclusion to a modern epic. Don’t worry that your expectations will be too high. *The Return Of The King* will exceed them all.

M

MAD MAX: FURY ROAD 15

DIRECTOR George Miller **YEAR** 2015

My name is Max, my world is fire and blood,” rumbles Tom Hardy’s voiceover (think Bane attempting Received Pronunciation) across a fearsome desert landscape of blinding yellows and combustible oranges. A lizard scuttles over a boulder, the tippy-tap-tap of its talons amplified to a death-metal snare-solo that forewarns of the cacophonous percussive score to come. “It was hard to know who was more crazy,” rolls the vocal thunder. “Me, or everyone else.” In this thermonuclear world where water, oil and dialogue are at a premium, it’s like choosing between a shower with Norman Bates and supper with a tribe of Leatherfaces.

Decades in the making, *Mad Max: Fury Road* (or *Mad Max 4* as it was titled before 9/11, Mel Gibson’s meltdown and freak weather clamped its progress) finally emerges as a plot-light, action-heavy chase movie bulging with mad-as-a-frog-in-a-sock stunt work. Which is to say, exactly how you want it. OK, so the hi-def, Instagram-filtered lensing, Hollywood names and CG enhancements to blockbuster-budgeted in-camera pile-ups are far removed from the 1979 guerrilla revenge movie that introduced Max Rockatansky to the world. But then George

Miller always wanted his carmageddon movies to bust out of the Ozploitation ghetto and get right up in Hollywood’s grille: both sequels were distributed by Warner Bros, with *The Road Warrior* (1981) a landmark action movie, and *Beyond Thunderdome* (1985) watered down and camped up for mainstream consumption. Besides, this reboot retains all the brutality, antipodean humour and fertile imagination played out on arid vistas you could hope for. It is, in a word, crazy. In two, it’s fucking crazy.

Captured by scavengers, Max (Tom Hardy, stepping into Gibbo’s S&M boots) is taken to the mountain lair of Immortan Joe (Hugh Keays-Byrne, who played Toecutter in the original), a gloriously nutzoid warlord with a white fright wig and horse-toothed muzzle. Soon after Max’s arrival, Imperator Furiosa (a bulked-up Charlize Theron with a buzz cut and bionic arm) sets out in nitro-fuelled tanker the War Rig to fetch supplies from Gas Town. Only she’s really making a break east to the Green Place with five of Immortan Joe’s best ‘breeders’ (among them Rosie Huntington-Whitely, Riley Keough and Zoe Kravitz). Apoplectic, Immortan Joe sends his War Boys to hunt her down, these pallid, bald-headed crazies looking like an army of

Nosferatu as they roar into the blistering desert in outlandish hot rods, all pipes and spikes. Among them is Nux (Nicholas Hoult), lips and sanity cracked, who screeches his desire to “die historic, on the Fury Road” as he straps Max to his grille like an oversized hood ornament.

Such is the extent of returning director George Miller’s finely tuned carnage, the few pockets of silence are most deafening of all. Sometimes it’s a God’s-eye view (or would be, if God existed in this blasted world) of moving dots trailing spumes of smoke, sometimes it’s the escaped Max and Furiosa learning to trust one another between battles: shreds of hope and redemption swirl in the dust. Even then, dialogue is sparse, sentiment sparser still. Hardy’s Max feels less iconic than Gibson’s but fascinates as a wounded, feral animal; he has 20 lines throughout, and doesn’t need 18 of them. Theron is his match and more. The movie might have been called *Mad Maxine* and, in these days of prequels, sequels and spinoffs, *Furiosa* is primed for action.

Action is, naturally, the operative word. Here it speaks louder than words, with character established through deeds – said deeds conducted while hanging off the sides of barrelling vehicles amid a tornado of guns, arrows, harpoons, buzzsaws, chainsaws and exploding spears.

At one point the tornado is literal, a sandstorm soaring into the sky like a Lovecraftian beast. Inside its belly, automobiles spiral into the air as lightning pulses and bodies spin. It’s a remarkable set-piece but threatens to be topped later, in the mountains, as motorbikes hurdle the War Rig every which way, and later still, when another crazed collision of metal and flesh is made all the more demented by warriors pole-vaulting between vehicles.

Miller, who storyboarded 3,000 images and hewed his movie from 480 hours of footage, captures it all in a ballistic ballet of tracks, dollies and zooms. There’s beauty to the violence (which is oddly bloodless, hence that 15 certificate), just as there’s beauty to the desert plains and undulating dunes, the quagmires and salt lakes.

In the battle of the 2015 behemoths, the maxed-out madness of *Mad Max: Fury Road* sets an extraordinarily high bar – then pole-vaults clean over it and smashes the entire rig to smithereens. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

THE VERDICT Ozploitation on a studio budget? Oh what a day! A lunatic vision, as hilarious as it is hellish. And some of the greatest action ever put on screen.



After the apocalypse, hairy steering wheels are the big thing.



Casey Affleck and Michelle Williams deliver awards-worthy performances.

MANCHESTER BY THE SEA ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Kenneth Lonergan **YEAR** 2016

Kenneth Lonergan's third film in a 16-year career offers further proof of his ear for dialogue and eye for the messiness of life. Like 2000's *You Can Count On Me* and especially 2011's *Margaret*, *Manchester By The Sea* refuses to sugarcoat or simplify, instead letting the drama sprawl and overspill until a 360-degree portrait of a man, a family and a community drifts into focus.

Boston janitor Lee (Casey Affleck) returns to the titular town in Massachusetts when his older brother Joe (Kyle Chandler) dies of a heart attack. A morose, taciturn loner given to communicating with his fists after too many beers, Lee is horrified to find that he has been named legal guardian of his teenage nephew Patrick (Lucas Hedges), whose ties to Manchester-by-the-Sea – hockey team, rock band, two girlfriends – mean Lee will need to stick around his hometown.

Under grey, snowy skies, the drama inches along, with flashbacks revealing Lee was once married to Randi (Michelle Williams), who still lives in the area. True, withholding the source of Lee's emotional shutdown for a late reveal is something you expect from a thriller rather than a sombre character study. But such is the authenticity on display elsewhere, it doesn't feel schematic. Holding it back could even be seen as an act of courage on Lonergan's part, denying viewers an easy means to empathise with such a closed-mouthed, locked-up character. One thing's for sure though: the flashback hits you like a freight train when it finally arrives.

Manchester By The Sea is not an easy film to watch. Not everyone will get on with its loose (but controlled) storytelling, baggy conversations and non-events other movies would deem unnecessary. And its wintry setting is enough to make viewers' joints throb. Even sharper is the pain to the heart: Affleck's committed turn as a man calcified by grief is harrowing to watch. Williams, meanwhile, haunts the periphery of the picture before stepping front and centre to inhabit a scene so raw and uncompromising it stings like a slap to the face on an ice-cold day.

Lonergan doesn't do zip and zest, though he does still appreciate the importance of humour in the direst of circumstances. Yet *Manchester By The Sea* offers its own joys, going places few movies dare to consider. It's a triumph. And Lonergan is one of the most vital voices in US cinema. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

THE VERDICT If ever there was a film that epitomised the saying 'no pain, no gain', this is it. Packs a real wallop.



Hand-forged axes: great in the garden and for taking on demonic sects.

MANDY ¹⁸

DIRECTOR Panos Cosmatos **YEAR** 2018

Mid-way through *Mandy*, Nic Cage sits on a loo and unleashes a series of guttural howls that make Brando's cries of "Stella" seem like whispered sweet nothings. But Cage, cinema's bastion of batshit, is just preparing for the main event – a revenge spree in which he juggles a crossbow, a chainsaw and a hand-forged silver axe to mow down a religious sect and the demons they've summoned.

It's the most infernal performance yet from Old Nic, who chugs vodka, snorts coke and grins from a mask of gore. And yet it all starts off so gently, with Cage's hirsute lumberjack Red Miller snuggling in front of trashy sci-fi shows with his titular wife (Andrea Riseborough), whose job as a pulp-fiction illustrator lends the movie its crazed aesthetic. Then the religious nutjobs snatch Mandy for their Messianic leader Jeremiah (Linus Roache) and a psychedelic initiation ritual duly spins out of control. The outcome is Mandy dead and Red crouched on the aforementioned toilet, howling.

If you're one of the 10 people who saw Panos Cosmatos' trippy debut *Beyond The Black Rainbow* (2010), you'll have an idea what to expect, although *Mandy* is a good deal more propulsive and violent. Well, in its second half at least: the first hour is akin to crawling into an opium den to gaze into Satan's kaleidoscope, all swirling colours, twisted superimpositions and off-beam transitions. It consciously evokes Lynch's *Blue Velvet* in mood and dialogue as well as Ingmar Bergman; the *Persona*-esque moment when two actors' faces meld together is the freakiest thing you'll see all year.

The leather-clad demons, meanwhile, could be *Mad Max* extras, or Pinhead's posse. And if that's not nutty enough, the grainy 16mm close-ups of Riseborough's face make her look otherworldly – befitting the environments built by Cosmatos as he turns the Pacific Northwest of 1983 into an Iron Maiden album sleeve.

Add the kind of cosmic wonderment that so animated H.P. Lovecraft's prose, the late Jóhann Jóhannsson's haunting score and a main title card that appears an hour into the movie, and you have an expressionistic midnight movie that stirs its many influences into something startlingly unique. So fresh is this nightmare vision painted by DoP Benjamin Loeb's

THE VERDICT Cage loses it in a bloody, druggy, superbly crafted revenge thriller. Astonishing.

super-saturated colours, it's a miracle it coheres at all, threatening to run off the screen at any moment and puddle on the floor along with your melted brain. **JAMIE GRAHAM**



MAPS TO THE STARS ¹⁸

DIRECTOR David Cronenberg **YEAR** 2014

It seems strange that it's taken David Cronenberg this long to shoot a movie in Los Angeles. Still, better late than never. *Maps To The Stars* not only lands him in the heart of Hollywood, it sees him drive a great big stake through it. Arguably his best work since 2005's *A History Of Violence*, it's a scabrous, satirical chomp on the hand that feeds – and, boy, is he hungry.

Maps nestles among the best showbiz sideswipes – from Vincente Minnelli's *The Bad And The Beautiful* to Robert Altman's *The Player*. Here, Hollywood is the backdrop to a monstrous, multiple-character study.

Leading the charge is the Weiss family, a shockingly dysfunctional clan comprising John Cusack's life-guru Stafford, fragile wife Christina (Olivia Williams) and son Benjie (Evan Bird), a repugnant, rehab-occupying teen star who made his fortune in comedy series 'Bad Babysitter'. Bird, best known for his role in the US remake of *The Killing*, is quite superb, channelling everyone from Macaulay Culkin to Justin Bieber as he delivers his lines with a warped sense of entitlement.

Yet there are others in this pit of vipers: has-been actress Havana Segrand (Julianne Moore), vying for a role in a remake of a film her actress-mother starred in. There's Jerome (Robert Pattinson), a limo driver with film-fame aspirations. And finally Agatha, a timid out-of-towner, played by Mia Wasikowska.

Agatha arrives on a Greyhound bus, ostensibly to work for Carrie Fisher, having met on Twitter. Soon enough, she's Havana's PA, becoming our guide to this selfish, survive-at-all-costs town, as the aforementioned all criss-cross. Of all the performances, Moore is the standout. From an explicit threesome and a true moment of body horror to singing a Bananarama ditty when she finds out a rival actress has just suffered unbearable tragedy, Moore does nerveless, peerless work, eclipsing even some of the soul-baring she's done for P.T. Anderson.

Detractors may carp that Cronenberg is showing us nothing new, but *Maps* is so flawless in its execution, it vividly refreshes the subject matter. It's a story right in his wheelhouse; a human look at characters barely clinging to their humanity. It's horrific stuff, just as all the best Cronenberg movies are.

JAMES MOTTRAM

THE VERDICT A

script written in venom, Cronenberg on bullish form and a cast on full power; one of the best Hollywood take-downs ever mounted.

MARRIAGE STORY ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Noah Baumbach **YEAR** 2019

Love is a battlefield for the antagonists of Noah Baumbach's forensic dissection of a showbiz couple's acrimonious divorce – partly drawn from his own split from Jennifer Jason Leigh. Boasting career-best performances from Adam Driver and Scarlett Johansson and a literate script that fizzles with zingers and invective, it's the kind of adult drama we see all too seldom nowadays.

Charlie (Driver) is a New York director who has a child, and a theatre company, with actress wife Nicole (Johansson). Nicole was a big film star back in the day, but since meeting Charlie and becoming a mother to Henry (Azhy Robertson), now eight, she's been content to live in her husband's shadow.

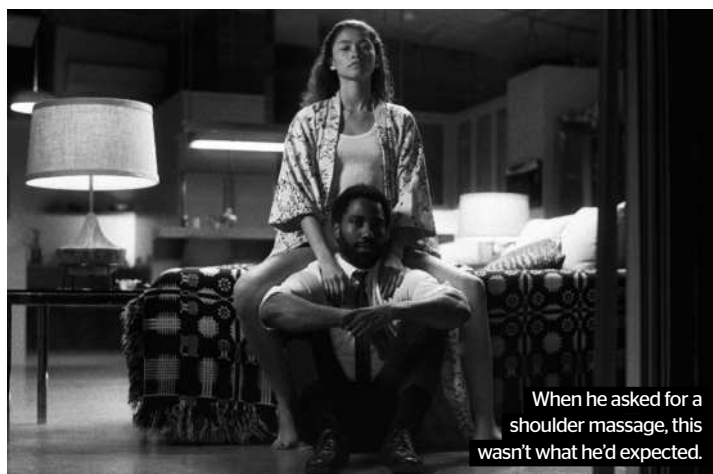
Yet Nicole wants more, and it comes in the form of a TV pilot shooting in LA. How about heading west for a bit and pursuing her dreams for a change? But Charlie says no, unwittingly condemning them to a collision course full of mediation meetings, custody hearings and courtroom confrontations. There are no winners in this war, just casualties – especially when sharks like Nora (Laura Dern) and Jay (Ray Liotta) are involved, cutthroat lawyers who have no compunction about ripping each other's clients to shreds provided they're paid \$750 an hour to do so.

There are moments in *Marriage Story* when the pain is excruciating – acutely so during the extended scene in which a clear-the-air confab descends into a no-holds-barred bout of bitter recriminations. ("You gaslighted me!" "I wish you were dead!") Yet Baumbach is too astute a writer not to mine humour from even the bleakest of scenarios. Witness the scene in which Nicole's mother (Julie Hagerty) and sibling (Merritt Weaver) are reluctantly dragooned into serving Charlie divorce papers, or a priceless set-piece involving a blank-faced family court evaluator (Martha Kelly) sent to observe how son and father interact.

Baumbach even makes room for a brace of numbers from Stephen Sondheim's *Company* in a film that finds exquisite depth and poignancy in the everyday minutiae of a drawn-out legal imbroglio. Throw in Randy Newman's rueful score and 35mm visuals from Robbie Ryan that savour every last close-up, and the result is a *Marriage* you won't want to end.

THE VERDICT Driver and Johansson face off to stunning effect in Baumbach's finest feature to date. So good it hurts.

NEIL SMITH



When he asked for a shoulder massage, this wasn't what he'd expected.

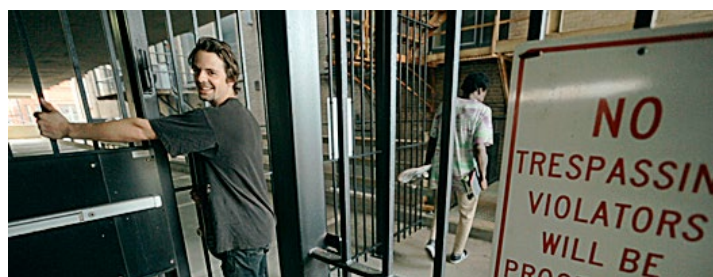
MALCOLM & MARIE ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Sam Levinson **YEAR** 2021

While most of us spent last year's lockdowns watching telly, raiding the fridge and doomscrolling, Sam Levinson teamed up with his lead from HBO drama *Euphoria*, Zendaya, and *Tenet*'s John David Washington to self-finance a black-and-white two-hander set in one house over a few hours.

Shot in gleaming 35mm, the film is, essentially, one big argument, as film director Malcolm (Washington) and his girlfriend Marie (Zendaya) return home from the premiere of his debut movie and get into one. It starts because he forgot to thank her in his speech; but then ebbs and flows and digresses and sharply refocuses and heats and cools and heats once more as their entire five-year relationship comes under scrutiny.

You'll need to take a deep breath before watching; this is a one-on-one so astute and scathing as to be comparable to the emotionally brutal domestic dramas of Cassavetes, Fassbinder and Bergman (or, to use a more recent example, Noah Baumbach's *Marriage Story*). *Malcolm & Marie* also makes meta with its observations on filmmaking and film criticism. That's a lot to argue about, but Levinson, who wrote the script in six days, has still more to say, giving his terrific actors some fearless musings on race, gender and class. There are also a few glimmers of tenderness along the way. *M&M* is a film of the moment, powered by Covid, BLM and #MeToo – but good enough to stand the test of time. **JAMIE GRAHAM**



MINDING THE GAP ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Bing Liu **YEAR** 2018

A remarkable debut from Bing Liu, this intimate documentary tracks the experiences of three young skateboarders growing up in a Rust Belt town. There's Zack, enduring a volatile relationship with his partner Nina. There's Keire, dealing with the death of his disciplinarian father. And there's Liu himself, returning home to ask his mother why she allowed him to be abused by his stepfather. The skating sequences have an exhilarating charge, yet it's the sensitivity with which this film explores how its subjects seek to break free from cycles of abusive behaviour that proves so compelling. **TOM DAWSON**

MARTHA MARCY MAY MARLENE ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Sean Durkin **YEAR** 2011

There are few things more unsettling than a chase scene in which you sense it doesn't matter if the quarry gets away. In the opening moments of writer/director Sean Durkin's mesmerising feature debut, Martha (Elizabeth Olsen) makes her escape from a commune, pursued through the woods by anonymous figures, but there's no sense of triumph in her success. However physically far away she gets it becomes clear, through Durkin's slippery camera and Olsen's glazed, darting eyes, that this is not a girl who has broken free.

Taken in by her affluent, married older sister Lucy (Sarah Paulson), there's a telling early exchange in which Martha asks, "How far are we?" "From what?" comes the response. "Yesterday." It's a disjointed question that suggests something is off in her view of the world, but the answer in narrative terms is that we're never very far from yesterday. Durkin slips seamlessly between time frames – in a single cut we move from present to past, from reality to memory, from Martha to Marcy May (the commune's name for her).

These narrative tricks used to illustrate our heroine's increasingly fragmented mind. As past and present become more blurred, she slips further into her memories of what we swiftly realise wasn't a harmless hippie commune, but a physically and psychologically abusive cult.

Playing the de facto face of the commune's evils, John Hawkes' Patrick expands on the menace that netted him an Oscar nod in *Winter's Bone*. "I know people have abandoned you your whole life," he tells Martha calmly, and though we learn little about her origins it's clear he's playing on just the right vulnerabilities. And Olsen is a wonder, playing someone who's numbed without ever lacking emotion. She deftly conveys the warring impulses at work behind Martha's placid

THE VERDICT A stunningly assured, elegantly crafted and profoundly disturbing portrait of a traumatised mind, *MMMM* rockets Durkin and Olsen to the top of the 'ones to watch' pile.

surface – for all she's suffered, there's a part of her that's drawn back to the place where she felt part of something. Her inability to let go, coupled with her mounting paranoia creates a lingering dread that carries us right up to the ambiguous final shot. For all that this is an "escape from a cult" movie, there's really been no escape at all. **EMMA DIBDIN**



"Have you got a splinter in your ass too?"



Finally, she'd get the chance to dunk a basketball.

MARY POPPINS RETURNS U

DIRECTOR Rob Marshall **YEAR** 2018

Before it gets to Mary Poppins returning, Rob Marshall's (*Chicago*) jaunty film offers a palate tester. It opens with Lin-Manuel Miranda vibrato-trilling in a just-passable Cockney accent about the "laverly Landan sky" while wheeling about theatrically on a bike amid a picture-book-perfect evocation of the '30s-era capital. God, it's perky. It's uncynical. It's old-fashioned. And if that's not your thing, *MPR* isn't going to be either.

But if you're cool with jazz hands, or craving a tonic for the drudgery of real life, or looking for a chance to recapture a youth spent watching Julie Andrews' original take, then this effervescent, smart slice of escapism is indubitably supercalifragilisticexpialidocious.

David Magee's reverential screenplay flaunts the same alchemy he displayed with *Finding Neverland*. Infusing *Poppins* touchstones with new narrative drive, it takes in joyous interludes, blub-inducing moments and knowing nods to the world on the other side of the screen. Moving the action forward to the decade covered in P.L. Travers' books, Magee reintroduces original kids Peter and Jane Banks as adults (Ben Whishaw and Emily Mortimer, respectively), now struggling with bereavement, parenthood and the imminent repossession of the house on Cherry Tree Lane.

Compensating for their dad's distractedness following the death of his wife, Peter's three nippers are preternaturally mature and clearly in

need of a reminder of the value of play. So when that kite is found and flown on, who should glide in from the heavens ready to take the children on an adventure, a London skyline dance, a visit to an upside-down relative, a drop-in at the bank and a last-minute dash to save the day? And of course, there's the talking umbrella, the bonkers admiral, the cartoon penguins, a painted title sequence, and a bit where characters are told to stop staring like "codfish".

But it's not all legacy hat-tipping. While it apes the 1964 original's structure and emotional beats – and Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman's tunes are big, infectious earworms – this *Poppins* delivers plenty of modern verve by way of execution and it ignores Dame Julie's sunny essaying of the nanny who never explains.

Emily Blunt's Mary may be pristine and no-nonsense, but she's also vain, disciplinarian, playful and clearly packing darker depths. Blunt offsets her brusque kindness with mysteries. Where did she learn to sing and dance with such sauce? Why is her Cockney accent so good? Why does her umbrella think she's such a pain? Where does she go when not with us?

That opaqueness makes her more engaging, as does her relationship with Dick Van Dyke surrogate Miranda, who brings warmth and wonder to their delightful partnership, as well

THE VERDICT A sweet, evocative throwback that delivers all the feels – in the most delightful way.

as his considerable Broadway showmanship. When he busts a move in Technicolour tails during the animated segment and swivels round a lamppost with a physicality reminiscent of Van Dyke's 'Big Bamboo' hoofing from *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, it's hard not to break into applause.

Likewise, as Cousin Topsy, Meryl Streep understands expectations of her character and her own persona, chewing the upside-down scenery with ludicrous elocution. Meanwhile, Angela Lansbury and Van Dyke have twinkles in their eyes as Disney-heritage cameos, and Colin Firth gives good perniciousness as bank manager William Weatherall Wilkins.

Execution is faultless, too, in two key fantasy sequences, in which Marshall walks a fine line between whimsical and twee, comedic and cute, all the while acknowledging viewer sophistication. Yes, the characters are in an animated world, but the Sandy Powell-designed costumes are physically painted confections and the swimming FX recall old-school favourite *Bedknobs And Broomsticks* (1971).

As we know, "in every job that must be done there is an element of fun," and while *Poppins* is slickly formulated with an eye firmly on the box office, it's also sheer, unabashed family fun. Only a Scrooge could fail to feel the joy in floating over London holding a pink balloon, twirling in an undersea grotto with dolphins or chatting to the horse pulling a carriage. As Michael marvels, "I never thought I'd feel that wonder again." Quite so. **JANE CROWTHER**

He resisted the urge to flick the cigarette behind him.



MANK ^{12A}

DIRECTOR David Fincher **YEAR** 2020

You cannot capture a man's entire life in two hours. All you can hope for is to leave an impression of one." So says *New Yorker* critic turned playwright turned script doctor Herman J. Mankiewicz (Gary Oldman) – or Mank, as he's known to friends, colleagues and venomous rivals – of his screenplay *American*, later to be retitled *Citizen Kane*. And just as Mankiewicz and Orson Welles most certainly achieved this objective with their rise-and-fall-and-so-much-more story of Charles Foster Kane, so too does this telling of how Mank co-wrote *The Greatest Film Ever Made*.

Directed by David Fincher from a script by his journalist father Jack, *Mank*, like *Kane*, utilises multiple flashbacks to piece together a life. The here-and-now is 1940 in a ranch in Victorville, California, as Mank holes up for 60 days to break the back of the script. But we're soon hopping back to Paramount and MGM backlots in the 1930s, hobnobbing with such titans as executive Irving Thalberg (Ferdinand Kingsley) and studio head Louis B. Mayer (Arlliss Howard). Also present, naturally, are media tycoon William Randolph Hearst (Charles Dance) and his actor lover Marion Davies (Amanda Seyfried), with the former serving as the de facto subject of *Kane*, and the latter inspiring the godawful opera singer Susan Alexander Kane.

With Jack Fincher's script lent an insider's knowledge by both his son and veteran screenwriter Eric Roth, *Mank* emerges as one of the great films on the machinations of Hollywood. It deals with themes of authorship, self-loathing, alcoholism, fear of failure and the value of the word. It is sometimes savage, sometimes amusing, often both at once. Meanwhile, any fears that the black-and-white lensing, mono soundtrack and period camera movements might prove gimmicky rather than authentic to the films of the time are dispelled by the vitality of the content – as well as widescreen framing that affords lungfuls of air.

Knowledge of *Citizen Kane* certainly helps but is not essential: the complicated character dynamics fascinate; the ogle behind the curtain will enrapture anyone interested in movies and their making; and the politics engross, with Hearst's pioneering of fake news to help swing the

THE VERDICT An incisive, stylistically assured deep dive into the life of a Hollywood great.

1934 California gubernatorial election lending a relevance that Jack Fincher, who died in 2003, could not have dreamed of. Make no mistake: *Mank* is an all-timer. **JAMIE GRAHAM**



Neither Eastwood nor Swank pull their punches in this gripping drama.

MILLION DOLLAR BABY ¹²

DIRECTOR Clint Eastwood **YEAR** 2004

Just go. Don't watch the trailer. Don't read about it, hear about it or listen to anyone who wants to tell you about it. Skip this review, if you like. The less you know about *Million Dollar Baby* before the lights go down, the greater you'll reel from the sensory blows it rains down in the final third.

Still here? Well... Although the boxing scenes are surprisingly crunchy, this ain't no *Raging Cow*. It's a stately, melancholic character drama on that grand old theme: redemption. But Eastwood takes his good, good time: gently coaxing and weaving the familiar parts into a dignified and resonant whole.

Like all the best movies on a sporting theme, *Million Dollar Baby* is more interested in the private demons being muffled by that single-minded thrust for public glory. Frankie's nightly bedside prayer nails his cynicism and spiritual anguish, while Eddie's pain is more gradually exposed – and eventually vindicated, in one glorious, air-punching set-piece.

Eastwood casts both men in dark, earthy tones, often immersing their facial expressions in shadow. Their haunted air is contrasted with Maggie's spunky radiance. In the scene where Eddie shuts down the gym for the night, there she is, still pounding the punch-bag – an angelic light in the middle of all this gloom.

It's to Swank's credit that, even alongside Eastwood and Freeman, she out-acts them both, blending a range of subtle character tics with all the expected tough stuff. It's a powerhouse blend of male/female swagger/vulnerability, and the last time she dabbled with gender blur (*Boys Don't Cry*), Oscar came knocking.

The blossoming relationship between Frankie and Maggie will woo the sniffiest cynic. As with the rest of the film, Eastwood takes it nice and slow. It's a perfectly dovetailed dynamic – she coaxes the cautiousness out of him, while he coaches maturity into her. And when, around two-thirds in, the film suddenly shifts onto an entirely unexpected level, you can't help but be captivated.

THE VERDICT With *Mystic River*, Clint stared down loss and revenge. Here, he's made an elegiac and beautifully measured film about the power of love.

In lesser hands, all of this might dribble out soppy and over-schmaltzed. But Eastwood is way too much of an old pro to settle for easy sentimentality over the kind of ferocious emotional impact he delivers here. Like we said, just go. **TF**



MARTYRS ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Pascal Laugier **YEAR** 2008

A lot of big claims have been made for Pascal Laugier's psychological and physiological horror film. The best this, the most that. Well let's slice through the hype and make it clear that French fear flick *Martyrs* isn't the anything. It is, however, one of the most extreme pictures ever made, one of the finest horror movies of the last decade.

It's also one of the hardest films to review. Why? Because what begins as an archetypal genre piece soon twists and snaps in unexpected directions, its dizzying plunges down midnight-black rabbit holes keeping viewers disorientated and vulnerable. So, for now, know only this: a blood-splattered child is found fleeing an industrial complex in 1971. Fifteen years later, she and a friend (Mylène Jampanoi and Morjana Alaoui, both excellent) seek revenge. Some very bad shit happens.

A torture-porn movie for *Guardian* readers, *Martyrs* is, according to Laugier, the "anti-Hostel", its savagery devoid of glee and its scalpel scraping at mind and soul as much as bruised, flailed body. In one incredible, indelible shot, the camera even burrows deep into a dilated iris for a 2001-style lightshow – the ecstasy in the agony.

Of course, suggesting that any gain can emerge from such pain is contentious at best, irresponsible at worst, and whether Laugier fully explains or explores his titular theme is debatable. But *Martyrs* is a technically brilliant, emotionally resonant, uncommonly cerebral horror film that dares to bend every rule, blend every mood. The first half comprises a reeling camera, disjointed cutting and a half-glimpsed phantom that owes as much to Raphael and Bacon as the ghouls of J-horror. The second half is mechanical and methodical, evoking Michael Haneke's cruel austerity yet infused with genuine tenderness. Extraordinary. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

THE VERDICT Arthouse? Grindhouse? *The Passion Of Joan Of Arc: Unrated Edition?* Defying all boundaries, *Martyrs* relentlessly dishes the visceral pain and emerges as a work of not just ceaseless terror but also gravity and beauty.

MOON ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Duncan Jones **YEAR** 2009

In a summer of super-sized sci-fi, Duncan "Son of David Bowie" Jones' feature debut makes a potent case for non-profligacy. More tender and transcendent than *Terminator Salvation*, more scruffy than *Star Trek*, *Moon* is a near-one-hander, shot in 33 days and stressing conceptual sci-fi preferences over conspicuous cash-flinging. With *Silent Running*'s sadness and *Alien*'s craggy conviction as precedents, its scale is small but its ideas – about being human, essentially – are big.

The slippery focus is Sam Bell (Sam Rockwell), a near-future astronaut reaching the end of a three-year contract to facilitate mining energy sources on the glum side of the moon. Sam is eager to go home to his family; who wouldn't be if they only had Kevin Spacey's insinuating voice for company in the shape of a proto-HAL robo-pal called GERTY? No wonder Sam's psyche starts splintering. Headaches and hallucinations cause him to crash his space rover during a lunar jaunt. In sick bay, his visions intensify...

What follows doesn't just probe what's up with Sam. It asks who he is, why he's here, anatomising identity on existential lines. This gives Rockwell

THE VERDICT Fans of conceptual sci-fi and classic storytelling should take this trip to identity's dark side. The direction is elegant, the acting impeccable. Take the trip.

much to rise to, and he does so with grace, depth and range enough to draw empathy and suggest a troubled past simultaneously. Old-school model-work effects and limited-scale set designs are deployed to similar ends: rugged-metal reality is matched to a more abstract, claustrophobic kind of head-space, fusing allegory with interior psychodrama.

Subterranean thrills and chills are provided in a "something in the cellar" fashion, but the nature of what's down there is properly complex. *Moon* is tense but it also expertly wrong-foots us, dodging potential clichés in favour of emotive, intelligent revelations. It'd be wrong to say "twists", because Nathan Parker's script drip-feeds Hitchcockian suspense instead of delivering fast-forgotten shocks. The reveals do satisfy, though, so dodge those spoilers. We'll see and enjoy bigger films this summer, but Jones' psychological space odyssey hardly puts a moon boot wrong. **KEVIN HARLEY**



Looks like Sam needs a quick word with himself...

THE MASTER 15

DIRECTOR Paul Thomas Anderson **YEAR** 2012

Anyone walking into Paul Thomas Anderson's latest expecting a thinly veiled biopic of Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard as played by Philip Seymour Hoffman – a sweeping, savage character study in the vein of, say, Daniel Plainview – won't take long to realise their error. A sliver of Joaquin Phoenix's face monopolises the film's first frames, his dark, darting eyes taking centre-stage. His traumatised drifter Freddy is the latest in a long line of broken, brutish Anderson men, scrabbling desperately to find connections, purpose, belonging. And if Freddy's story were boiled down to a single word, then the word wouldn't be Scientology, or cults, or leaders. The word would be nostalgia.

Phoenix's performance is remarkable not least in its physicality; with his half-twisted expressions and shuffling gait he looks like a man who has been chewed vigorously and spat back out, with all the parts still functionally working but slightly off-kilter. Freddy's not an easy character to love; emerging from war with unnamed scars, he's fixated on sex but essentially infantile, prone to violent rages and subsisting on home-brewed hooch that's wince-inducing even to look at.

After a series of jobs go sour, taking potential relationships down with them, Freddy drunkenly wanders onto a brightly lit cruise ship from a darkened dock, where he finds his purpose in charismatic cult leader Lancaster Dodd (Philip Seymour Hoffman), who's eager to lead him down the proper path. Anderson took many of his cues from John Huston's 1945 government documentary *Let There Be Light*, which explored trauma and depression in soldiers after combat. There's a scene taken wholesale from *Light* between Freddy and an army doctor, in which he explains that a recent 'crying spell' was brought on by a letter from Doris, a girl he left behind before the war: "I believe in your profession, it's called nostalgia."

Dodd's methods centre on the idea of past life regression – recalling memories from before birth – as a beneficial and healing process. "You seem so familiar to me," he tells Freddy during their first meeting, seducing him with the promise of a forgotten past, while their gripping initial session of 'processing' delves headfirst into Freddy's longing for his

THE VERDICT With potent performers and poetic visuals, Anderson has made the boldest American picture of the year. Its strangeness can be hard to process, but this is a shattering study of the impossibility of recovering the past.



The room fell silent; he was only seconds away from announcing this week's *Come Dine With Me* winner.

pre-war life. For a man sick with longing for a past he can't get back, The Cause is irresistible.

It's less clear what Dodd sees in Freddy; their makeshift father-son dynamic is closely aligned with one Anderson developed in *Boogie Nights*, but we all know exactly what Jack Horner saw in Dirk Diggler. The development of their codependent, intimate connection is endlessly fascinating, and expertly written. We see Freddy as savagely devoted, defending Dodd from his detractors like a barely domesticated guard dog; and while Dodd scolds him, he shows himself to be no less animalistic than his protégé when provoked.

Anderson's mastery of his camera, which lives and breathes alongside his characters, should be no surprise, but he's working without his long-time DoP Roger Elswit for the first time here. But new cinematographer Mihai Malaimare Jr. creates what might be the director's most mesmerisingly beautiful canvas yet, while Jonny Greenwood's staccato score injects unease into even the stillest of shots.

Dodd is a distinctly big character, with his grandiose metaphors, his speeches about love and dragons and his penchant for spontaneous song but Hoffman doesn't make the mistake of giving a big performance. Instead, he's composed and jovial and self-possessed, and some of the film's most startling moments

come when his potential for vicious explosion spills over the placid surface.

This is the most compelling performance of Phoenix's career to date by some margin. It's easy to get distracted by the physical trappings of what he's doing – the stiff gait, the wrenched-up mouth and sickly pallor – but he creates an pin-precise arc for a character who could feel aimless. The plot isn't driven by events, and you could say not much happens. But Freddy's progression from drifter to disciple to disillusionment, his love for Dodd, his blind rages and inert sexual compulsion, his gradual realisation that the past is a foreign country, are played with vigorous commitment.

The Master is far from flawless. The third act widens to become scattershot with strands left under-explored. Freddy's disillusionment with Dodd comes a shade too abruptly, as though something were lost in the edit, while we get only intriguing glimpses of the possibility that Amy Adams' Peggy, far from being the meekly supportive wife, is really the Machiavellian driving force behind Dodd.

But *The Master* is a singular, technically audacious film, white-hot with emotion, and boasting scenes so powerful they'll stay with you for days. And Phoenix? As ill-advised as that Casey Affleck mockumentary might have been, he is, in fact, very much still here. **EMMA DIBDIN**

MASS ¹²**DIRECTOR** Fran Kranz **YEAR** 2022

It's hard to make sense of a tragedy, particularly one as senseless as a mass shooting. This searing drama captures the agony of that futility. *Mass* is an astonishing and surprising writing/directing debut from Fran Kranz, previously best known for providing comic relief across the Whedonverse (from *Dollhouse* to *The Cabin In The Woods*). If this marks a new era in his career, there are exciting times ahead.

Set for the most part in a single room, *Mass* sees two sets of parents meet years after a tragic school shooting that left both of their sons dead. More excruciating still is that Jay (Jason Isaacs) and Gail's (Martha Plimpton) son Evan was a victim, while Linda (Ann Dowd) and Richard's (Reed Birney) son Hayden was the shooter.

It's a purposely un-cinematic piece of work. Twenty or so minutes can go by without a single character so much as standing up. Kranz relies entirely on dialogue and his cast's unadorned acting chops to sell a truly devastating story about grief and the worst-case scenario of parenthood. Jason Isaacs, in particular, has never been better, filling the screen with painful intensity. *Mass* is an exhausting watch in many respects: each character has a moment where they reach a crescendo – and each time it's difficult to watch. But it's well worth the energy it takes to absorb the impact. **LEILA LATIF**

THE VERDICT A shattering drama that's also an auspicious writing and directing debut, resting on highly committed performances from all involved.



Alex Hibbert and Jaden Piner as the young Chiron and Kevin in *Moonlight's* first third.

MOONLIGHT ¹⁵**DIRECTOR** Barry Jenkins **YEAR** 2016

At some point, you gotta decide for yourself who you want to be," says drug dealer Juan (Mahershala Ali) to Chiron, a 10-year-old boy living in Miami with no father and a crack-dependent mother (Naomie Harris). From this brief description, Barry Jenkins' film might sound like every other 'hood movie. But little about this story of identity, sexuality, class and race is run-of-the-mill.

Charting three distinct chapters in the life of Chiron, spanning roughly 16 years, *Moonlight* is almost impossible to categorise beyond its loose 'coming-of-age' tropes. Touching on issues of bullying, addiction and, above all, sexual confusion and repression, it's a superbly crafted piece of work that frequently takes a sledgehammer to the stereotypes too easily associated with African-American cinema.

Inspired by Tarell Alvin McCraney's theatre piece *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*, Jenkins uses different actors to play Chiron and his friend Kevin in the trio of chapters (dubbed 'Little', 'Chiron' and 'Black', after the various names our hero's known by). We begin with Little (Alex Hibbert), who's near-silent for the first 10 minutes after Juan discovers him in a crack den.

Lacking a father figure, Little's friendship with Juan and his girlfriend Teresa (Janelle Monáe) grows – a bond complicated by the

fact Juan sells drugs to Little's mother. Already questions are forming in Little's mind about his sexuality – something that becomes ever-more clouded when the film jumps six years. Chiron (Ashton Sanders) is now at high school and has feelings for Kevin (Jharrel Jerome), an inveterate womaniser.

Finally, when we see Chiron in his mid-twenties – now played by Trevante Rhodes – his life has changed dramatically. To say how would spoil the surprise, beyond the fact he goes by the name 'Black' and is living in Atlanta. Rhodes adeptly conveys the emotional turmoil his character is in; André Holland, who plays Kevin – now a short-order cook – is also an admirable foil.

Across all three segments, Naomie Harris is marvellous as Chiron's mother, Paula, whose gradual descent into crack dependency – mirrored by their family home's tragic but inexorable decline into a hovel – is brilliantly essayed. But it's the craft of *Moonlight* that lingers: the terrific sound design, for example, that reflects Paula's fractured mental state, or the dreamy, intoxicating cinematography as Chiron spends a memorable night under Miami's palms.

With a classical score by Nicholas Britell – another fine against-the-grain choice – *Moonlight* keeps surprising. The final reel isn't quite as impactful as you'd hope, but it's a hugely impressive work – one that's won the Golden Globe for Best Drama – and will be long remembered.

ROB JAMES

THE VERDICT Sensitive, subtle and heartfelt, Jenkins' genre-buster is a significant work that will knock you out.



Reeves and Weaving soar high in one of *The Matrix*'s many action sequences.

THE MATRIX ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Lana Wachowski, Lilly Wachowski **YEAR** 1999

The *Matrix* is a riddle wrapped inside an enigma, packaged as the wildest, funkiest sci-fi thriller to slink its way onto the big screen since Ridley Scott made a movie about androids. "No one can be told what *The Matrix* is," goes the publicity blurb. "You have to see it for yourself." If only that were true – it would be so easy to give away the big revelation, coming as it does only half-an-hour in. But, if you're someone who likes to go in cold, then relax – nowhere in this review will you find the answer, because ignorance of such knowledge is sure to guarantee bliss in the multiplex.

So what can we tell you? Well, this is – quite simply – the action movie of the millennium. Twentieth-century entertainment has finally reached its peak: forget the pyrotechnics of ageing, muscle-bound Austrians. Welcome, instead, to the age of gravity-defying, mind-blending action superheroes who can not only offload two machine-pistols while running along a wall, but also dodge bullets, leap from skyscraper to skyscraper and, effectively, punch holes in time.

Writer/directors Lana and Lilly Wachowski have gone further with the action genre than you'd have ever thought possible. Their debut, *Bound*, was a stylish, low-budget heist thriller, which led to inevitable comparisons with the Coens. But if *Bound* was the Wachowskis' Coen Project, then *The Matrix* is surely their

Jim Cameron Project. They've been given a multimillion dollar budget and free reign to indulge their overactive imaginations, and they've obviously made the most of every last cent – the movie's massive Stateside box-office success (it made \$22.4 million during the opening weekend) is testament to that.

Each kung-fu melee is a masterwork, using smooth slo-mo and seamless freeze-frames to shift between perspectives, then winding up the visual tempo to show all the deadly neck-crunching hand-chops in real-time. Every mega-bodycount shoot-out is executed in a similar fashion, so you can see bullets gliding towards their target, while shell after shell tumbles to the floor in a tinkling cascade of brass. But it takes far more than eye-massaging effects to make action sequences this spectacular; which is why the Wachowskis called in Jet Li's fight choreographer Yuen Woo Ping to inject a bit of authenticity. This ain't cartoon violence. It hurts.

But don't go thinking that *The Matrix* is yet another no-brain action jaunt, because it's as

well-plotted as any of the best future-shock head-scratchers, requiring its audience to wrap their minds around some hefty concepts (the nature of reality, the mechanics of destiny). And don't let the Keanu factor put you off either – this is as far from *Johnny Mnemonic* as an amoeba is from God Himself. Reeves may not be the most expressive actor, but – fair dues – he trimmed down, trained up and even shaved his eyebrows off for this role. Lean, mean and wrapped in black, he looks perfect as Neo.

Laurence Fishburne, meanwhile, fits snugly into the shoes of mentor Morpheus, and Carrie-Anne Moss' Trinity is a lithe, lady-shaped death machine. Bad Guy honours go to Hugo Weaving, famed for his cross-dressing in *Priscilla, Queen Of The Desert*. It's fun seeing a man who once shook his booty wearing a feather tiara and engaging in a kung-fu showdown with the *Speed* star.

But the most memorable thing about *The Matrix* is its visual impact. Imagine a videogame, a pop promo, a summer blockbuster and a philosophy lesson all rolled into one trippy, brain-blowing experience and you've got it. You'll step out of the cinema feeling worryingly immortal, high on the adrenalin that's pushed your head into the clouds. The only problem? Will you feel the same after you've seen *The Matrix* a second time? Or a third? It's certainly worth buying a few more tickets to find out. **TF**

THE VERDICT *The Matrix* represents no-limits film-making at its finest, and will surely change all the rules of action-movie production. The Wachowskis have crafted an intelligent, ultra-cool futuro-fight fest: *Star Wars* aside, this is one film 1999 will be remembered for.



MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE - FALLOUT 12A

DIRECTOR Christopher McQuarrie **YEAR** 2018

There have been five previous *Mission: Impossible* movies, each fashioned by a different director who's been actively encouraged to bring his signature style to the franchise (hiring a female filmmaker seems to be the most impossible mission of all). *Fallout* breaks from this admirable quest for freshness, with Christopher McQuarrie, the director of fifth instalment *Mission: Impossible – Rogue Nation*, returning to the chair, perhaps indicating that producer/star Tom Cruise is this time ready to play it safe.

No chance. McQuarrie has no interest in repeating the elegant storytelling and suspenseful set-pieces that brought sophistication to *Rogue Nation*. *Fallout* is a more sprawling, chaotic affair, crashing from Belfast to Berlin to Paris to London to Kashmir in a flurry of action that punctuates a narrative so twisty it doesn't so much spin heads as snap necks.

The plot involves our IMF hero Ethan Hunt (Cruise) being given 72 measly hours to grab three nuclear cores heading to The Apostles, a splinter cell of terrorists set up by *Rogue*

Nation baddie Solomon Lane (Sean Harris). Hunt and his teammates Luther (Ving Rhames) and Benji (Simon Pegg) botch the job with terrible consequences: nukes go off in Rome, Jerusalem and Mecca. And so Hunt goes into action again, this time with CIA watchdog Walker (Henry Cavill, all muscles, malignancy and magnificent moustache).

Hunt's first task is to cosy up to arms dealer White Widow (Vanessa Kirby), and then... well, best you take the journey for yourselves to discover how the dizzying plot accommodates players old (Harris' anarchist Lane, Rebecca Ferguson's MI6 agent Ilsa, Alec Baldwin's government honcho Alan Hunley) and new (Angela Bassett's CIA chief Erica Sloan, Liang Yang's fist-flinging terrorist, Kristoffer Joner's nuclear-weapons expert Nils Debruuk). There are double, triple, quadruple crosses... Whenever Ethan mutters, "I'll figure it out,"

THE VERDICT Director Christopher McQuarrie brings grace and grit, and star Tom Cruise brings it, period. This quick-witted, fleet-footed franchise shows no sign of flagging.

he's referring to the perilous stunts he has to tackle, but viewers could apply his catchphrase to the thrillingly clever story.

And those stunts... wow, just wow. Impossibly dangerous set-pieces have always been this franchise's mission, with *MI:I*'s chopper-in-the-Chunnel collision, *MI:II*'s cliff-face dangle, *MI:III*'s bridge battle, *MI:IV*'s Burj Khalifa climb and *MI:V*'s plane-clinging takeoff raising the bar for action cinema. Well, *MI:VI* serves up belter after corker, from a stomach-knotting Halo jump to knuckle-whitening motorbike and car chases to Cruise, the greatest sprinter in the movies, propelling himself up, around and over St. Paul's Cathedral, then past Tower Bridge and up to the very summit of the Tate Modern. Hollywood's leading man does it all himself, naturally, even breaking an ankle during one full-pelt leap. He also – madly, unbelievably – pilots a chopper in the climactic kamikaze pursuit.

Add in humour and exploratory emotion as Hunt, hitherto a cipher, gets to exhibit a little soul beneath the superspy, and you have, improbably, the finest *Mission* yet. You'd be crazy not to accept it. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

MONSTERS 12

DIRECTOR Gareth Edwards **YEAR** 2010

They'll never make them like this again," said George Lucas to Martin Scorsese as they strolled through the gargantuan *Gangs Of New York* set. The implication was that any film of such scale and sweep would henceforth play out on the CG-scapes favoured by the *Star Wars* overlord. While this hasn't (yet) proved true, Hollywood's canniest chequed shirt might not have been entirely wrong either.

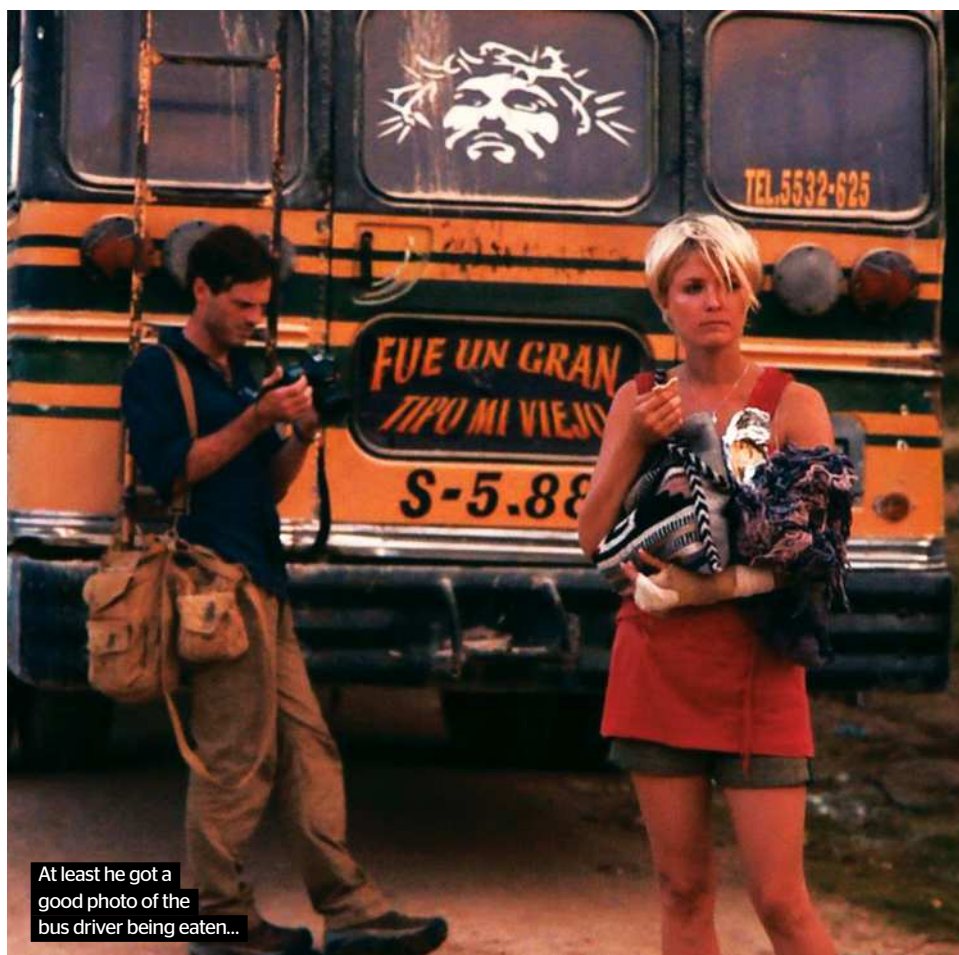
Written, directed, designed, lensed and SFX'ed by one man – for peanuts – and improvised on the fly with a cast of two across Central America, *Monsters* is the world's first home-made sci-fi blockbuster, or at least the first that can stand toe to toe with the big boys without feeling embarrassed about its trainers.

British special-effects whiz Gareth Edwards served a frustrating apprenticeship in TV documentaries before unleashing his feature debut's squid-like space beasts. Though he spikes his sun-burnished landscapes with ruined buildings and vehicles, this isn't an imaginary world reduced to the capacity of a hard-drive, but the real one embellished by gorgeous CG anomalies. It's not fantasy, but an impossible documentary from a possible future. One thing's for sure, as Edwards racks focus on incinerated alien limbs and children's corpses, that galaxy far, far away has never seemed further.

Following Godard's maxim that "films should have a beginning, a middle and an end, but not necessarily in that order", the film begins with a brilliant flashfire-strafed action scene. The upshot is an early reveal of one the squids (the result of a NASA space probe that crashed six years previously) in all its marauding glory.

It's a smart move because the pace soon slows (and stays) at a contemplative meander as we meet American photojournalist Andrew (Scoot McNairy) and his boss' daughter, Samantha (Whitney Able), who Andrew must escort home from Mexico avoiding the 'Infected Zone', a walled-off containment area to which the aliens (somewhat messily) migrate every year. Needless to say, things don't go according to plan, and pretty soon the pair are *Apocalypse Now*-ing their way up the river into the unknown. There's even time for a little Wagner.

THE VERDICT The most audacious debut since *The Blair Witch Project*. As a film it's a couple of notches shy of a masterpiece, but as an achievement it's completely without precedent.



At least he got a good photo of the bus driver being eaten...

Charismatic but uningratiating, Andrew sees life through his own cynical viewfinder, while Sam glides along with the untouchable serenity of the wealthy. Moving with shell-shocked indifference through shifting levels of strangeness – foreign towns, eerie jungles, a decimated evacuation zone – they begin to thaw towards each other, the two actors (who are now married in real life) tenderly sketching in the beats as romantic possibilities flare then falter. "You don't have to do it perfect," she tells him, tenderly, as he bandages her hand, a sweet summary of the film's woozy, patchwork realism.

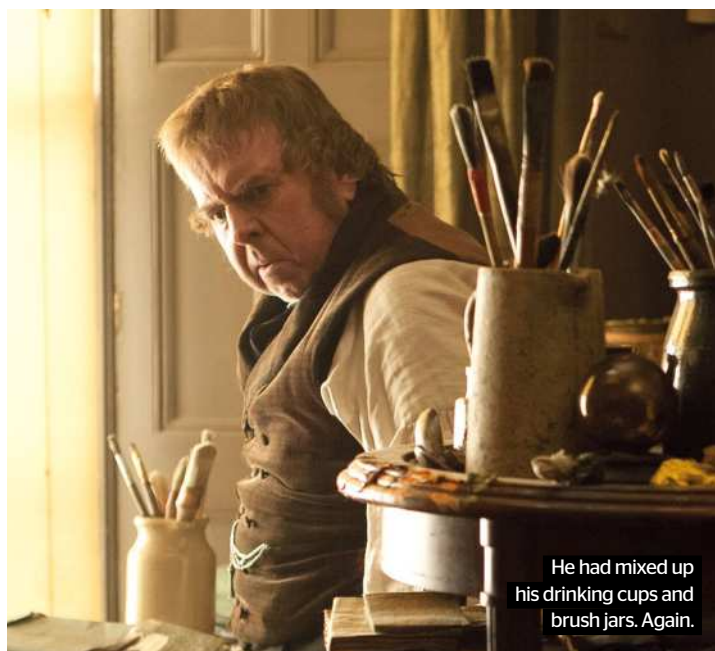
Edwards takes a similarly low-key approach to his direction, using half-seen CG warning signs, ominous details – bloody handprints smeared across an abandoned barge, howler monkeys screaming in the trees – and atmospheric but ready-made locations, such as the hurricane-ravaged Galveston, USA, to suggest a many-textured world drifting inexorably to hell.

Those expecting to see an equatorial *Cloverfield* won't be disappointed, but they may be surprised: *Monsters* plays out more like *The Road: A Romance* than a traditional creature feature. To the inhabitants of the Infected Zone, the aliens are old news, a nebulous concern in an area used to immigration and

outbreaks of territorial violence. But it's also because Edwards and his performers seek a cinematic experience beyond mere pointing and staring, where a kiss on the hand has as much impact on the audience as the sudden appearance of an outraged space cephalopod.

True, there's something occasionally remote about the film's kaleidoscopic delights. But you'll leave with no doubt of Edwards' capacity for empathy. He proves his stones as a showman too. This may be a story about slow-blooming love and otherness, both ethnic and extra-terrestrial, but it also promises monsters. And, when they eventually re-emerge in a thrilling, fog-shrouded ambush, flinging trucks into the trees like the natural heirs to ILM's groundbreaking T-rex, they're nothing short of awesome. Not too shabby for an ambitious computer geek who saw *Jurassic Park* as a teen and thought, "Yep, I could do that."

While it's only fitting that Edwards should pay homage to heavyweights such as Spielberg and Coppola, they may not see the joke. With his innovative, one-stop-shop method of production – and an unforgettable film to boot – he may well prove their equal or, indeed, their usurper. Not only should *Monsters* catapult him unstoppably into the mainstream, it might just change moviemaking forever. Maybe Lucas was right after all. **MATT GLASBY**



MR. TURNER¹²

DIRECTOR Mike Leigh **YEAR** 2014

Fifteen years on from *Topsy-Turvy*, Mike Leigh returns to the handsome period biopic with a portrait of an artist, 18th-century giant Joseph Mallord William Turner. A man who evidently didn't suffer fools gladly – no less, you'd imagine, than Leigh himself. Tempting though it is to interpret *Mr. Turner* on some level as a self-portrait, this is but one brushstroke in a rich and sprawling canvas. One whose generous running time affords Leigh ample room to explore his subject's private life, his public persona and the ever-changing Victorian world that restlessly swirled around him.

The film introduces Turner (Timothy Spall) as a man of high ideals and base appetites: a barber's son with a passion for landscapes who likes nothing more than sharing a pig's head with his father (Paul Jesson) or having a quickie against the bookcase with his housekeeper (Dorothy Atkinson, splendidly Dickensian). Turner relishes his lofty status at the Royal Academy yet takes a schoolboy's delight in winding up John Constable (James Fleet), his chief rival. He refuses to acknowledge the children he sired with his ex-mistress, yet happily moves in with a guest-house owner (Marion Bailey) the minute her husband is out of the picture.

This is, in short, a complex dude, brought majestically to life by Spall in a performance made up almost wholly of guttural grunts, contemptuous snorts and dismissive harrumphs. Like his paintings in their early, inchoate forms, Turner's a bit rough round the edges. Leigh, though, makes it plain that it was precisely from this mass of contradictions that his genius sprang.

A huge cast featuring many of Leigh's regular collaborators populate the fringes with a vivid array of supporting characters. DoP Dick Pope, meanwhile, brings a painterly elegance to an exhibition's worth of digital compositions that most memorably include a recreation of *The Fighting Temeraire*, the "bloody big ship" Daniel Craig took such a liking to in *Skyfall*. The end result must surely rank as not only one of Leigh's most significant achievements, but also one that may have a lasting influence

THE VERDICT One great British artist pays tribute to another in an homage that boasts a titanic turn at its centre.

on how artists' lives are chronicled on film in future. If nothing else, the scenes in which Turner uses his own phlegmy sputum to lubricate his watercolours give a whole new meaning to the phrase 'spitting image'. **NEIL SMITH**



MURDERBALL¹⁵

DIRECTORS Henry Alex Rubin, Dana Adam Shapiro **YEAR** 2005

First off, a quick tutorial... Played on a basketball court and officially known as the not-so-edgy 'quad rugby', the sport has two opposing teams of four players, decked out in adapted wheelchairs designed to smash, crash and bash their rider towards a goal of two traffic cones. All competitors are awarded a disability mark (from 0.5 to 3.5 points), depending on the mobility of their condition, with teams not allowed to go above a total of eight points on court at any one time. Within these sparse rules, mayhem reigns.

But the on-court chaos is tame compared with the off-court loathing between bitter Canadian coach Soares and US powerhouse Mark Zupan. Soares was the States' superstar until, much to his chagrin, he was deemed "past it" by the selectors. Not a man driven by forgiveness or blind loyalty, he skipped the border and took the calls of "traitor" with a tellingly unsteady smirk. With Soares immersed to an almost life-threatening degree and Zupan all too eager to pelt him with expletives, the rivalry is intoxicating and often hilarious.

While the action is always frenzied, *Murderball* is much, much more than just a sport film. It's all about the raw humanity of the players; the way their situations have given them an articulate, no-bullshit frankness you'll struggle to find in mainstream sport. Whether talking about sex or explaining how they got to where they are today (Zupan was maimed in a drunken teen car-crash; Bob Lujano suffered a rare form of meningitis as a kid; Andy Cohn suffered spinal-cord injuries as a 16-year-old), they never complain, never seek sympathy and, like directors Henry Alex Rubin and Dana Adam Shapiro, never once fall back on cheap sentimentality.

The film is anchored with the story of Keith Cavill. Only recently crippled in a motorcycle accident – and still coping with his new circumstances – he journeys from unable-to-tie-his-own-shoelaces physiotherapy to a glorious, inspirational meeting with Zupan at a pre-

THE VERDICT Hard and fast action, likeable characters and potent tales of suffering and redemption. A gripping and unflinching eye-opener.

Olympic Murderball presentation. As Cavill wheels around in his new metallic chariot, the emancipation is clear, and – far from wince and applaud and hope the poor boy doesn't get any more injuries – you'll want to get in line for London 2012 Murderball tickets. **JONATHAN DEAN**

MUNICH 15

DIRECTOR Steven Spielberg **YEAR** 2005

Nothing Steven Spielberg has made quite prepares you for *Munich*. Not the assault on Omaha Beach or the target practice of Nazi commandant Goeth. *Saving Private Ryan* and *Schindler's List* are the obvious comparisons within his previous 23 features, but neither is as bold or shocking. *War Of The Worlds* – with its trite allusions to terrorism – was merely a feint. This is the sucker punch – the bravest film of his career.

Spielberg needs to steel himself against the frenzied press coverage *Munich* will generate. He'll be called both a Zionist propagandist and a self-hating Jew, an opportunist and a fraud. But he's a smart enough man to know that if both sides attack you, you're probably doing something right. Even after making a film where 'right' and 'wrong' are very murky ideas indeed.

Murk is not something Spielberg has often chosen to explore – and certainly not with this kind of commitment. Neither has he ever made a film this intimately violent. No uniforms, no aliens, no gnashing rubber sharks... Brutality sunders the everyday. Terror comes home: in the bedroom, on the phone, carrying groceries or cradling a child. "I'm in business with Death – you think I'm squeamish?" asks the French godfather who gives Avner (Bana) his

information. Spielberg certainly isn't. *Munich* leaves you numb, fragile and frighteningly aware of mortality. Reels flicker through the mind's eye (the barge slaying, the athlete's jaw, the knife), images so stark and upsetting you'll be staring at the ceiling, struggling to sleep.

Even by Spielberg's standards, information about the film has been kept to an absolute minimum, with the makers adamant they won't be interviewed by anyone who hasn't seen it. The logic is clear: too much supposition and misplaced expectation about what has been done with material "inspired by real events". You have to see *Munich* to understand it can't be easily labelled, discussed or dismissed. Calling it a five-star thriller – which it is – feels reductive and flippant. It is thorny and provocative and will leave audiences shell-shocked. Cinema is rarely this relevant or unsettling.

The 1972 Munich hostage massacre is detailed in Kevin Macdonald's 1999 Oscar-winning documentary *One Day In September*. *Munich* deals with the days after. Israel's Prime Minister Golda Meir (Lynn Cohen) authorises intelligence agency Mossad to eliminate the 11 individuals supposedly responsible for the terrorist act – scattered around Europe either working explicitly, or allegedly undercover,

for the foundation of a Palestinian homeland and/or the destruction of Israel. One's a pen-pushing family man, another's translating *The Arabian Nights* into Italian, another's protected by the KGB, another by the CIA. All are marked for death. And Avner doesn't question the evidence. "Every civilisation finds it necessary to negotiate compromises with its own values," says the PM in the film's most explicit moment of contemporary resonance. But pick a line, any line...

"What law protects people like this?"

"Do what the terrorists do."

"Why are these men implicated?"

"The world has been rough to you and your tribe and it's right to respond roughly to them."

"All this blood comes back to us."

Turn on the news. You'll hear the same argument, anguish and justification – though perhaps not the assertion of Daniel Craig's South African assassin: "Don't fuck with the Jews."

For all the research, the script has to involve a degree of supposition – how much 'fictional history' there is will spark rigorous debate – and the French 'Mafia'-style family almost seems too convenient and fantastical. But the bleak, absurdist humour provides necessary respite – the Mossad bean-counter who wants receipts for the kill-list tip-off payments; the toy-cum-bomb maker whose gadgets give out; soldiers in drag; a victim stuck under a door while his assailants decide if he's the bloke in the photo they're meant to kill. Then there's the clickety-clack of a Kalashnikov and you're not laughing any more. Everyone has families and everyone has a cause – as shown in a stairwell conversation between Bana and his PLO counterpart, which distills the Arab/Israeli conflict without being preachy. Everyone wants a homeland. Safety, security and peace. But the price to be paid is etched in Bana's chalky face as his soul ebbs away and his mother provides cold comfort: "Whatever it took, whatever it takes, a place on Earth, we have a place on Earth at last."

Spielberg usually defaults to the snug – from Hooper's survival in *Jaws* to the tear-wringing of *Schindler's* postscript. By the conclusion of *Munich* you are desperate for sentimentality and relief; desperate, waiting, for that Spielberg ending. But this? It has no ending. **NEV PIERCE**

THE VERDICT A gruelling, remorseless thriller that grapples with vital, intractable issues. *Munich* offers no easy answers, no condescension, no compromise. Devastating.



Eric Bana (centre) offers up one of the greatest performances of his career.

THE NEST 15

DIR. Sean Durkin YEAR 2021

It's been a decade since Sean Durkin's superb debut, *Martha Marcy May Marlene*, but his follow-up is worth the wait. A disquieting but frequently funny study of a dissolving marriage during the 1980s financial boom, it confirms Durkin's talent and gifts career-best roles to Jude Law and Carrie Coon.

Law plays Rory, a Londoner living in America with wife Allison (Coon), step-daughter Sam (Oona Roche) and son Ben (Charlie Shotwell). They seemingly have it all, but Rory can't rest. Soon, he's dragged the family back to Britain, relocating to a preposterously unsuitable mansion in Surrey. Allison and the kids struggle with the move, but it's Rory who reveals the biggest demons.

Full of self-regard and with a largesse beyond his bank balance, Rory, it becomes increasingly clear, is living a lie. Law is extraordinary, painting a meticulous portrait of the fragile ego propping up Rory's alpha-male persona. Coon is even better, playing Allison's plight with a delicately calibrated blend of emotional trauma, hilarious pique and meme-able drunk-dancing.

Durkin charts their inevitable fallout with a visual style pitched as psychological horror, all slow zooms and unsettling angles, but adds a tone of brooding black comedy that carries the caustic mood of Joseph Losey's classic collaborations with Harold Pinter. The worse things get for Rory and Allison, the bigger – and darker – the laughs. It's a stunning comeback. **SIMON KINNEAR**

THE VERDICT *The Nest* reaffirms Sean Durkin's talent, and his cast all bring their absolute best.



Frances McDormand lights it up in *Nomadland*.

NOMADLAND 12A

DIRECTOR Chloé Zhao YEAR 2020

Inspired by Jessica Bruder's non-fiction book *Nomadland: Surviving America In The 21st Century*, *Nomadland* is a film about a phenomenon caused by the 2008 financial crash – the many Americans heading towards retirement age who lost their homes and now lead an itinerant lifestyle. Living in campervans, they go where seasonal work takes them, much as the Joad family travel to California during the Great Depression in *The Grapes Of Wrath*.

If that sounds like comedown cinema of the lowest order, it's not – although director Chloé Zhao makes no attempt to take the scenic route while chronicling a hardscrabble existence that entails long nights shivering in a tin can on wheels, flat tires, breakdowns and defecating in a bucket. But with the bad and the ugly comes the good in a sense of freedom and frontier spirit, of fluent community and vistas to make John Ford quiver.

Frances McDormand plays Fern, a widow forced to flee the town of Empire, Nevada when the factory she works in closes. Her demeanour is as matter-of-fact as her cropped haircut, so she loads some belongings into a van and leaves any self-pity behind as she hits the road. We, like her, discover this brave new world as she goes along, meeting many of the real-life nomads mentioned in Bruder's book and a few more that Zhao and McDormand met as they planned their route. Fact and fiction become almost indistinguishable, though a sliver of plot is introduced in the possibility of romance with fellow traveller Dave (David Strathairn, the only other professional actor).

Is Fern running away, or chasing something? Is a life of independence and the pioneer spirit that built America better or worse than the American Dream of home, family and affluence? Zhao is too skilful a filmmaker to offer definitive answers, leaving viewers to draw their own conclusions. What is without question, though, is that *Nomadland* is terrific filmmaking, driven by the most unadorned performance of McDormand's career. Like the picture itself and the community it portrays, she casts off anything surplus to get to the naked truth. How ironic that it will likely saddle her with many more possessions in the form of awards. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

THE VERDICT A masterpiece straddling fact and fiction, with an award-worthy turn by Frances McDormand.



NORTE, THE END OF HISTORY 15

DIRECTOR Lav Diaz YEAR 2013

Aclaimed Filipino director Lav Diaz has made films ranging between five and eight hours, so his latest, clocking in at a mere four-hours-and-10-minutes, and his first in colour, is a walk in the park. A transposition of Dostoevsky's *Crime And Punishment*, it sees disillusioned intellectual Fabian (Sid Lucero) commit a violent crime and allow unemployed family man Joaquin (Archie Alemania) to be imprisoned for it. Unfolding in lengthy, frequently static takes, it accrues tremendous character detail, thematic heft and emotional intensity while presenting a country broken by abject poverty, political corruption and half-baked ideologies. Superb.

JAMIE GRAHAM



NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN 15

DIRECTOR Joel and Ethan Coen **YEAR** 2007

Tom and Jerry, cheese and crackers, Torvill and Dean... Some things are meant to go together. Add to that list the Coen brothers and Cormac McCarthy, the ravaged, despairing, intensely violent landscapes so pitilessly evoked in the latter's novels dovetailing with the bleak worldview exhibited in the scintillating crime thrillers of the former.

As magnificent as McCarthy's same-titled 2005 novel undoubtedly is, he's written better books, with *Blood Meridian* (optioned by Ridley Scott) and *The Road* (John The Proposition Hillcoat) putting the 74-year-old in the front rank of modern American authors. But it's *No Country For Old Men* that most perfectly fits the Coens, its keen sense of time and place, lowlife characters, Jenga plotting, blacker-than-black humour and colourful, naturalistic dialogue ("It's a mess, ain't it?" ... "Hell, if it ain't it will do 'til the mess gits here") recalling the brothers' neo-noirs. *Fargo* is the particularly obvious reference point, and not just because the plot of *No Country* involves a nobody chancing a crime to become a somebody only to find himself alarmingly out of his depth, pursued by implacable killers and a small-town sheriff given to homespun philosophy.

No, a more pertinent comparison is that *No Country*, for all its bloodlust and desperation, shares *Fargo*'s world-weary humanity. And so it is that the Coens' 12th feature emerges bulletproof to the tuts and clucks too often aimed at their work. Glib? No. Smug? Not a chance. Drawn from cinema at the expense of life? Not this time – *No Country* balances a

love of genre tics, invigorating technique and tense, terse set-pieces with a deep affection for people and an unswerving moral purpose.

The first hour is extraordinary – confident and consummate as it unfurls three plot strands that will inevitably entwine. Arrestee Anton Chigurh (Javier Bardem) escapes his police escort and kills an innocent passer-by with a cattle stungun. Trailer trash cowboy Llewellyn Moss (Josh Brolin) happens upon a pile of corpses, a stash of heroin and \$2m cash in the Texas desert. And craggy, scrupulous sheriff Ed Tom Bell (Tommy Lee Jones) arrives too late to both crime scenes, his creased, hooded eyes narrowing as the dolorous words of his opening voiceover, outlining his duties as lawman, echo in viewers' minds: "Man would have to put his soul at hazard. He'd have to say, 'OK, I'll be part of this world...'"

Ostensibly a chase movie that sees Moss fleeing the indestructible, damn-near-inhuman Chigurh (contract killer, ghost or angel of vengeance?) as Bell lags behind, dejectedly trawling from one messy cadaver to the next, *No Country* also finds time to meditate on the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of man. It's a moving, melancholic picture, set in Texas in 1980 but speaking for today's America, and it miraculously juggles high entertainment value – graveyard humour, searing action, choking suspense – with a

THE VERDICT Virtuoso. A film of pin-sharp principles, cross-hair precision and suffocating tension, this Coens stunner hits like a cattle gun between the eyes.

plaintive tone as it chews on themes of sin and redemption, love and violence, fate and free will. It's in these quieter scenes that the movie finds time to breathe. Roger Deakins' exemplary cinematography captures the might and majesty of the burnished desertscapes, while Carter Burwell's stark, haunting music is used so sparingly that the real soundtrack is the wind whipping across the plains. The first half of the film, especially, is stripped down and scrubbed clean of static, its potent images dedicated to the silent spaces between words and actions. Audiences can smell the dust, feel the sting of windswept sand... and then the action swerves into a twilight world of rundown gas stations and sticky motel rooms, the stench of sweat wafting from spotted sheets as Moss dresses wounds, saws down shotguns and twitches curtains.

Given few words to play with (but each of them worth rolling around the tongue), Brolin is a revelation, compounding his good work in *American Gangster* to announce himself as an actor of real heft. Jones, as the titular old-timer, brings a serrated edge to McCarthy's mournful words, though it's his turn in Paul Haggis' *In The Valley Of Elah* that makes him a frontrunner for the Oscar this year. And Bardem is the best of the lot, his pale, slouching, mop-topped psycho cracking lopsided grins under gleaming eyes.

The Coens' best film? Yeeesss... No. That title still belongs to *Miller's Crossing*. Yet for such a question to demand pause for thought speaks volumes: *No Country For Old Men* is an instant classic. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

THE OLD MAN & THE GUN ^{12A}

DIRECTOR David Lowery **YEAR** 2018

At the start of the year, Daniel Day-Lewis apparently bid acting goodbye with a riveting performance as fastidious fashionista Reynolds Woodcock in *Phantom Thread*. Now, to close out 2018, Robert Redford has intimated that he's ready to ride off into the sunset on the back of his impossibly charismatic turn as true-life bank robber Forrest Tucker in *The Old Man & The Gun*.

Based on David Grann's 2003 *New Yorker* article, writer/director David Lowery's splendidly crafted dramatic thriller is an ode to the New Hollywood of the 1960s and '70s – the era that made Redford a movie star. It even weaves in footage from the octogenarian actor's old movies, back when he was a kid and the sun danced in his hair. That such a technique, married to desaturated 16mm images, doesn't make *The Old Man & The Gun* a fossil trapped in amber is testament to its breezy style and ebullient emotions. Neither too clever for its own good nor simply a nostalgia-trip pastiche aimed only at chin-strumming cinephiles, it is, in a word, fun. And

it's also so damn charming it makes your heart twinkle like Redford's eyes.

We pick up the action in 1981, as 76-year-old career-crim Tucker has just busted out of San Quentin – his 16th successful prison break – and is moseying into a bank armed with an unloaded pistol, an aw-shucks grin and a devastating wink. Minutes later, fleeing a squad of wailing cop cars, he pulls over to assist a woman having engine trouble. It's a ruse, and the cops duly screech past. But an instant connection flickers between Tucker and his unwitting decoy.

She is Jewel (Sissy Spacek), a horse trainer and a widow. He tells her, over coffee, that he is in sales, and then thinks better of it and writes the truth on a slip of paper. She reads it, doesn't quite believe it, mistaking it as part of their flirtation. During the remainder of the movie they will meet several times more, and their chemistry pops like corn. Meanwhile, another relationship develops between Tucker and the obsessive Texas 'tec on his trail, John Hunt (Casey Affleck). These are two guys addicted to what they do, who come to

admire one another, who even share a bond of affection. You might say they are laid-back, amiable, soulful versions of De Niro's Neil McCauley and Pacino's Vincent Hanna in *Heat*, and likewise they enjoy a mid-movie meet sure to prickle viewers' skin.

There the comparisons end. No running street battles with booming automatic weapons here; just a genial gentleman who ambles up to a succession of bank tellers, asks to be directed to the manager, and then suggests, with a sunny smile, they load up a bag. It's how the Sundance Kid might have spent his twilight years had he not been punctured by a hail of bullets in Bolivia.

The vanity-free Redford is magnificent, allowing DoP Joe Anderson to zoom in on every crag and crevice of his face in the knowledge that Father Time is powerless to dim his sparkling blue eyes, his star wattage. Redford's performance celebrates the renegade spirit even as Lowery celebrates an era of American movies as golden as his star's barnet, and, of course, that star himself.

The tenderness is there in the tactility of the film stock, in Daniel Hart's jazzy score, in the period-appropriate tunes (The Kinks, Simon & Garfunkel)... together they comprise a poetic love letter that draws on the wider history mentioned above but also personal bonds: Lowery's elegiac crime movie *Ain't Them Bodies Saints* broke out at Redford's Sundance Film Festival, and the star lent all of his grace and charm to a role in Lowery's studio debut, *Pete's Dragon*.

Crucially, however, the love-in is paused long enough for Lowery to offer a glimpse of the darker side of Tucker's compulsion – we're introduced, briefly, to the wounded daughter (Elisabeth Moss) that he doesn't even know he has.

Also at the top of her considerable game is Spacek, who likewise brings baggage. Jewel is older and wiser, but bears traces of *Badlands*' Holly, feeling a frisson of excitement at the thought of Tucker pulling heists. She is mesmerising. But make no mistake: this is Redford's (last picture) show, and it serves a glorious goodbye. We can only hope that he changes his mind and, like Tucker, can't stop doing the thing he loves.

JAMIE GRAHAM

THE VERDICT The retiring Redford will surely be Oscar-nominated for his dazzling display in a crime movie of gorgeous style and generous spirit.



Robert forgot to bring his prop gun on to the set again.



Macdonald's film is a taut thriller and vital documentary all in one.

ONE DAY IN SEPTEMBER ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Kevin Macdonald **YEAR** 2000

British media coverage of the Oscars focused almost exclusively on the triumphs of Sam Mendes and Michael Caine. Yet there was another UK success story in *One Day In September*, winner of the Best Documentary gong. The lack of attention it received is symptomatic of the undervaluing of documentaries in our film culture, but this inventive and gripping example of the genre will help reset the balance.

One Day In September has already attracted controversy. Its subject matter – innocent Israelis being murdered by Arab terrorists on German soil – is a hugely emotive one. Because it's a true life account that's structured more like a race-against-the-clock conspiracy thriller – only with real lives at stake – it incensed the Berlin Film Festival panel, who apparently described it as a “disgrace to documentary film-making”.

They couldn't be more wrong, because director Kevin Macdonald has fashioned a fast-moving, edge-of-the-seat story which zeroes in on the human dimension to these terrible and tragic events.

Particularly noteworthy is the wide range of interviewees Macdonald has managed to track down. There are the widows and children of Israeli victims, a former chief of Mossad, various high-ranking West German officials, and even the one remaining Palestinian terrorist, Jamal Al Gashey, who now lives in permanent hiding.

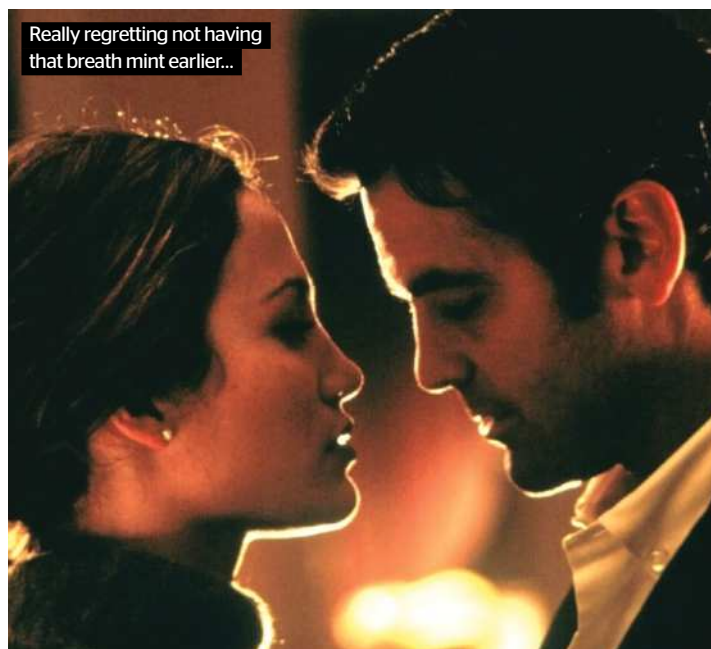
While pinpointing the cravenness of Olympic officials in

their response to the crisis, the film also systematically undermines the notion of German efficiency and organisation. Macdonald uncovers a catalogue of incompetence that leaves you both saddened and stunned.

Snapping all the rules of stuffy documentaries, *One Day In September* deserves to find as big an audience as any Hollywood multiplex thriller. **TF**

THE VERDICT

A compelling account of one of the blackest episodes in Olympic history, Macdonald's Oscar-winning documentary-thriller is impressively assembled. A human tragedy is laid bare, with powerful and at times painful immediacy.



Really regretting not having that breath mint earlier...

OUT OF SIGHT ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Steven Soderbergh **YEAR** 1998

For such a cine-literate source, Elmore Leonard's low-life pulp novels have had a pretty raw deal when it comes to decent movie adaptations. His script-friendly material has always ended up blundering about the screen: miscast, misguided and misunderstood. That filmmakers have so often cocked-up translating his trademark wisecracking hoods borders on injustice. *Out Of Sight* covers significant mileage in redressing the balance.

That such a high-spirited caper should come from Steven Soderbergh may come as a surprise. Soderbergh, whose *Sex, Lies And Videotape* turned him into something of a late '80s indie prodigy, has never fulfilled his promise, bypassing Hollywood to indulge himself in frigid thrillers like *Kafka* and *The Underneath*. It's all the more remarkable that a director famous for chilly, sub-arthouse delvings should succeed in making something as warm and playful as *Out Of Sight*.

Better still, Soderbergh knows that, in the case of Leonard, the patter is the character, giving each ensemble member their own stand-out scene with which to stamp out their idiosyncrasies. In supporting roles, Rhames is as sturdy as ever as Foley's partner, while *Boogie Nights*' Don Cheadle oozes menace as vicious swindler Snoopy.

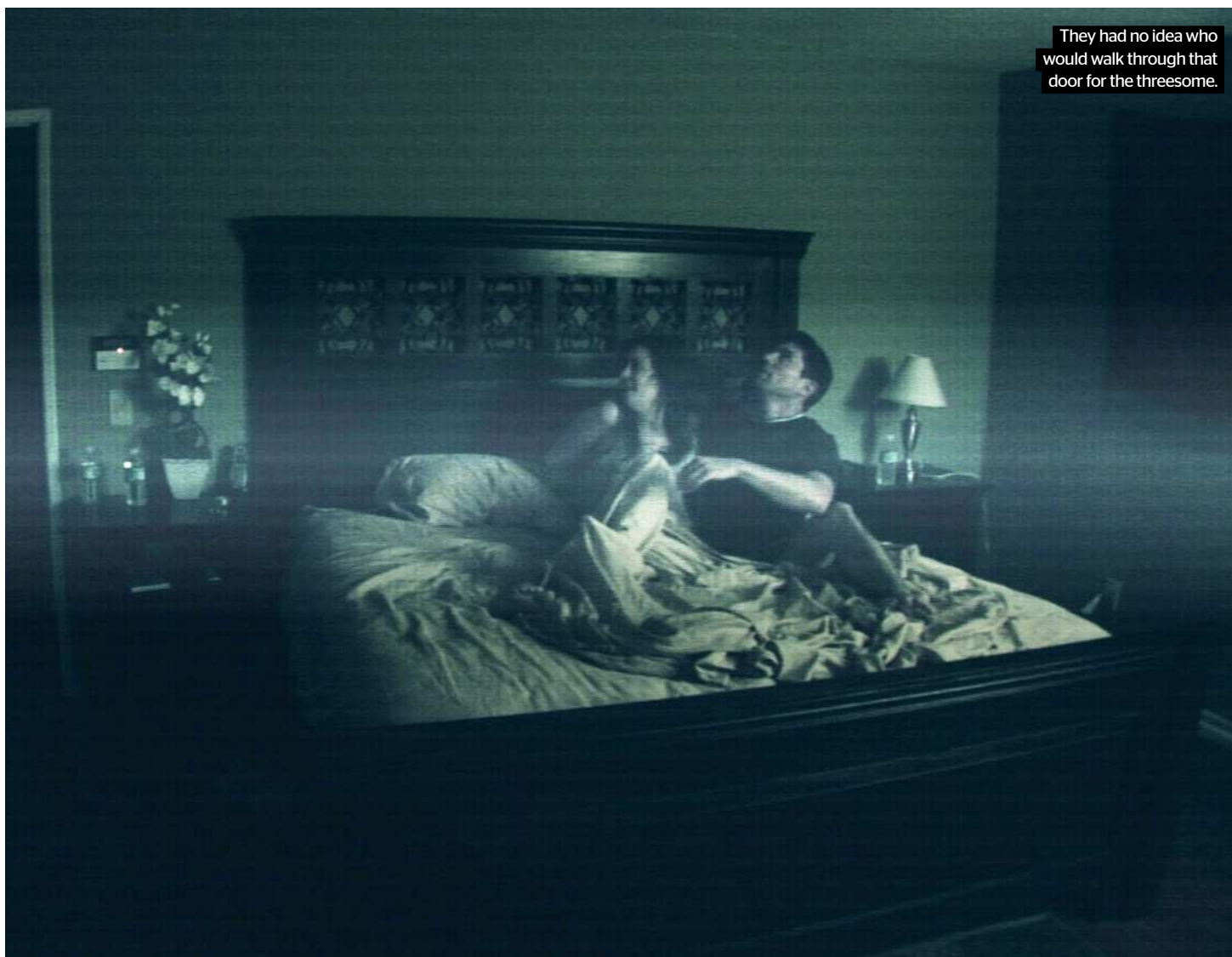
But the movie really belongs to George Clooney and Jennifer Lopez. Until now, Clooney's been an actor waiting to happen, in desperate need of a decent part. The laconic cool of Jack Foley offers him the chance to prove himself. Not a problem. Combining the macho drawl-delivery of John Wayne and nonchalant charm of Cary Grant, he exudes a casual charisma, turning in an enigmatic, career-defining performance.

It's the same for Lopez. After her nondescript, screaming shit-fits in *Anaconda*, she's come out of practically nowhere to claim the prize for Bright Young Thing Of '98. As Karen Sisco, she snubs the doe-eyed vulnerability of accidental heroism and stirs humour, toughness, sex appeal and good old-fashioned sass to knee-trembling effect. Put both of them together and you have that movie manna that money can't buy – chemistry.

Blend in an outstanding *Bullitt*-inspired soundtrack by dancey knob-

tweidler David Holmes, some very funny deadpan dialogue, reel after reel of must-see set pieces and you have a serious contender for film of the year. **TF**

THE VERDICT Career-best star turns adorn this stylish, sexy thriller.



PARANORMAL ACTIVITY 15

DIRECTOR Oren Peli **YEAR** 2009

Horror goes in cycles and 2009 is the year the wheel turned to crush torture porn. *Drag Me To Hell* and *Trick 'r Treat* traded in ghoulish fun, *Let The Right One In* brought subtlety and poignancy, while *Martyrs* – the year's outstanding horror movie – subverted the sub-genre to create, in director Pascal Laugier's words, "anti-torture porn". And now *Paranormal Activity* returns triumphantly to the Val Lewton ethos: the less you're shown, the more you shit yourself.

Made for \$15,000 by freshman director Oren Peli (and set entirely in his own house), *Paranormal Activity* sees – or rather doesn't, as is often the case – young couple Katie and Micah (Katie Featherston, Micah Sloat) terrorised by a 'presence'. Half serious, half taking the proverbial,

Micah buys a camera and sets it up at the end of the bed. What appears on playback is spooky. Then scary. Then absolutely, positively, oh-sweet-Jesus-NO!!! terrifying. So much so that Peli's ingenious micro-movie is being hailed by some as the Scariest Film Ever Made.

What's really frightening is just how simple it all is – so stripped down it makes *The Blair Witch Project*, with its intricate mythology and Maryland shoot, seem fussily elaborate. Shot in just a week (!), all we have here is a slow-build shockumentary featuring two identifiable

THE VERDICT *Paranormal Activity* trafficks in shadows and shivers yet is more malevolent than a dozen *Hostels*. Kudos to Spielberg for suggesting the deeply distressing ending.

protagonists and set, primarily, in a single room haunted by minimal special effects and creative audio. And yet it inflicts deep psychological wounds.

Why? Because we care about this couple. Because Peli drills into our primal fears. And because the static set-up applied to each night-time bedroom scene is expert in its composition – a clock reading on the bottom right, bed in the middle, and to the left an open doorway leading to a barely visible hallway and, beyond, an inky back bedroom.

Not since Carpenter's *Halloween* has the frame been used this ingeniously, viewers having to focus pull as they sweep left and right for the impending threat. Now that's scary.

JAMIE GRAHAM



"Once you know Bruce Willis is dead, it feels so obvious!"

PARASITE 15

DIRECTOR Bong Joon-ho **YEAR** 2020

A new Bong Joon-ho film always excites expectations. The South Korean director has amassed quite a CV: *Memories Of Murder*, *The Host*, *Mother*, *Snowpiercer* and Netflix giant-pig movie *Okja*. The Palme d'Or-winning *Parasite* follows suit. Gripping from first frame to last, it again showcases Bong's love of hopping between genres – pitch-black comedy here holds sway, but there's drama, social commentary, horror and a surprising amount of heart.

Starting off as something of a mirror image to 2018's *Shoplifters*, it introduces us to the Kim family, barely getting by as they share a cramped basement with scurrying bugs. Ki-taek (Song Kang-ho) and his wife Chung-sook (Chang Hyea-jin) are out of work, as are twentysomething daughter Ki-jung (Park So-dam) and teenage son Ki-woo (Choi Woo-sik). Days are spent holding their phones to the ceiling in an effort to piggyback free wifi, while evenings attract drunks who urinate against their street-level window.

Then Ki-woo gets a break, replacing his friend as the tutor for Da-hye (Jung Ziso), the daughter of wealthy entrepreneur Mr. Park (Lee Sun-kyun) and his naïve wife (Cho Yeo-jeong). Ki-woo is a smash hit, and when Mrs Park says she's in need of an art tutor for her younger son, Da-song (Jung Hyun-jun), he slyly

THE VERDICT Bong Joon-ho proves his mastery of suspense. A thoughtful, playful thriller that goes off without a Hitch.

suggests his sister, pretending she's a college friend. The pattern is set, and some conniving soon sees the older Kims replace the Parks' driver and housekeeper.

This first half of *Parasite* is a con movie made by a connoisseur, its moving parts elegantly fitting together until all of the players have gravitated to the Parks' spacious, modernist home. The second half is about tearing everyone apart again, though just how that happens should be discovered for yourself. It's not in a manner you might imagine, with *Parasite* throwing a curveball to set things off. Put another way, if the Kim family is, in one reading of the title, a 'parasite' living off its fat host having buried deep inside, then something happens that is the narrative equivalent of *Alien*'s chestbursting set-piece.

Scenes both amusing and tense follow, the film maintaining its formal sophistication even as Bong's seething anger at the state of things bubbles to the surface. There are comparisons to be made with *Us*: the Kims could almost be subterranean doppelgängers of the Parks, no longer willing to be invisible. Like Jordan Peele's film, *Parasite* refuses to go the easy route of making its Haves unlikeable people so that we might desire their destruction by the Have Nots. It's cleverer than that, smartly playing with our sympathies just as it builds to a demented set-piece finale... only to then blindsides us with a poignant coda.

JAMIE GRAHAM

PETITE MAMAN U

DIRECTOR Céline Sciamma **YEAR** 2021

A tangible aura of magic and mystery envelops Céline Sciamma's latest, an exquisite jewel whose fairytale simplicity masks an ocean of emotion. It's another triumph for the writer/director of *Portrait Of A Lady On Fire*, albeit one that operates on a much quieter register than that 2019 success.

When her beloved grandmother passes away, eight-year-old Nelly is taken to her secluded house in the woods to help her parents with the clear-up. While playing outside she meets Marion, a little girl her own age with whom she finds she has a close affiliation...

To reveal more would be a disservice to a narrative that subtly weaves elements of time travel and fantasy into what is at its heart a gentle, touching depiction of a burgeoning friendship. It's also a quiet study in grief and family relationships, and a masterclass in the art of working with children, with twin sisters Josephine and Gabrielle Sanz giving delightfully natural performances that are testament to Sciamma's empathetic direction. (The scene where they make pancakes captures playful innocence in a way you will rarely see – ahem – battered.)

At a refreshingly trim 72 minutes, *Petite Maman* does not have long to beguile the viewer. That it manages to do so with such delicate, poignant grace is further evidence that Sciamma has made something truly special that'll stay with those who see it for a much longer period of time. **NEIL SMITH**

THE VERDICT A small yet faultless tour de force for which no praise would be de trop.



PHANTOM THREAD 15

DIRECTOR Paul Thomas Anderson **YEAR** 2017

In many film romances, a belief in finding 'the one' is woven deep into the plot fabric. But what if the lead character is a mother-fixated, man-child creative with a profound inability to countenance disturbance or compromise? What might this genius' chosen 'one' look like?

Ask Paul Thomas Anderson, who knows all about complicated love between complicated individuals. True, his eighth feature initially seems another radical departure in a career of many. If *Boogie Nights* and *Magnolia* offered sprawling, emotive contrasts to *Hard Eight*'s clipped neo-noir cool, *Punch-Drunk Love* was a short, sharp about-turn again. *There Will Be Blood* affirmed Anderson's radicalism; *The Master* went weirder with its close-coiled cult dissections; and *Inherent Vice* loosened the coils for ramshackle private dick-ery.

At first, *Phantom Thread*'s tight-wound front couldn't seem more different. Set at a rarefied remove from its '50s backdrop, it presents a meticulous character study of fastidious clothes designer Reynolds Woodcock, played by Daniel Day-Lewis in a performance pinched with hollowed-out precision. But remember how love was impossible in *Magnolia* or destabilising in *Punch-Drunk*, or how isolated from the world *Blood*'s Daniel Plainview and *Vice*'s dope-distanced Doc were: gradually, it becomes clear how Anderson's vision is sewn into *Phantom*'s threads.

Both impressive in his mono-minded mania and absurd in his neediness, Woodcock joins these Anderson-ites in vividly drawn, all-consuming obsession. He likes everything just so and cannot abide idle chat. The characterisation is finessed down to every verbal repetition: he'll often restate his points with subtly varied wording, as if he can't perceive disagreement as anything but a simple failure to understand.

Anderson initially seems to revel in this isolation, matching Woodcock's precision in fine details. This is cinema of refined self-containment, music and image merged in rhapsodic artifice. At Woodcock's London house, workers arrive in rapt formation, rising to Jonny Greenwood's swelling score for one of the greatest stairwell scenes since Hitchcock.

On which note, enter Vicky Krieps' hotel waitress Alma, catching Reynolds' eye as she

THE VERDICT Anderson crafts another classic of obsession and strange love, played by dynamite leads: Day-Lewis retires in style, Krieps is revelatory.



trips over herself. Like a child trying to impress mother, Reynolds courts her by ordering a whopping brekkie with painstaking relish. Not too runny with the egg, thanks. She accepts his invitation to dinner and his house, where, with further fastidiousness, he begins to dress her. (As Aimee Mann almost sang in *Magnolia*, Alma looks like a perfect fit to him.)

If *Vertigo* pops to mind before you can say "makeover", the set-up veers towards Hitch's *Rebecca* as Reynolds' sister Cyril (a fiercely immovable Lesley Manville) lurks like some ever-present, Mrs. Danvers-ish power behind his throne. More strangely still, Alma doesn't run screaming like she's seen Reynolds' mother's ghost, by whom he's haunted.

When Alma becomes entwined with Reynolds, his needs prove dictatorial. Their oppressive ludicrousness is exposed with sharp concision: when Alma cooks him buttered asparagus, it ignites one of the greatest food-based tantrums since Jack Nicholson's menu meltdown in *Five Easy Pieces*.

As Alma suffocates in the no-man's-land between Cyril and Reynolds, Anderson flirts with claustrophobic 'artist and muse' psychodrama terrain. But *Phantom* isn't Aronofsky's *mother!* with none-too-runny eggs on top. This is Anderson's film, not least because its core relationship is never simplified. Krieps is an

intuitive revelation whose disarmingly direct character keeps surprising us.

What follows is a duet charged with complexity and mystery, with a startling kink that could hardly have come from another filmmaker. Though Anderson echoes Bergman and Hitchcock on various occasions, he stretches *Phantom* out on exquisitely nuanced, extraordinarily singular lines. Building mysteries that demand unravelling, it subverts expectation throughout. Just when you have it pegged as a chamber piece of parched emotions, Julia Davis' venomous cameo and a volcanic party blindsides you. Elsewhere, Day-Lewis' sublime performance treads a knife-edge of cruelty and comedy, tonal extremes beautifully balanced under Anderson's watch.

Despite its refinement, *Phantom* comes cut from the cloth of lived-in enigmas. And there's no greater enigma here than love, which Anderson views as unfathomable to outsiders and unsustainable between strong-minded people without something breaking. In other words, without spoiling anything, you can't make omelettes without cracking eggs. Nor can you mistake this study of choppy romance for anything but the work of one of modern cinema's great risk-takers.

KEVIN HARLEY

Haenel and Merlant
shine brightly in a
poignant masterpiece.



PORTRAIT OF A LADY ON FIRE 15

DIRECTOR Céline Sciamma **YEAR** 2019

At first glance, French filmmaker Céline Sciamma's fourth feature seems like a radical departure. Radical, that is, in its classicism, as the writer/director known for *Water Lilies* (2007), *Tomboy* (2011) and *Girlhood* (2014) – all modern tales, in setting and theme – offers a painterly period drama set in 18th-century Brittany. But while the elegant style is largely traditional, with Sciamma showing little interest in fiddling with form, the scenes, ideas and women depicted are as progressive as anything on her CV.

Portrait Of A Lady On Fire, like those earlier works, is concerned with the fashioning of its protagonists' identities. The action centres on Héloïse (Adèle Haenel) and Marianne (Noémie Merlant). The former is fresh out of a convent and being readied for marriage to a Milanese gentleman; the latter is hired by Héloïse's countess mother (Valeria Golino) to act as her daughter's walking companion.

Well, that's the story, anyway – Marianne is an artist, and the real reason she's been employed is to paint Héloïse's portrait so that the man from Milan might view the proffered bride. Héloïse would never pose for

such an endeavour – she has already sent one artist packing – so Marianne must commit her features to memory so that she might paint the portrait within the confines of her chamber, alone.

Initially frosty, Héloïse thaws over the course of several perambulations and conversations, responding to the attentiveness of Marianne's gaze and returning it with interest. A romance develops, sensual and intense, but this is no *Blue Is The Warmest Colour* 2 and Sciamma is no Abdellatif Kechiche.

In fact, anyone keen to study the differences between the male and female gazes need only watch Kechiche's lauded but controversial 2013 drama and *Portrait Of A Lady On Fire* as a double bill. While the earlier film won the Palme d'Or, *Portrait* scored its own Cannes triumphs last May: Sciamma picked up Best Screenplay and became the first female director to helm a winning entry in the Queer Palm contest.

THE VERDICT Sciamma looks to the 18th century to find modern truths in a film that is at once sensual, haunting and piercingly intelligent.

More interested in words, intellectual curiosity and social decorum than naked lust, Sciamma has painted a stunning portrait of two ladies, and both of her leads are indeed on fire. But this is more than just a romantic drama or a character study, excellent as it is in those departments.

It has much to say on the act of creativity, on how women were painted out of the arts (at the time the film takes place, women were not allowed to paint men) and how the patriarchy determined a woman's every move, her every right, her very fate. This last is especially pertinent – and, sadly, relevant – in a subplot involving a servant, Sophie (Luàna Bajrami).

For all its composed sumptuousness, *Portrait Of A Lady On Fire* makes for thrilling viewing. There is a hint of Hitchcock to the pull of its desires, and an eerie quality to Marianne's repeated visions of Héloïse in her white wedding gown, emerging from midnight-black shadows before disappearing like a ghost. A night-time sojourn to a crackling bonfire, meanwhile, is at once rhapsodic and uncanny, while also lending a literalism to the film's title to go with its metaphorical meanings. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

THE RAID 2 18

DIRECTOR Gareth Evans **YEAR** 2014

When it comes to action blockbusters, it's hard to think of a time before Jerry Bruckheimer, Michael Bay, Roland Emmerich and co brought their unique style of loud, mega-budget destruction to the masses. And while comic-book movies scratch a certain explosion-y itch, it's been a long time since the action genre felt like it had a genuine edge. Which is why *The Raid 2* hits all the harder. Pun very much intended. Adrenalin-fuelled, gloriously CGI-lite, and with a scope and variety that belies its origins and budget, it's already a heavy contender for the giddiest, most thrilling action ride of the year.

Its 2011 predecessor proved an effectively kinetic enough calling card formany to sit up and pay attention to Welsh director Gareth Evans. The tale of a drug bust gone hideously, bloodily wrong, it centred on one insanely brave cop's desperate mission to scale and then take down a tower block full of psychotic criminals. How? By using the ancient art of punching people very hard in the face. Yet while it was never anything but taut, spectacularly choreographed and wincingly violent, it also drew apt criticism for its narrative and conceptual simplicity. Part *Assault On Precinct 13*, part videogame beat 'em up, it was clear that a simple retread wouldn't suffice for a sequel.

Kicking off straight after the end of *The Raid*, part two sees battered-and-bruised cop Rama (Iko Uwais) made keenly aware of how hollow his victory actually is. The crime lord he defeated was but a mid-level grunt in an expansive underworld. To guarantee his family's safety, Rama must go undercover – first in prison, to get close to Ukok (Arifin Putra), the son of a mob boss, and later as a trusted enforcer for the family he's meant to destroy. Throw in Ukok's own pretensions to his father's crime crown, a burgeoning gang war with a rival Japanese dynasty, and an assassin-spawning wildcard intent on overruling all, and soon Rama realises he's in way over his head.

On paper, this tale of fathers, sons, gangland crime wars, and undercover cops trapped by the corruption they're trying to

THE VERDICT Sumptuously shot, perfectly paced and flat-out exhilarating, *The Raid 2* cements Evans as the best action director working today. Fight aficionados should brace themselves for a bruising, blistering ride.



They showed off some fancy moves at the abattoir.

overcome isn't anything new. A hotchpotch of *Infernal Affairs* and *The Godfather*, it may not be narratively original, but it's bolstered by a host of dramatic performances that grip as easily as the action.

A simmering stew of petulance, arrogance and daddy issues, Putra is a particular stand-out. Then there's returning-as-a-new-character Yayan Ruhian, excellent as a deadly, valiant vagabond. Both embark on emotional journeys that belie the simplicity of the set-up. Meanwhile, a host of eccentric, almost Tarantino-esque psychopaths entertain as swiftly as they shock (the petition for a spin-off featuring the brilliantly named Hammer Girl and Baseball Bat Man starts here). True, certain secondary storylines get lost amid the politics: Rama's motivations rapidly fade into the background, and the issue of who's double-crossing whom and for what can occasionally confuse. But *The Raid 2* essays an ambitious and admirable shift in genre, opening up a scope far beyond the confines of its predecessor. Evans relishes the switch-up, crafting set-piece after set-piece guaranteed to have you scraping your jaw up off the floor. The sheer imagination on show, both in the

cinematography and choreography, guarantees each brawl is instantly iconic.

A breathless toilet-based takedown (Rama, trapped in a cubicle against 20 bustling goons) is just the audacious start. Notable highlights include a freewheeling and visceral 30 to 40-person prison-yard brawl, a thrillingly crafted, bone-crunchingly destructive car chase, a wryly funny trio of gangland assassinations, and a tense, violently balletic kitchen-based finale that echoes Bruce Lee's unfinished masterpiece *Game Of Death*.

Immaculately edited, each traumatic, tensely tactile fight would blur into chaos if not for Evans' pinpoint pacing – there's an ebb and a flow to the aggro woven around the storyline. The director also flaunts a knack for turning sedate moments into explosive ones – something that refreshes all the more in the face of modern blockbusting's tendency to start big and just keep getting bigger, until burnout.

The Raid 2 may not be the best action, gangster, or even martial-arts movie ever. But as a combination of all three, it's unparalleled in recent memory and offers a glimpse into a post-Bayhem action-movie world. Brutal, beautiful and brilliant. **MATT RISLEY**

**RAW** 18**DIRECTOR** Julia Ducournau **YEAR** 2016

Every so often a horror comes along that redraws the map, redefines the genre and renders its contemporaries rather bloodless by comparison. That's not to say *Raw* – a sharp, sexy and eye-poppingly gory French-Belgian cannibal number – isn't already marinated in some pretty tasty stock.

With nods to *Carrie*, *Ginger Snaps* and *Teeth*, this is very much from the 'monstrous, burgeoning female sexuality' school – movies drawing corollaries between the stinky, messy, awkward stuff of adolescence, and the truly Other. And yet writer and director Julia Ducournau's debut feels astonishingly fresh and bold. Surely destined for cult-classic status, it may very possibly have unrepentant carnivores developing a taste for Linda McCartney's soya sausages.

Tracing the startling turn of events that occur after strict vegetarian student vet Justine (a blistering Garance Marillier) is forced to eat a rabbit kidney in a hideous college hazing ritual, *Raw*'s every transgressive frame is filled with (often darkly funny) bestial allusions, yet retains a very human poignancy and depth. It also comes front-loaded with that ultimate seal of approval – reports of fainting audiences. While seasoned horror-watchers know to take such things with a pinch of finest Himalayan rock salt, in this instance, do consider yourself extremely warned... **ALI CATTERALL**

THE VERDICT A bracing and brilliant original, with a delicious script and meaty performances.

ROMEO + JULIET 12 **DIRECTOR** Baz Luhrmann **YEAR** 1997

How unlike your typical Shakespeare adaptation Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* is. Like Ian McKellen's remarkable *Richard III*, it breaks free of stagy tradition almost completely – only the poetic language and that plot are left to give the game away. Out go the ruffs, tights and oh-so-perfect English accents. Instead, Luhrmann's production delights in John Woo-style slow-mo, in-ye-face art direction, gender-bending gang members and casual drug-taking. Where you'd expect to see horses, there are convertible Chevys. Where there should be swords and rapiers, there are handguns. Even the muted Capulet-Montague confrontation that kick-starts the original play becomes, in Baz's hands, a *Desperado*-style stand-off – all guntoting teen posturing, backed by the lazy twang of an electric guitar.

Even if this contemporary take on such an old, familiar story seems like a dumb idea – an uncalled-for remake of *Boyz n The Hood* with added rhyming couplets – chances are it will win you over. And it looks consistently fabulous. Taking its cue from the drug-fuelled, funk-up lifestyle of any inner-city ghetto, it's one long eye-popper of a film.

It's greatly to the movie's credit that nothing has been taken as sacred, either – the play's been chopped and changed and messed about with as much as is needed to make it work as a film. Instead of the fair port of Verona, Luhrmann gives us a Mexican beachside metropolis – a decaying nowhere with the Capulet and the Montague families represented by two huge business corporations. This is a seedy world in which the "dagger" isn't a small, pointy sword but a popular make of 9mm handgun. Similarly, the 'Prince' of Verona turns out to be the local Chief of Police, while a local church choir belts out Prince's 'When

THE VERDICT Shakespeare goes to Mexico, as Luhrmann and the art of film-making update *Romeo+Juliet* with bold, anarchistic verve. You've got to see it.

Doves Cry' in fabulous gospelicious harmony – this is celluloid Shakespeare with an unforced sense of humour. At first the juxtaposition of what you're seeing with what you're hearing may grate; later, it'll seem perfect.

What Luhrmann's interpretation does is to strip Shakespeare down to its literary boxers. It sacrifices huge chunks of text for "visual" storytelling. If you've never encountered *Romeo & Juliet* before, this dumping of the more flowery poetry and unimportant scenes makes everything much easier to understand.

As for the performances, DiCaprio and Danes acquit themselves well enough, but their brief love affair never really ignites. But the acting in *Romeo + Juliet* isn't the incredible thing – it's the look of the production. With Luhrmann's quick-fire music-video approach to the material, It assaults the senses with a non-stop rush of vibrant images and fast-cutting action. It's a rich, rude, violent ride that storms the walls of haughty Bardness – potted Shakespeare for the Tarantino generation. Love it or hate it, there is no middle ground. You'll either come out thinking it an anarchic work of near-genius, or an embarrassing mess.

Whatever you decide, Luhrmann has managed something so different with this production it just cries out to be seen. Hardcore traditionalists will be appalled. We suspect that Shakespeare himself – though he'd probably wince at all the text that's been cut – would love it. Branagh has just brought us a brilliant, faithful version of Shakey; Luhrmann has, equally brilliantly, reinvented *Romeo + Juliet* for the present day. **TF**



She couldn't believe he was actually using the 'falling-from-heaven' pickup line.

THE REVENANT 15

DIRECTOR Alejandro G. Iñárritu **YEAR** 2015

Revenge is in the creator's hands," real-life frontiersman Hugh Glass is told midway through Alejandro G. Iñárritu's extraordinary wilderness drama. It's this feeling of vengeance that boils inside Glass (Leonardo DiCaprio) throughout much of this two-and-a-half-hour epic – and little wonder. Mauled by a bear, left for dead by his men and witness to the murder of his own son, Glass' bleak and bloody survival in this harsh 1820s terrain is motivated by one reason alone: to even the score.

That bare outline doesn't even begin to capture the sheer wild ambition, beauty and savagery on show in *The Revenant*. Far more challenging than even Iñárritu's bravura Oscar-winner *Birdman*, this is his *Fitzcarraldo* or his *Apocalypse Now* – man versus the elements, both on screen and off. Stories have already spread about the legendarily arduous shoot endured by cast and crew in the Canadian wilderness. Whatever hardships they went through were worth it.

In the first five minutes, Iñárritu and his *Birdman* cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki will leave you agog with a scene of arrow-whizzing, tomahawk-wielding carnage as Glass and his fellow fur trappers, led by the resourceful Captain Andrew Henry (Domhnall Gleeson), are set upon by a gang of Native Americans. As a group of 40-odd men is whittled down to just 10, Lubezki's camerawork ensures you're just as captivated by incidental details as you are by the action: the sun glinting through trees, birds circling, plumes of smoke rising.

By the 25-minute mark, you'll be literally slack-jawed for one of the most stunning scenes ever committed to film, as Glass is attacked by a grizzly bear protecting its two young. Is it CGI? Is it real footage? However it was done, the result astonishes as Glass is tossed around, clawed, bitten and even sat on, the bear's paw squashing his head into the dirt. Like so much of this remarkably visceral film, you'll live every moment with him – every scream and anguished howl.

While Henry is able to sew up Glass' wounds, it becomes clear that the group won't be able to carry him to safety through the harsh, mountainous landscape. "The proper

THE VERDICT Astounding. With a director, DoP and cast at the top of their game, *The Revenant* is a filmmaking triumph. You cannot afford to miss experiencing this on the big screen.



We think we'll excuse him the fur coat...

thing to do would be to finish him off quick," says Fitzgerald (Tom Hardy), interested only in self-preservation. Volunteering to stay with Glass, Fitzgerald is joined by youngster Jim Bridger (Will Poulter) and Glass' half-Native American son Hawk (Forrest Goodluck), who refuses to leave his father's side.

Soon enough, Fitzgerald is leading the escape back to civilisation, leaving Glass to die. This, of course, he refuses to do, flaunting survival skills that would put Bear Grylls to shame (not least hauling himself out of a shallow grave).

Co-written by Iñárritu and Mark L. Smith (who penned Joe Dante's *The Hole*), the story is adapted from Michael Punke's 2002 novel – itself inspired by the myth that built up around Glass after his grizzly attack. If the film has a documentary-like realism to it, Iñárritu seasons it with frequent digressions, flashbacks, hallucinations and dreams, as Glass drifts in and out of consciousness, conjuring images of his son and wife (who at one point appears floating above him like a ghost).

Glass isn't the only man left on the mountain, though; in a parallel story, a Native American is leading his tribe in search for his missing daughter Powaga (Melaw Nakehk'o). French-speaking fur trappers, rivals to the

Captain Henry-led gang, are also in the mix. But to say more about their involvement would give away elements of the final blood-soaked act – which'll leave you feeling especially battered and bruised.

If you're imagining *The Revenant* is a film chock-full of gratuitous violence, though, nothing could be further from the truth. True, some moments are stomach-churning – not least Glass cutting out the innards of a dead horse and using it as a makeshift sleeping bag (think Luke Skywalker on Hoth with his Tauntaun). But Iñárritu, pacing the film to perfection, never forgets that even in the most extreme circumstances there can be levity – Glass and a Pawnee Indian, for example, catching snow on their tongues.

With Lubezki's photography at once capturing the magnificence and cruelty of Mother Nature, like the moment Glass stands by to watch a bison stampede, you'll be left in a state of shock and awe. Will *The Revenant* repeat Iñárritu's triple-Oscar swoop for *Birdman*? Will Lubezki gain his third consecutive golden statue? Will DiCaprio, in full-blooded form, finally shake off that Academy curse? On this evidence, it's impossible to see how they could not. **JAMES MOTTRAM**

ROGUE ONE: A STAR WARS STORY 12A

DIRECTOR Gareth Edwards **YEAR** 2016

What the original trilogy did so well was hint at a world that was so much bigger than what you saw on screen, so do we really need a film like *Rogue One*? Based on this evidence, the answer is a victorious “Yahoo!”. Like *The Force Awakens*, *Rogue* has clearly been crafted with care and considerable attention to detail, and it unfurls a fascinating corner in the galaxy far, far away that’ll thrill fans as they revel in its meticulous world. It works in its own right as a full-blooded action adventure, though there’s no question it’ll mean more to those who’ve pored over trading cards and staged their own standalone stories with action figures.

While the storytelling is relatively lean, the plotting is more complex than *A New Hope*’s opening text would have you believe. We start with a prologue, where the connection between scientist Galen Erso (Mads Mikkelsen) and the building of the Death Star is established, and Galen’s daughter, Jyn, goes into hiding. As a wayward adult rebel (but not yet a Rebel), Jyn (Felicity Jones) is apathetic about galactic politics, but gets a chance to take a more active role when she’s sprung from a labour camp by a faction of the Rebel Alliance. She’s one

thread in a plan that leads back to Galen, and his designs for the ultimate weapon. It’s here the mission begins, and there’s no letting up.

What first delights is quite how real the world feels. Director Gareth Edwards’ previous films *Monsters* and *Godzilla* focus more on human characters than beasts, and *Rogue One* is similarly boots-on-the-ground level. As with *TFA*, the commitment to practical sets, real locations, in-camera effects and creature make-up conjures a tangible world, one that feels very much of a piece with the galaxy you grew up with; *Rogue One* never comes across as an ‘alternative’ *Star Wars* film. It fits comfortably with the series. Within this very much alive world, the stakes are clearly established, and the tension of intergalactic war hangs in the air. More than *The Force Awakens*, *Rogue One* gives a broader sense of the political landscape, and indeed the war that’s playing out in the background: this actually feels like a war film, where loose lips could sink starships, and the line between goodies and baddies is ambiguously shaded.

The casting helps to blur the distinction. *Rogue One*’s central motley crew are individually textured and clearly defined. Everyone from Riz Ahmed’s defected Imperial

pilot to odd-couple warriors Chirrut and Baze (Donnie Yen and Wen Jiang) feels developed, and has a chance to shine without it feeling like arbitrary box ticking. Alan Tudyk steals all the laughs as K-2SO, a reprogrammed Imperial droid who’s something like a sassier, snarkier, tougher Threepio. Jones is terrific in a role that’s grittier and more badass than anything she’s done before, and Diego Luna brings a mercenary edginess to Captain Cassian Andor.

Even on the Imperial side, character actor extraordinaire Ben Mendelsohn largely reins it in as Imperial weapons head Director Krennic, exuding both menace and the frustration that comes with being a few links down the chain of command. And of course, there’s the small matter of Darth Vader’s return.

He’s infrequently seen but keenly felt, and his brief appearance is catnip for fans, restoring his credibility after he was last seen howling “Noooooooooooooo!” in *Revenge Of The Sith*. The dark lord formerly known as Anakin is one of a handful of callbacks and references. One CG face will provide a fan thrill, even if it’s slightly at odds with the otherwise tactile surroundings, and certain crowd-pleasing references feel a bit more natural than others. Still, *Rogue One* feels remarkably coherent with no sense of a cut-and-shut job.

The music is also handled with care, even if Michael Giacchino has the unenviable task of being the first person who’s not John Williams to craft a *Star Wars* movie score. Naturally, there’s nothing quite as memorable as Williams’ standouts, and no one gets a theme you’ll be humming after the credits roll, but given *Rogue*’s ‘outsider’ status, this does no harm, and judiciously used snippets of the classic score electrify.

The opening shot confirms that *Rogue One* is no *Star Wars*-lite, and everything from shots of locations, fallen Jedi temples and the Death Star itself feel wholly ‘big screen’, with Edwards frequently demonstrating his knack for scale. And despite viewers ostensibly knowing the outcome, *Rogue One* grips until the very end. The biggest surprise is how emotional it is, with several scenes primed to (Force) choke you up.

Rogue One might trade in nostalgia but it’s bold enough to take risks, and will leave you stirred, fired up and raring for more. Now, if only there was a follow-up we could go and watch immediately... **MATT MAYTUM**

THE VERDICT Proof that *Star Wars* prequels can work, *Rogue One* is a rousing action-packed epic that’s a treat for fans and one of the year’s best blockbusters.



Felicity Jones commands the screen in *Rogue One*.

ROOM 15

DIRECTOR Lenny Abrahamson **YEAR** 2015

You don't have to be claustrophobic to be unsettled by Lenny Abrahamson's latest, a tale of love, hope and survival that confines a significant part of its action to an airless, locked outhouse. Said shed has been the home of Ma (Brie Larson) for seven years, the length of time she has been held captive by a man we know only by the demonic moniker Old Nick (Sean Bridgers). The last five of those years have been spent raising Jack (Jacob Tremblay), a little boy for whom this single room represents the world in its entirety. Jack, to state the horrifically obvious, is Old Nick's son – a child born of rape who may be Ma's only chance of salvation.

Recent scandals involving the likes of Josef Fritzl, Ariel Castro and Aravindan 'Comrade Bala' Balakrishnan have shown that *Room*'s plot, if outlandish, is anything but fanciful. Yet Abrahamson's film – adapted by Emma Donoghue from her own best-selling novel – is no lurid exploitationer but a thoughtful, at times poetic meditation on how one endures and makes bearable a nightmarish dilemma. Ma, a bit like Roberto Benigni in *Life Is Beautiful*, artfully shields her five-year-old from the ghastliness of their shared plight, filling his days instead with fun, games and exercise. Jack, for his part, gives Ma a reason to go on living a life she would have happily put an end to were he not there to be cared for.

Room, then, is a story of mutual dependency under the bleakest conditions conceivable. But because it's told from Jack's perspective, it's rarely explicitly bleak. Never having seen or known anything else, 'Room' is no cell for Jack but a playground of possibilities: one in which Lamp and Bath and Stove are friends as much as implements, and Ma is an omnipresent, ever-adoring constant. Jack, in short, is not one to complain, even when the heat is capriciously turned off or when he's obliged to hide in Wardrobe to facilitate Old Nick's frequent visitations – encounters that we, like him, do not see but only hear taking place from behind a shuttered partition. Indeed, there are times Donoghue provocatively asks if such an upbringing might even be preferable to the over-stimulated, expectation-burdened childhood that is generally considered 'normal'.

Abrahamson, like Jack, makes the best of his lot too, deploying imagination, creativity

THE VERDICT A prize-winning page-turner becomes a moving, harrowing and redemptive drama about the ties that bind a mother to her child. Be warned: one box of tissues may not be enough.



Ma (Brie Larson) and Jack (Jacob Tremblay) in the titular *Room*.

and a host of ingenious angles to make *Room* as cinematic as possible. (You wonder if he wanted to set himself a challenge comparable to the one he gave Michael Fassbender in *Frank*, a film that asked the actor to give a performance from within a papier-mâché head.) Assisted by production designer Ethan Tobman, the *What Richard Did* director makes Ma and Jack's living quarters a mutable space whose four walls abound with revealing little details. At no point, though, are we ever allowed to forget this is, in essence, a cage: a grubby, mouldy interior every bit as inviting as the one Maggie Smith inhabited in *The Lady In The Van*.

Dame Maggie, of course, could get out of her van whenever she wanted to and see and experience the world outside. That's a prospect denied to Ma and Jack until *Room*'s midway point, where it stops being a study of incarceration and becomes a thriller about a jailbreak. To disclose more would be a disservice, to both the movie and the reader. Suffice to say that what follows turns *Room* on its head, not least by introducing Brie's parents (Joan Allen and William H. Macy) into a yarn that had previously seemed destined to remain a grippingly minimalist three-hander.

Larson, so good in 2013's *Short Term 12*, is even better here in a role that requires her to be victim, rock and lioness, often at the same time. (The fact that Ma's actual name is Joy presents the intriguing prospect that two of this season's likely Best Actress nominees – Jennifer Lawrence being the other – will be recognised for playing like-titled heroines.) It has been a breakthrough year for the 26-year-old Sacramentan, whose appearance here comes hot on the heels of playing Amy Schumer's sister in *Trainwreck* – another mum, incidentally, who feels compelled at one stage to defend her boy's legitimacy to a coldly unwelcoming grandfather. As terrific as she is, though, it's Tremblay who emerges as the film's trump card, the adorable youngster proving both charming and heartbreaking as he charts Jack's painful passage from innocence to experience.

Room is a film about entrapment. Yet it's also one about liberation, about letting go of your fears and moving on from trauma, however deep it is. At one point Jack asks to be shorn of the locks he has been cultivating since infancy. It's a revelatory, transformative moment in a film you won't find nearly so easy to say goodbye to.

NEIL SMITH

The old 'superglue on the seat of the race suit' routine was always priceless.



RUSH 15 **DIRECTOR** Ron Howard **YEAR** 2013

Fast cars, glamorous girls and champagne a-flowing... Formula One has always been the sport with the most decadent vibe. More so than curling, anyway. A world where brinkmanship is as common as wheel spins, where real danger lurks at every hairpin bend, it would seem fertile ground for a film. Particularly when your story zeroes in on the infamous rivalry between British driver James Hunt and his 1970s Austrian counterpart Niki Lauda – two wildly different characters united in their determination to win.

In the hands of Ron Howard, it's a tale that could easily have gone awry; while he's successfully documented real-life heroism before, in 1995's *Apollo 13*, he's a director who, on occasion, gets dazzled by the superficial. The sour taste left by his recent Dan Brown outings lingers.

Fortunately, *Rush* far exceeds expectations, emerging as one of the most rip-roaring rides of Howard's career. Put this down in part to writer Peter Morgan. Whether it's Blair/Brown (*The Deal*), HRH/Blair (*The Queen*), Idi Amin/his doctor (*The Last King Of Scotland*) or the two eponymous protags of the Howard-directed *Frost/Nixon* (2008), bringing two forceful figures head to head is Morgan's speciality.

In 2010, Asif Kapadia's Bafta-winning documentary *Senna* proved there is a thirst for F1 films, compellingly tracing the life and death of driver Ayrton Senna. Morgan winds the clock back further – to when driver safety finished a distant last. But *Rush* is not a film for

petrolheads. It's a character study of two men – one brazen and cocksure, the other an early-to-bed obsessive – who were both mavericks of the track.

The Surrey-born Hunt (Chris Hemsworth) is the golden boy, the George Best of F1, driving in the red and white of McLaren. He's a risk-taker and a womaniser. "James can be a loose cannon," we're told, "but in terms of raw talent there is no better driver in the world." His opponent and polar opposite is Ferrari driver Lauda (Daniel Brühl); more analytical than Hunt, more mechanically minded, a man who spurns the post-race partying his playboy rival laps up.

Briefly showing us the rise of both men, Morgan's script primarily concentrates on the 1976 season, with Lauda defending the World Championship he won the previous year. Students of F1 will know that it was a season that changed both their lives forever. But even if you go in armed with all the facts, *Rush*'s immediacy will still have you sweating bullets.

Oddly, though, *Rush* almost stalls at the starting grid – the early scenes awash with 1970s fashions and mullets take some adjusting to. In particular, Aussie actor Hemsworth's plum Home Counties accent briefly brings back nightmare memories of Tom Cruise's 'oirish' lilt in Howard's *Far And Away*. But then, gradually,

THE VERDICT Utterly gripping. Aided by two punchy lead turns, an Oscar-worthy script and stunning in-car footage, Howard's race film delivers top-gear drama. A piston- and heart-pumping triumph.

Rush shapes into a film that transcends a tale of '70s excess and becomes one about dedication, honour, loyalty and sporting fellowship.

There are no villains here, only heroes, and Morgan makes it clear early on that neither Hunt nor Lauda are as black-and-white as the chequered flag they chase. Take Lauda, for example, and the scene where he and his wife-to-be Marlene (Alexandra Maria Lara) pick up two F1 fans whose car has broken down. Abruptly flooring the accelerator, Lauda shows that Hunt isn't the only one capable of taking risks; suddenly, he feels like a worthy adversary.

But what really makes *Rush* purr is the final stretch, as Lauda contends with colossal odds, both physically and psychologically. Brühl has a knack for getting us to empathise with the unlikeable (see *Inglourious Basterds*) and with each scene he increasingly makes you understand and root for his difficult character.

As brilliant as Brühl is, Hemsworth has just as tough a task. From seducing a nurse (Natalie Dormer) to his tumultuous marriage to model Suzy Miller (Olivia Wilde), he's not always easy to side with. But there are several flashes of raw emotion here that balance the surface swagger.

Amid all this is a series of visceral racetrack scenes, brilliantly recreated by Howard and DoP Anthony Dod Mantle (*Slumdog Millionaire*), cut to a thumping Hans Zimmer score. That *Rush* manages to sting us with these is testament to its craftsmanship. Rarely has a feature film captured the intensity and exhilaration of motor sport so well. *Rush* is the word. **JAMES MOTTRAM**



THE SELFISH GIANT ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Clio Barnard **YEAR** 2013

Great social-realist cinema has to do a lot more than just throw in the kitchen sink. Following her 2010 docudrama breakout *The Arbor*, Clio Barnard's first fiction feature is just about as good as it gets. A beautiful, heartfelt, devastating fable about Broken Britain, *The Selfish Giant* was a rightful award-winner at Cannes, but the real prize is the film itself: signalling the arrival of a host of home-grown talent, confronting sticky issues without fear, and already looking cosily at home in the pantheon of modern Brit-classics.

At the thumping heart of the film is 13-year-old Arbor (Conner Chapman), a scrappy, hyperactive kid from the sink estates of Bradford who rails against his abusive family, his ignorant teachers and the apathetic doctors. The only good thing in his life is best friend Swifty (Shaun Thomas), a gentle giant without the smarts to rail at anything at all. When they get expelled for standing up for each other, the boys try to earn some fast cash, stumbling into the scrap-metal business after they nick a length of copper cable from the railway line.

Swapping their dingy interiors for mist-shrouded West Yorkshire fields, the pair set off with a horse and cart to make their fortune against a dusky horizon of smoke stacks and electrical pylons. Flecks of magical realism glimmer in the twilight, hinting at the story's loose roots in the Oscar Wilde fairytale that lends the film its name.

Cracks start to appear when dodgy dealer Kitten (Sean Gilder) gets the kids to do his dirty work, but the story is tightly bound together by the pair's unshakable friendship – and more importantly, by the youngsters playing them. Both non-professional actors, Chapman and Thomas gift *The Selfish Giant* with urgent, lively, wholly natural performances, easily outshining their adult co-stars.

Obvious comparisons to Ken Loach's *Kes* abound in Arbor's emotional journey, but this is a much tougher tale; Barnard cutting deeper and

THE VERDICT Carried aloft by remarkable performances, Clio Barnard's poignant, unflinching slice of hard-knock-life grips tight and lingers long.

hitting harder. Which isn't to say she holds back on the tears in the wrenching finale either. Following a run of shorts and docs, Barnard fills her narrative debut with so much wholehearted passion for her characters, it's all you can do not to laugh, scream and cry right along with them. **PAUL BRADSHAW**



SIDEWAYS ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Alexander Payne **YEAR** 2004

Bursting with fruity aromas and full-bodied humanism, *Sideways* sees writer/director Alexander Payne consciously rebottle the flavour of Hollywood's vintage era. "People say to me, 'Your films feel so fresh and different,'" Payne observes. "But I'm not trying to make new films. I'm trying to revitalise the cinema of the '70s, with its emphasis on real people and real struggles..."

Payne's latest picture revisits the spiky theme of his previous two, *Election* and *About Schmidt*, with Paul Giamatti's sad-sack Miles another lost man floundering in Middle America. A depressed divorcé, a failed writer and a raging alcoholic who hides his disease behind oenological enthusiasm, Miles is a socially awkward, romantically inept screw-up. Thomas Haden Church's carefree Jack, meanwhile, is really not much better: washed-up actor, cultural Neanderthal and incurable womaniser.

Friends bonded by past rather than present, they've grown apart. Miles is now like the Pinot grape he so admires, thin-skinned and vulnerable, while Jack is hardy and easy-going like a good Cabernet. Yet put them together and this odd couple make up a vaguely even whole, their mutual reliance giving each comic mishap an emotional kick, every burst of prattle a poignant undercurrent.

Adapting Rex Pickett's semiautobiographical novel, Payne and co-scribbler Jim Taylor inspect their protagonists' imperfections by holding them up to the warm lights of Virginia Madsen's soulful waitress and Sandra Oh's lively pourer. The result? A film that's rich, warm and satisfyingly complex, blending a variety of flavours (anguish, joy, humiliation, pathos, amusement, hope) into a honey-mellow whole.

Of course, much of the credit must go to the four leads, less starry but no less impressive than *Closer*'s quartet of Oscar-fancied beauties. Oh gives the movie a zingy aftertaste; Madsen is smooth and sweet with a hint of melancholy; Haden Church fizzles before revealing unexpected layers; and Giamatti... Well, imagine *American Splendor*'s Harvey

THE VERDICT Squint, sniff and slurp to your heart's content: this road-movie-cum-midlife-crisis-cum-romantic-comedy slips down a treat.

Pekar left to mature. To peak. It's the performance of the year.

Still, if it's subtlety and restraint you're after, Payne's wily direction obliges. He's so good he can serve story and character by remaining invisible. Just be sure to see his movie. **TF**

SEX AND LUCÍA ¹⁵

DIR. Julio Medem **YEAR** 2001

The follow-up to *Lovers Of The Arctic Circle* is another beguiling piece of romantic storytelling from Basque magical realist Julio Medem (*Cows*, *The Red Squirrel*).

The Lucía of the title is a Madrid waitress (Paz Vega) who runs away to a secluded Mediterranean island after the death of her writer boyfriend Lorenzo (Tristan Ulloa). There, amid dazzling sunshine and mysterious rock formations, she encounters guest-house proprietor Elena (Najwa Nimri) and scuba-diver Carlos (Daniel Freire), who together cause her to reassess Lorenzo's life and work...

Shifting fluidly between past and present, reality and fantasy, Medem's artistry appears completely effortless. The multi-layered narrative considers how fiction is both created and consumed, while intense, naturalistic performances from the capable cast collide with dreamy, overexposed imagery (the film was shot on hand-held digital video) and a marvellously melodramatic score. And yes, there's also a smattering of sex. **TF**

THE VERDICT Sex And Lucía is the most impressive work yet from a hugely impressive filmmaker.



Nobody was really in the mood to conga.



SICARIO ¹⁵ DIRECTOR Denis Villeneuve **YEAR** 2015

The motif to which Denis Villeneuve's ferocious cartel thriller keeps returning may seem inconsequential. But Villeneuve (*Prisoners*, *Incendies*) is not that kind of director, and this is not that kind of film. In the afternoon heat, dust motes dance in front of the camera lens just before one of the most exciting action sequences you'll see all year hits.

We're in Chandler, Arizona, as a SWAT team surrounds a bungalow. Jóhann Jóhannsson's heart-in-mouth score pulses oppressively. Here, for the first time, we cut to those motes, swirling in a darkened living room, until the walls explode, and Kidnap Response Unit agents Kate Macer (Emily Blunt), her partner Reggie (Daniel Kaluuya), and their colleagues storm the building. What follows memorably traumatic, swathed in shellshocked screams and choking sand: another kind of dust.

Macer barely has time to wash the blood out of her hair before she's paraded in front of a cabal of Y-chromosome-heavy officials including undercover operative Matt (Josh Brolin), dress-down dismissive in flip-flops. The Mexican drug cartels are encroaching into Arizona, we're told, before a sexist interrogation: "Married?" "No." "Kids?" "No. Anything else?" Her mission? "To overreact dramatically." Watching what follows, you'll know exactly how that feels...

Strangely, for a film more likely to waste innocent bystanders than time, Macer's first assignment with Matt and his mysterious cohort Alejandro (Benicio Del Toro) – an over-the-border raid to kidnap a cartel leader – serves very little narrative purpose, or could at least be elided in montage. But Taylor Sheridan's action-heavy, exposition-light script is smarter than that, and the effect of this sequence is threefold. Firstly, it illustrates the vastness of the drugs trade and the

dangers of trying to dismantle it. Secondly, it puts us, like Macer, out on the frontline. But most of all it's polygraph-test tense.

Set to the bass drone of a distant air strike, or a stomach turning over, five black government vehicles rip through battle-ravaged bandit country expecting ambushes at every corner. For 15 minutes, nothing happens, but all that time spent sitting on your hands means that, when violence flares on a crowded border road, the anxiety levels are unbearable. The resulting carnage, sneers Matt, "won't even make the papers in El Paso." It is, without doubt, one of the greatest traffic jams ever committed to celluloid, right up there with Fellini's *8½* and Joel Schumacher's *Falling Down*.

Tough but brittle, Blunt would make a great Sarah Connor, but Macer isn't really the centre of this story. Brolin and Del Toro's world-weary charisma speaks of once-decent men capable of terrible things, and breakout star Kaluuya's welcome warmth makes his sidekick cherishable rather than disposable.

Sicario fires on just about every level, from Jóhannsson's supple score to Roger Deakins' desert-scorched cinematography to Sheridan's lean script. But Villeneuve's also trying to show us something more ambitious than gut-punch gunfights: that the fallout from the drugs trade is everywhere, the violence invisible, but endemic. Echoed over and over – in the grainy night-vision goggles, rockets in the Mexican skies, the smoke of innumerable cigarettes – those dust motes stand in for all the evils not easily seen, but spreading all the same. **MATT GLASBY**

THE VERDICT *Sicario* represents the perfect mix of cerebral and visceral thrills. Star, director and screenwriter all bring their A-game.



Elisa is left speechless by what she discovers in the tank.

THE SHAPE OF WATER 15 **DIRECTOR** Guillermo del Toro **YEAR** 2017

Even before you factor in his love for ghosts, fauns and kaiju, thick currents of feeling have always run through Guillermo del Toro's finest films. Consider Federico Luppi's poetic longings in *The Devil's Backbone*, Hellboy's love for Selma Blair's Liz Sherman, or the weeping heart of innocence lost in *Pan's Labyrinth*. And they double as declarations of devotion to the belief that film can seduce and transform across boundaries.

Those rivers of feeling overflow in his tenth film, an impassioned musical romance brimming with evidence of deep directorial conviction. True, recent del Toro workouts *Pacific Rim* and *Crimson Peak* also stretched beyond their monster-movie and melodrama roots thanks to his unfiltered investment. But *The Shape Of Water* is the director at his purest, surfacing as an English-language (and sign-language) extension of *Backbone* and *Pan* in its fulsomely imagined period allegory of outsiders resisting the tide of historical oppression.

For *Backbone*'s orphan hero and *Pan*'s inquisitive Ofelia, substitute Sally Hawkins' mute Elisa, a lonely but life-loving cleaner who lives above an old-school film palace in 1962 Baltimore and finds escape in movies, music and moments of bathtub bliss. Meanwhile, her outsider bonds with potty-mouthed fellow cleaner Zelda (Octavia Spencer) and gay neighbour Giles (Richard Jenkins) receive full expression in del Toro and Vanessa Taylor's character-rich script.

At another extreme sits Colonel Strickland (Michael Shannon), who we meet as he delivers

an 'asset' for containment to the government facility where Elisa and Zelda work: a creature (Doug Jones) from a black lagoon, deemed to be of Cold War interest. After a shocking, bloody episode reveals our amphibian enjoys neither imprisonment nor torture, Elisa forms a bond with him based on Benny Goodman records and hard-boiled eggs. Soon, aided by sensitive scientist Dr. Hoffstetler (Michael Stuhlbarg) and pals, she hatches a plan to bust the creature free: and Strickland isn't the kind to pay enough attention to 'the help' to see the plan coming.

A kind of renegade fairytale romance ensues, though this being del Toro, it ensues in extravagantly wrought fashion. He frames the transformative, language-leaping bond between a wounded fish-fella and a scarred woman who has, finally, found someone who doesn't look through her, with poetic potency.

It also helps that Hawkins is on peak form. In her richest role since *Happy-Go-Lucky*, she communicates non-verbal feeling with an unforced charm that never dampens the longings below. Don't let the faint echoes of *Amélie* dupe you: Hawkins and del Toro ensure her feelings run truer than any burped up in Jean-Pierre Jeunet's whimsical hit.

Jones projects similar forces of feeling through the scales and tactile grunts of the gill-man, his animal nature honoured yet

THE VERDICT Del Toro's Valentine to boundary-crossing love pours from the screen in ravishing torrents of feeling and style. And Hawkins is sublime.

never diluted for smooth consumption. After Universal's botched monster-movie revivals, this is a monster done right, red of tooth, claw and heart: and should any *Blade II* fans fear del Toro has gone soft, let's just say the creature's hunger observes no pet-based pieties. Also on boundary-busting duty is Spencer, who vigorously channels the spirits of classic Hollywood romance's barbed best pals – with added knob jokes. And Jenkins brings a worldly-wise poignancy to Giles, whose crush on a waiter sparks a persuasive portrait of period prejudice.

That bigotry erupts in Strickland. With oiled hair and ominous cheekbones lit from below, Strickland would verge on noir-heavy cliché were it not for Shannon's seething menace and del Toro's understanding of his type. A creature of his Cold War times, Strickland is the American successor to *Backbone*'s grasping proto-fascist Jacinto and *Pan*'s full-bore fascist Vidal; he bleeds like them, too.

The result is a full-blooded fable of outsider love that's at once timely and timeless, fantastical and forceful. Del Toro's intuitive direction navigates the tides between matters of the heart and monsters of history with fluid power, buoyed by the swoon and lunge of Alexandre Desplat's lavish score. Meanwhile, DoP Dan Laustsen's sumptuous images relish every inch of Paul D. Austerberry's immersive production designs, from Elisa's home to the movie theatre below. In one scene, the gill-man stands before that cinema screen, transported. In del Toro's hands, we know exactly how he feels. **KEVIN HARLEY**



SICILIAN GHOST STORY 15

DIRECTORS Fabio Grassadonia, Antonio Piazza **YEAR** 2018

The first 'twist' this richly cinematic fable offers is that it's rooted in real life. Written and directed by Fabio Grassadonia and Antonio Piazza, the film was inspired by the 1993 kidnapping, imprisonment and murder of schoolboy Giuseppe Di Matteo, whose father was a Mafia assassin-turned-informant.

The events unfold from the perspective of fictional 13-year-old Luna (newcomer Julia Jedilkowska), the girlfriend and classmate of the abducted Giuseppe (Gaetano Fernandez). Incensed at the code of silence displayed by the local community towards the crime, she embarks on a search for her soulmate.

Shot by Paolo Sorrentino's regular cinematographer Luca Bigazzi, this multi-layered film immerses us in the dreams and nightmares of Luna and also allows us to experience Giuseppe's inner world. What's more, in highlighting the depth of romantic feeling shared by the two teenagers, *Sicilian Ghost Story* provides an eloquent, uplifting and very moving response to the real-life Giuseppe's awful suffering. **TOM DAWSON**

THE VERDICT A dark fairytale whose extraordinary imagination is matched by the compassion it extends to its young lovers.

SIN CITY 18

DIRECTORS Frank Miller, Robert Rodriguez, Quentin Tarantino **YEAR** 2005

There's a line in Raymond Chandler's *Farewell My Lovely* that describes a brutish anti-hero as being "as inconspicuous as a tarantula on a slice of angel cake". That's Mickey Rourke's Marv: a hulking ogre in weathered leather. Voice an unholy rasp of gargled razorblades. Face all patchwork pulp and frazzled flesh. With hammered-down nose and hooked-up chin, he thunders around like an urban rhino on heat for revenge – and that's revenge, not justice...

Sin City is fierce, adult stuff. Heads are severed (we counted seven). Limbs are lopped off. Chunks are chomped out of necks, arrows thunk through faces, hands and scalps are shorn clean away. There's beating, hanging, slashing, torture by whip and some seriously smarting eyeball and genital trauma. But this is a shamelessly abstract world and Robert Rodriguez revels in ripping up the rules of everyday physics in surrender to the exaggerated comicbook logic of co-director and *Sin City* author Frank Miller. Characters leap from fifth-storey windows and land on their feet. They swan-dive down stairwells, spinning off banisters. Hit by cars, they pirouette like gymnasts, thunking back to earth and asking for more. It's thrilling to see such a classy cast freed of all the standard restraints. Rourke in particular delivers a balls-out, born-again performance.

Rodriguez takes Miller's profane urban patois and swashbuckling brushstrokes and ships it wholesale. The three *Sin City* graphic novels adapted here – *The Hard Goodbye*, *The Big Fat Kill* and *That Yellow Bastard* – aren't just inspiration, they're storyboards. Frames and sequences are recreated shot-for-shot. Dialogue is directly transposed. Never before has a comicbook's entire soul been so faithfully, and successfully, ripped from page to screen. And as the stories briefly overlap,

THE VERDICT Together at last: virtuoso technique and uncompromising story swagger. A lavish pulp classic, pumped up to its eyeballs with sex, sleaze and soul.

implying other threads and themes Miller will exploit in later books (and in the deadcert sequels), you'll salivate at the million tales this naked city has yet to tell.

Miller's stinging verbals lend a literary edge to the carnage and carnality: the florid narration, the fancy-talking hoodlums, the Bible-black angst. As with Chandler, there's poetry in the ragged stew of street trash and metaphor mash. Although Rourke is the stand-out, Rodriguez coaxes star turns from all. Elijah Wood terrifies as a mute, cannibal, high-kicking Harry Potter. Bruce Willis, seedy and scarred, looks more at home being the stand-up guy than he did in the flaccid *Hostage*. Benicio del Toro is a cheap and nasty nemesis for Clive Owen's dashing do-gooder, and Nick Stahl's creepy 'Yellow Bastard' will linger long.

Yes, the women are decorative – either strutting around with all assets advertised or poured into gappy bondage garb. But there's plenty of sass to go with the slink, particularly Rosario Dawson's Gail, who protects her patch with a potent force of working-girl power. Only Jessica Alba's nightclub dancer Nancy is a true victim – but that's precisely what drives the logic of her story. This ain't no treatise on sexual politics. It's an unreconstructed, man's man's world where the guys are either sickly or borderline sicko and the girls are classic noir femme fatales – both in distress and deadly.

The bar for future comic-book treatments has officially been raised. As Raimi humanised the Marvel formula, Rodriguez has de-geeked the graphic novel. *Sin City* has slapped down a simple challenge: follow that. **ANDY LOWE**



This was the last time she'd let him eat chocolate mousse unsupervised.

SKYFALL 12

DIRECTOR Sam Mendes YEAR 2012

You know the rules of the game," M tells Bond at the start of *Skyfall*, "You've been playing it long enough!"

Fifty years to be exact, an anniversary that makes the 23rd entry in the world's most durable franchise both a cue for nostalgia and a chance to reassess. It would have been easy for director Sam Mendes to wallow in the former, tick all the boxes and play to the gallery. Instead he poses questions. Who is Bond? Is he a man with a future, or an irrelevant relic trapped in the past?

It's a daring move to reintroduce Bond after a four-year hiatus as a man whose best days may be all behind him. But then *Skyfall* is nothing if not audacious, deconstructing 007 and the iconography he comes with in a way that is constantly, consistently surprising. A blistering pre-credits sequence, in which Daniel Craig destroys half of Istanbul in a quest to recover sensitive information from an enemy operative, initially suggests Bond is back on track after the stuttering blip that was *Quantum Of Solace*.

No sooner are we settled, though, than James is shot in error by one of his own (Naomie Harris), plunging from the roof of a moving train into Daniel Kleinman-designed titles filled with skulls, tombstones and other totems of death. Bond survives, of course – he always does. But when he comes back to life he is far from his best, Craig's unshaven chops and bloodshot eyes betraying a man whose heart isn't in it (if it ever was).

It doesn't help that Judi Dench's M also looks set for the scrap heap, or that the new Q (Ben Whishaw) is a techno-nerd barely half his age. ("You still have spots!" sneers Bond contemptuously during their first encounter in the National Gallery.)

Put through his paces after some Mediterranean downtime involving scorpion-baiting drinking games and post-shag Heineken, 007 can hardly manage a chin-up before collapsing in a heap. He can't even dangle from the undercarriage of an ascending elevator without wincing in discomfort.

If *Casino Royale* was Bond finding his footing, then *Skyfall* is him remembering where he left it – a clever turnaround made all the more effective by giving 007 an adversary who, for much of the film, is crossing the finish line while Jimmy's putting on his trainers. With his shock of blond hair, dodgy dentistry and

THE VERDICT The Daniel Craig era comes of age with a ballsy Bond that takes brave chances and bold risks. Turns out you can teach an old dog new tricks.



vengeful M fixation, Javier Bardem's Silva is that rarest of creations: a cyber-terrorist who genuinely terrifies. But he also has a playful side; witness the literally thigh-rubbing glee he brings to one stand-out interrogation scene.

It's far from the only sexually charged moment; cue a steamy shower clinch with Bérénice Marlohe's femme fatale Severine, plus some saucy banter with Harris' Eve that positively fizzles with winking innuendo. But in line with Craig's summer assignment at Buckingham Palace, the real Bond girl is of a more seasoned vintage: Dame Judi herself, here evolving from 007's testy taskmistress into a surrogate mother he will kill to protect. At one point – possibly *Skyfall*'s gutsiest – Mendes has the two decamp to rural Scotland, there to ruminate on Bond's past and how M took advantage of it. The casting of Dench was always a masterstroke, but it has taken seven outings for her to be exploited properly.

Mendes' ambitions, though commendable, don't always fit the material. The Bond series has lasted half a century without referencing Shakespeare, Tennyson and J.M.W. Turner, so why shoehorn them in now? Thankfully, they don't interfere with the standard Bondian trappings, *Skyfall* boasting all the glamour, excitement and exoticism we have come to expect, and then some.

A floating Macau casino, complete with firework display and komodo dragons, supplies a perfect setting for cocktails, fisticuffs and *Live And Let Die* in-jokes, while Bardem's hideout has all the grandeur of Blofeld's volcano with none of the impracticality. Thanks to lensman Roger Deakins and production designer Dennis Gassner, a Shanghai skyscraper rippled by neon advertising provides an atmospheric backdrop for a nocturnal assassination.

A splendid mid-section in London, meanwhile, spurns the city's architecture for a chase beneath its surface, Bond pursuing Silva via sewer, tunnel and Tube while still finding time to crack the odd funny. Indeed, for all its intimations of mortality and harping on obsolescence, *Skyfall* is more often than not a hoot, Craig having the confidence at last to lace his the killer instinct with a bone-dry wit and wry nonchalance.

The scene where he contemplates utilising one of the series' oldest and most famous gizmos is a perfectly judged grace note, while an appearance from Albert Finney near the end exudes warmth and good humour. It all adds up to the 007 adventure we've been waiting for: a flawlessly assembled thrill ride with a cast to die for and a nakedly emotional undertow. Happy birthday, Mr Bond.

NEIL SMITH



SON OF SAUL 15 DIRECTOR László Nemes YEAR 2015

Holocaust literature is full of gaps, ellipses and silences – how, after all, do you say the unspeakable?

For his harrowing debut, Hungarian writer/director László Nemes has a brutal solution. *Son Of Saul* throws us straight into the maelstrom of concentration-camp life as if we, too, were prisoners. Saul Ausländer (Géza Röhrig), is a Jewish trustee, shepherding new arrivals into the showers, removing their valuables, then piling up the bodies. When he recognises his son among the corpses, he sets out to secure him a proper Jewish burial.

With its boxed-in ratio and ugly, seemingly endless takes, the result is a worm's-eye view

of evil on an industrial scale. We glimpse blurry Brueghelian nightmares of bonfires and burning bodies. The crushing irony, of course, is that Saul's mission is futile – nobody's getting out of here alive. But just because it's futile doesn't mean it's pointless: stubbornly clinging to the corpse is Saul's attempt to remain human in the face of mass dehumanisation. By placing us, helpless, in his shoes, Nemes makes us both victim and perpetrator – complicit, trapped, cogs in the same awful machine. **MATT GLASBY**

THE VERDICT A film to make your blood run cold, Nemes' account of life and death contains horrors you can't unsee.



SONG WITHOUT A NAME 12A

DIRECTOR Melina León YEAR 2019

Melina León's account of Georgina (Pamela Mendoza), a young, destitute mother in civil war-stricken Peru, who has her child stolen after giving birth at a fake clinic, shows the plight of those with nothing trying to take on a world that barely acknowledges their existence. A journalist (Tommy Párraga) discovers her case and starts unveiling the horrific, real-life-inspired truth. Aptly captured in timeless 4:3 monochrome, this is a work of singular delicacy, starkly beautiful in its desolation, and profoundly sad.

ERLINGUR EINARSSON

SOUL PG DIRECTOR Pete Docter, Kemp Powers YEAR 2020

Out of tune and off-key, middle-school students struggle to perform Mercer Ellington's jazz standard 'Things Ain't What They Used To Be' as Pixar's 23rd film opens. Things sure ain't for film releases, as *Soul* will now arrive down Disney's chimney.

You can rely on this, though: co-directed by Pete Docter and Kemp Powers, *Soul* affirms Pixar's ability to tackle life's biggies with exquisite layers of depth, wit, and world-building detail. Joe (Jamie Foxx) is a NY teacher who dreams of being a jazz muso, only for an accident to dump him on the cosmic traveler to The Great Beyond.

Desperate to live again, Joe reaches The Great Before, where unformed souls discover their pre-birth personalities – except for 'meh'-faced soul number 22 (Tina Fey), who can't find a purpose she likes. The man who wants to live and the soul who doesn't soon unite, sparking off a comic-existential quest that's not for the spoiling.

Though echoes of *Wreck-It Ralph* and *Inside Out* emerge, *Soul* works jazzy twists into its familiar odd-couple set-up. An epiphanic fish-out-of-water romp develops, complete with body-swap larks, profound barbershop visits, busker encounters and other revelatory episodes besides, all subtly woven into deceptively philosophical themes about life and how to live it.

Meanwhile, bustling with vigour, Jon Batiste's jazz score blends beautifully with the photorealistic NYC scenes. Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross' limpid synth pulses reflect the abstract celestial realms. Quick-fire comic counterpoints lighten the existential and metaphysical loads.

Soul begins by asking questions about finding your life purpose. But

another perspective emerges, one likely to leave you blubbing. *Soul* hits delicate emotional keys with an ease that only true virtuosos can muster. **KEVIN HARLEY**

THE VERDICT

A moving study on purpose, meaning and, yes, *Soul*.





"What, you mean you don't (un)dress like that for work?"

SOUND OF METAL¹⁵

DIRECTOR Darius Marder **YEAR** 2020

Sound design is perhaps an under-celebrated tool in the filmmaker's arsenal. After all, it can be a vital component in building a world, establishing a character's headspace or simply conjuring up atmosphere, but it's rarely in the spotlight. *Sound Of Metal* proves just how vital and transformative it can be.

It's about a drummer, Ruben Stone (Riz Ahmed), whose life is upended when he suddenly develops drastic hearing loss. Ruben's on the road with bandmate and partner Lou (*Ready Player One*'s Olivia Cooke) when the condition takes such a severe turn that he has no choice but to seek medical help. He winds up checking in to a home for deaf addicts that's run by Joe (Paul Raci), a former veteran who helps his charges get to grips with their new way of living.

On a visceral level, the immersive sound design adds to an uncannily engaging film experience. Entirely captioned, *Sound Of Metal* frequently makes you *feel* Ruben's disorientation and isolation. And while it's tackling a serious subject, and shining a rare cinematic light on the deaf community, it never patronises or lectures its subject or audience, and there's something remarkably intimate about the way Ruben's relationships develop as he begins to grasp sign language.

It's as much a film about addiction and acceptance as it is about a condition. Ahmed is electric in one of the roles of his career so far. With bleach-blond hair and a lithe torso scrawled in tattoos, he inhabits the role like a second skin. It's an affecting performance that resonates acutely in the feels, without resorting to grandstanding or softening any of the character's coarser edges. Cooke is also terrific in a smaller role, but it's Raci who's the MVP of the supporting players. In real life, Raci was a child of deaf adults. Here he's on authoritative and empathetic form, and avoids on-screen mentors clichés with seeming ease.

Infusing a *vérité* tone with poetry, Marder is a talent to watch. As *Sound Of Metal* builds to its surprising third act, the cumulative effect is powerful and profound. And despite its tight focus and subtle character

THE VERDICT *Sound Of Metal* is surely up for every sound award going, and deserves even more than that.

work, it absolutely rewards being seen on the big screen, where that experiential sound design can deliver its fullest effect. A small film that hits big, *Sound Of Metal* is a gem you'll want to bang the drum for. **MATT MAYTUM**



Nobody could have predicted that Tom's unlikely phobia of pears was about to ruin the picnic.

THE SOUVENIR¹⁵

DIRECTOR Joanna Hogg **YEAR** 2019

A semi-autobiographical portrait of an artist that is at once severe and compassionate, painterly and spontaneous, formally rigorous and fluent (much of the dialogue is improvised), *The Souvenir* sees writer/director Joanna Hogg bring meaning to the memories of her formative years as a filmmaker. It also offers a fascinating study of co-dependent, tortuous love.

When we first meet Julie (Honor Swinton Byrne, daughter of Tilda Swinton, who plays her mum in the film), she's living in Knightsbridge in the early 1980s – a 24-year-old film student putting together a debut feature set in the shipyards of Sunderland. A well-meaning pursuit, but does her eagerness to pop her own bubble of privilege give her the right to appropriate such a story? It's a question that she's at least aware of.

Julie's professors, all men, frown at her every suggestion and she likewise receives pointed feedback from Anthony (Tom Burke), with whom she falls in love after meeting at a party. Anthony works for the Foreign Office. Older than Julie, he seems impossibly sophisticated and exotically world-weary. He also, thrillingly, *sees* Julie, though he's frequently condescending and at times utterly contemptuous.

The above synopsis doesn't begin to express the complexity of the character portrayals and the relationship dynamic, with Byrne and Burke peeling back layers to startle at every turn. These surprises are organic, and all the more mesmerising for it. Masks slip, moods shift, and secrets and lies bubble to the surface as life pushes and pulls. Nearly all of the action is set indoors, and the toxicity spreads to every corner, making it hard to breathe. Not at the expense of nuance, though, with love and sympathy never lost in the mix.

Like Hogg's three previous films (*Unrelated*, *Archipelago*, *Exhibition*), *The Souvenir* wrestles with questions of class and Englishness, while the politics of the time informs the frame. At one point Julie's flat shakes to the sound of an unseen blast – the IRA bombing of Harrods in 1983. It is not by chance, however, that one discussion between Julie and Anthony

THE VERDICT A World Cinema Dramatic prize winner at Sundance, Hogg's best film yet is an instant British classic.

brings up the movies of Powell and Pressburger. Like those classics, *The Souvenir* swerves on-the-nose message-making and defies categorisation. It's a strikingly personal drama that captures a time and a nation. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

SPIDER-MAN 2 PG

DIRECTOR Sam Raimi **YEAR** 2004

With great power comes great responsibility." Sam Raimi knows what that feels like – his blessing and/or curse was great box office for his first shot at Spidey glory. Thank goodness, then, that Raimi and his team have taken a long, hard look at what worked about the original and used that to fashion a superior sequel. Like Bryan Singer with *X-Men 2*, the man who launched the wall-crawler onto the big screen has delivered a mature, muscular follow-up that pulses with life.

If the first outing sometimes felt like Raimi was reining himself in to forge a well-crafted, respectful origin story, success has allowed him the freedom – and the finance – to unleash his full capabilities. Make no mistake: this is still faithful web-slinging. But now that Raimi has demonstrated mainstream flair to the tune of an almighty ker-ching, he's allowed himself to sprinkle in his cult sensibilities to ensure the quality leaps even higher than our hero.

Case in point? The first time Doc Ock's tentacles display their deviously destructive power. When surgeons try to free Alfred Molina's Otto Octavius from their terrible,

brain-controlling embrace, all hell breaks loose as the metallic marauders try and take down everyone in the room. Even without the *Evil Dead*-style swirling tentacle-cam shots, it would have been a great set-piece, all seesawing cameras and ballsy smackdowns. But with them, it's a thing of ballistic beauty. Feel those goosebumps.

Not that it's the movie's high point. That would be a vertigo-inducing scrap on a clock tower; or the trailer's car-through-coffee-shop-window eye-bulger; or an astoundingly realised rumble on a speeding train... Yes, safe to say it's time to forget those faintly awkward CG clashes seen in the original. Here, Raimi spins scenes that will drop jaws and staple them to the multiplex carpet, his effects team overcoming the weightless arachno-problems to truly realise the power and impact of our hero as he swings through New York. The city itself shines, too. No longer a half-hearted, faceless metropolis, the character of the Big Apple is brought to fully realised (and gloriously widescreened) life thanks to Bill Pope's epic cinematography.

Yet Raimi's armoury doesn't just consist of kinetic set-pieces. After all, there are more

ways than one to swell a viewer's heart, Uncle Sam grounding the story in the little things – those quiet moments between the tormented souls who must live in the superhero's shadow. Picking up Peter Parker's story two years after we left him shunning Mary Jane's (Kirsten Dunst) affections at Norman Osborn's funeral, everyone's plotlines have evolved in directions that feel completely natural. *Spidey 2* may be bigger and better, but it's also plenty deeper and darker.

The script crackles, Oscar-scooping final drafter Alvin Sargent wrangling together the contributions of several scribes (including *Smallville* showrunners Alfred Gough and Miles Millar and Pulitzer-winning novelist/comic nut Michael Chabon) to bring us up to speed with grace, pace and wit. Tobey Maguire now seems entirely comfortable filling Parker's shoes as well as the webbed suit, his hangdog expression demanding viewers' empathy. And Dunst infuses Mary Jane with as much glamour and spark as she can in her relatively limited screen time, the delicate weaving of plotlines also allowing her to empower MJ into a lifesaver all of her own. Even better, dangling plot threads are neatly scooped up, with James Franco in particular stepping to the fore, grasping the chance to add extra shades of darkness to his tormented Harry Osborn.

Mind you, it's not just the returning actors who delight. In the Spider-sequel's continuing quest to fix the faults of its predecessor, we're not only gifted with a great character actor for a villain, but this time we're actually allowed to see his face. And what a face, Molina's heavy (acting) chops quivering with conflicted anguish as Dr. Octopus tears up the screen. He's part scientist fighting to keep control of his mind, part cackling villain relinquishing body and soul to his new power. Trust us: wrongdoers don't get any more watchable than this.

Complaints? One or two, mainly instances where the movie becomes a little too repetitive or, in the case of a dreamscaped heart-to-heart between Parker and Uncle Ben (Cliff Robertson), temporarily flabby. More quibbles than flaws, however, they never threaten to stop this being anything but a triumph. The year's best summer blockbuster has just swung in through the window... And it's hard to believe that anything else is going to be able to catch it. **TF**

THE VERDICT With this big, bold sequel, Sam Raimi has crafted of the greatest comic-book and superhero films of all time.



Peter was starting to have doubts about this masseuse's qualifications.



SPIDER-MAN: INTO THE SPIDER-VERSE PG

DIRECTORS Bob Persichetti, Peter Ramsey, Rodney Rothman **YEAR** 2018

Of all the characters in all the fictional universes, Spider-Man feels like the one least in need of another new spin. The character's been done in live-action three times in recent memory, and is currently in very rude health in the form of Tom Holland's MCU-traversing Peter Parker. *Into The Spider-Verse* gleefully obliterates this assumption with a smart, funny, dimension-crossing adventure, one that introduces a new Spidey alongside some familiar iconography and tropes. It's also visually astonishing, bringing the dynamism of the comics to life in a way that surpasses the live-action efforts.

It's jointly directed by Bob Persichetti, Peter Ramsey and Rodney Rothman, but the hallmarks of producers Phil Lord and Christopher Miller are all over this punky take like graffiti (Lord came up with the story and co-wrote the screenplay). *Spider-Man: Into The Spider-Verse* has an irreverent 'meta' tone, reminiscent of Lord and Miller's *21 Jump Street* and *The Lego Movie*, but it also has unexpected heart and thrilling action. And it's very, very funny, skewering Spider-Man with the same irreverence *The Lego Batman Movie* slayed the Dark Knight.

Our lead Spider-Man this time around is Miles Morales (Shameik Moore), an alternative webslinger who's been in the comics since 2011. He's not as much of a tech nerd as Peter Parker, but he's smart, likeable and struggling to feel at home in the elite boarding school at which he's won a place. Having a father who's a cop isn't making his adolescent years any easier, either. Of course, he winds up being bitten by a funky-

looking arachnid, and... you know the drill.

Or not quite. Because Miles also gets caught up with an atom collider that tears a hole in the space-time continuum, introducing him to a schlubby Peter Parker from a parallel universe (given pitch-perfect cynicism by Jake Johnson's croak). It's up to this paunchy mentor to show Morales the ways of the web and help him get a sticky-palmed grasp of life as a hero.

Miles and Peter aren't the only two Spider-people on the scene though. The disruption of the space-time fabric also brings Gwen Stacy/Spider-Woman (Hailee Steinfeld) into their orbit, as well as other Spidey characters from the multiverse. If on paper it sounds convoluted, on screen it's surprisingly elegant. It helps that the action is grounded in Miles' dimension, and the goal for him and his superteam is a simple one – stop that particle collider going off again and turning NYC into one giant glitch.

Miles has a gratifyingly slow-burn origin, as far as these things go. He doesn't instantly take to his gifts; the mind is willing but the superpowers are hard to master. Along the way he learns some lessons about what it means to be a hero, but the filmmakers manage to make these moments feel heartfelt rather than sappy. It helps that the voice cast is ace, nailing the comedy as well as the more emotional moments. Brian Tyree Henry and Mahershala Ali, in particular, bring real gravitas to their

supporting roles as Miles' father figures. Nic Cage, meanwhile, is a delight as Spider-Man Noir, a black-and-white Spidey from the '30s spouting era-specific one-liners.

Visually, the film eludes comparisons to anything that's come before. It's a pop-art comic that's come to life, and the zip of its editing and montages recalls the energy of Edgar Wright's work. Imagine a comic-book panel that's been rendered in 3D and then animated in stop-motion. Characters are shaded with Roy Lichtenstein-style dots and lines, but remarkably, this doesn't hold you at a remove: the stylised faces are etched with feeling.

The villains, meanwhile, live up to their exaggerated comic-book silhouettes: check out Liev Schreiber's Kingpin, who's built like a triple wardrobe, or the monstrous Goblin. When the visuals are this impressive, you might often expect the film to lack substance, but not so here. Amid all the invention there's plenty of heart – not just in Miles' story; all the Spideys are sensitively treated – and a satisfying arc.

Existing Spider-Man fans will no doubt get more out of *Into The Spider-Verse*, given that it's loaded with familiar villains, Easter eggs and references, but it deserves to be seen widely. And while there are hints that the story could continue, it works as a satisfying one-shot – it feels like a full meal, rather than just a starter, which is rare for a potential franchise-starter these days. Forget the quantum physics and dimension-hopping: the most impossible thing to believe here is that Spider-Man feels exciting and new again. **MATT MAYTUM**

THE VERDICT A joyful, trippy new incarnation of Spider-Man, brimming with wit, soul and jaw-dropping visuals. Amazing.



STEVE JOBS 15

DIRECTOR Danny Boyle **YEAR** 2015

Machine-gun written by Aaron Sorkin and directed with controlled gusto by Danny Boyle, *Steve Jobs* possesses a three-act structure, but don't for one second think this is a typical Hollywood movie. The three acts here are each focused around a major launch – the Macintosh in 1984; the NeXT computer in 1988; and the iMac in 1998, with Jobs (Michael Fassbender) ricocheting between Apple's Head of Marketing Joanna Hoffman (Kate Winslet), co-founder Steve 'Woz' Wozniak (Seth Rogen), CEO John Sculley (Jeff Daniels) and software developer Andy Hertzfeld (Michael Stuhlbarg).

"It's like five minutes before every launch, everybody goes to a bar and gets drunk and tells me what they really think," says Jobs, and how you respond to that on-the-nose statement should tell you how you'll get on with this fast and furious biopic. Truth and storytelling conventions be damned – as befits a project about a rampantly egocentric, bullying, brilliant, monomaniacal, maddening, visionary being, Steve Jobs makes its own rules even as it collapses timelines, jettisons chunks of history and flagrantly flaunts its artifice. Either embrace the genius or know where the door is.

Act One is set in the De Anza Community College, Cupertino, California, Jobs in meltdown because he's lost a cover of *Time* magazine – a result of the paternity issue being made public, he feels – and the Macintosh refusing to say

THE VERDICT "I don't want people to dislike me. I'm indifferent to if they dislike me," says Jobs. Well, this won't be for everyone but it dazzles.

"Hello" to the waiting audience. Hertzfeld, charged with conjuring the on-screen greeting, feels the full force of Jobs' refusal to settle for anything less than perfection, while Chrisann wants to know why she and Lisa are on welfare when Jobs is worth \$441m. Act Two takes place at the San Francisco Opera House, Jobs having it out with the visiting Sculley as to why he was let go by Apple – a boardroom decision we're made privy to via judicious flashbacks. Jobs knows his overpriced NeXT computer is doomed to fail in the marketplace, but also knows Apple will have to buy his operating system and reopen its doors to him. Act Three hails the return of the prodigal son, with the iMac announcing the next era of home computing just as the internet takes off. So why is Jobs refusing to pay \$25,000 for his daughter's tuition, and why must he still refuse to credit Woz, whose electronic engineering is the cornerstone of the company's success, or the team that built the pioneering Apple II?

There are glimmers of decency, especially towards the end when Sorkin and Boyle perhaps realise they'd better give audiences a hint of humanity to reward their investment. But this is unafraid to alienate. For the most part, viewers are invited to form their own opinions from the whirlwind of information. Perhaps such callous single-mindedness was essential to Jobs bestowing us with such gifts? Whatever you leave with, it won't be your breath. This is brazen, bravura filmmaking, with Boyle corralling a clutch of terrific performances while taming his own often-ostentatious style. This is movie that never lets up or allows viewers to do anything but meet it with fearsome focus. Much like its subject. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

SUMMER 1993 12
DIRECTOR Carla Simón **YEAR** 2018

When her mother dies, six-year-old Frida (Laia Artigas) leaves Barcelona to live with her uncle's family in rural Catalonia. Yet even as Frida enjoys the freedom of the countryside, she remains stricken by emotions she can't quite comprehend.

This outline might feel familiar but, in a stunning debut, Carla Simón adds fresh nuance by mining her own past. In a candid exploration of her childhood memories, the writer/director balances a crisp evocation of time and place with a mature reflection on things that were inexplicable back then.

The dual perspective is rigorously structured but gracefully applied. With its naturalistic style and seemingly episodic drift, the film's surface has the hazy, lazy mood of a summertime frolic. Underneath, though, Simón carefully seeds elliptical details so that an innocuous playground accident suddenly recontextualises everything we've seen.

This underlying sadness is apparent in everything from the framing, which subtly isolates Frida, to the preternaturally wise performance she coaxes from Artigas. Frida's upbringing has toughened her up and there's a scowling, mean streak in her love/hate relationship with adorable younger cousin Anna (Paula Robles). Yet Artigas also conveys the little girl lost underneath who yearns for love – and it's this quality that carries the film to its heartbreaking final scene.

SIMON KINNEAR

THE VERDICT A gorgeous, wistful remembrance of a troubled childhood, whose beguiling naturalism mines a deep vein of emotion.



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STAR WARS: THE FORCE AWAKENS 12A

DIRECTOR J.J. Abrams **YEAR** 2015

Blue letters on black: 'A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away...' And then: **STAR WARS**. If that doesn't elicit goosebumps, the receding crawl that follows thrillingly echoes the openers of the original trilogy.

This is old-school stuff, pitched just right, and so it is with most of the film that follows. Forget the overstuffed, over-polished, over-pixelated, underwhelming prequels by George Lucas. The look and feel of J.J. Abrams' seventh episode in the beloved space saga is just what fans have been waiting for since 1983's *Return Of The Jedi*. It's time to party like an Ewok: the Force is strong with this one.

Luke Skywalker, the last Jedi, has vanished; the First Order has risen from the ashes of the Empire; and the Resistance's General Leia Organa (Carrie Fisher) has sent her most daring pilot to the planet of Jakku to sniff out Luke's trail. That pilot is Poe Dameron (Oscar Isaac). He'll team up with Finn (John Boyega), an AWOL Stormtrooper, and the pair will go in search of Dameron's BB-8 droid, conveyor of a galactic map that might just lead to Luke.

Upon Jakku, scavenging to survive, resides Rey (Daisy Ridley), the at-first-dubious-but-increasingly-proud owner of (you guessed it) BB-8. But no sooner have Rey and BB-8 started to roll together than they find themselves targeted by a death squad. "Stop holding my hand!" Rey yells at Finn, who's turned up in the nick of time to drag her to safety. Pointedly, thrillingly, she then grabs his hand

to haul him into a rusting ship, their only hope of escape. It is, wouldn't you know it, the Millennium Falcon, and Rey, a capable pilot, miraculously escapes a pair of TIE fighters while flying past, and then through, a downed Imperial Star Destroyer in a stunning set-piece.

If any of this sounds convoluted, it's not. Abrams and co-writers Lawrence Kasdan and Michael Arndt bring clarity and purity to the storytelling, returning to the part-mythological, part-Saturday-serial vibe of *A New Hope*.

The images, too, are uncomplicated and unfussy. Just as Abrams jettisons the antiseptic sheen of the prequels in favour of the clunky, lived-in world of the originals, and uses CGI more to take away than to add, so he refrains from the kamikaze camera and ADD-cutting of so many modern blockbusters. Yes, there's a mobility and immediacy to the battles that wasn't possible 30 years ago, but this never jars, always serves story. The use of irises and wipe-edits, meanwhile, is adopted for house style.

Of the new triangle of characters, Boyega brings intensity and a surprisingly honed comic timing; Isaac is amiable and handsome and a welcome throwback in his effortless derring-do; and Ridley, always likeable, overcomes initial woodenness to handle the heavy lifting

THE VERDICT No need to have a bad feeling about this. J.J. Abrams' epic adventure will thrill youngsters and transport millions more back to their childhoods far, far away.

of later emotional scenes.

Of the old triangle, Han Solo (Harrison Ford) and Leia set bottom lips a-trembling whenever they share the screen, while Luke (Mark Hamill)... Well, that would be telling. Chewbacca has also sharpened his sense of humour over the last 32 years – his bickering double-act with Han will have you choking laughter like you're bringing up a furbal.

But it's Driver's Kylo Ren who steals the show, a match for Darth Maul when sporting his car-grille mask, and something else entirely when he removes it. *Star Wars*, in many ways, is all about clearly defined lines and black and white, but this is the kind of anguish and soul-searching you'd expect in an Ingmar Bergman movie. But with a really cool lightsaber.

Star Wars: The Force Awakens is not perfect nor could it ever be. But for every niggle (Snoke is pure Voldemort, one tentacular beast better belongs in *Men In Black 3*) there are 10 things that are exactly right, and it says much that no one will leave disappointed despite going in with hysterical levels of expectation.

There are images here that brand the brain: such as Rey dwarfed by a crashed Star Destroyer as she toboggans down a huge sand dune, or Starkiller Base, boasting enough firepower to make the Death Star(s) look like a Zippo lighter.

Beneath the scintillating action and striking world-building, it's a film about parents and children, about legacy. *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* will be viewed and passed down for many years to come. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

STAR WARS: THE LAST JEDI 12

DIRECTOR Rian Johnson **YEAR** 2017

What the hell has happened to Luke Skywalker? That was the question that haunted all 136 minutes of *Star Wars: Episode VII – The Force Awakens*, and never more so than in the final scene, when we at last caught up with Luke (Mark Hamill) on the far-flung planet of Ahch-To, only not as the self-assured, optimistic Jedi Knight we left partying on Endor at the close of *Return Of The Jedi*, but as a grey-bearded monk who's retreated from the world(s).

The Last Jedi, the eighth canonical episode in the *Star Wars* saga, is the first to continue right from where its predecessor left off. But before we get to the little matter of whether Luke accepts or rejects Rey's offer, we join General Hux (Domhnall Gleeson) as he leads the First Order in an attack on a base that harbours General Leia Organa (Carrie Fisher) and the Resistance. Poe Dameron (Oscar Isaac) and BB-8 take the fight straight back to Hux, piloting an X-wing at a Dreadnought cruiser to neutralise its surface cannons. They return to base just as Finn (John Boyega) awakens from the coma that claimed him at the end of *Episode VII*.

And so it's back to Ahch-To, where Rey is determined to tag everyone's favourite Jedi Master back into the galactic wrestling match,

or to at least twist his robot arm into training her in the ways of the Force, as Yoda once trained him.

Supreme Leader Snoke (Andy Serkis), meanwhile, is scolding Kylo Ren (Adam Driver) for losing his Starkiller Base duel with Rey (Daisy Ridley). "You're just a child in a mask," he snarls, fixing his apprentice with wonky eyes as the crevasse in his forehead twists in a furious frown. Kylo must win back Snoke's trust, and killing Rey, his ex-mentor Luke, and every last Rebel is the way to do it.

This is all just the first 30 minutes, and is actually the slowest part of the movie. The next two hours zip by like the Millennium Falcon acing the Kessel Run, as writer/director Rian Johnson – something of a Padawan when it comes to films of this scale, having previously made *Brick*, *The Brothers Bloom* and *Looper* – crosscuts between sub-plots like a magician executing an immaculate riffle-shuffle.

Everyone's favourites have key parts to play, with the aforementioned joined by Chewie (Joonas Suotamo), BB-8, R2-D2, C-3PO (Anthony Daniels) and, now with more impact, stormtrooper commander Captain Phasma (Gwendoline Christie). Hell, even pirate queen Maz Kanata (Lupita Nyong'o) rocks up... as do a

host of famous fans and guest stars, but we'll leave you to discover those ones for yourselves.

The new characters, meanwhile, are attention-grabbers – and not just the porgs (mercifully not overused), crystal foxes, and a veritable menagerie of creatures and droids. Best of the bunch is Leia's right-hand woman Vice Admiral Amilyn Holdo (Laura Dern, giving the galaxy a shock of purple hair and its sharpest cheekbones since Peter Cushing's Grand Moff Tarkin), whose tactics to keep the Resistance out of the First Order's iron fist are not to the liking of Poe, whom she labels "a trigger-happy flyboy".

Maintenance worker Rose (Kelly Marie Tran) teams up with Finn to undertake a death-defying mission that recalls a cheeky operation conducted by Luke and Han in *Episode IV*. And helping, or perhaps hindering, them is hacker DJ (Benicio Del Toro), a chancer they find on the casino planet of Canto Bight (think *A New Hope*'s cantina writ large and spliced with a scene of a tuxedoed Bond seated at the tables).

Johnson, as we know, is a master of misdirection, oh-so dexterous when it comes to sleight-of-hand storytelling full of twists and turns. *The Last Jedi* is no different, packed with subterfuge and shocks. It propels the saga forward in unexpected ways. It's not so much darker, à la *The Empire Strikes Back*, for it's the funniest *Star Wars* film by far, and Johnson was vocal about wishing to avoid "heaviosity". But it is *deeper*, delving into the nature of the Force and what it means to be a Jedi, while concentrating intently on themes of family, myth, identity, treachery, loyalty and sacrifice.

There are astonishing set-pieces, including at least three up-there-with-the-best 'saber duels and the climactic battle, glimpsed in the trailer, which hurls TIE fighters, the Millennium Falcon, AT-M6s and more at each other over a salt flat-scape that churns up the red stain of violence. But the real drama is in the faces, as Johnson locks in his unwavering close-ups to explore the cloudy planets of Luke's eyes, the glimmering lakes of Rey and Kylo's tears.

But the final word must go to Leia, to whom the film is dedicated. Carrie Fisher here gives a performance of tremendous dignity, wisdom and love, and is awarded at least three scenes that serve as a fitting goodbye. Her journey from princess to senator to rebel to general is now done. The Force is with her. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

THE VERDICT An excellent middle chapter bursting with wit, wisdom, emotion, shocks, old-fashioned derring-do, state-of-the-art tech and stonking set-pieces.



As the wind picked up, Rey regretted the cropped trousers.



SUMMER OF SOUL 12

DIRECTOR Questlove YEAR 2021

Long-neglected history sings out loudly to today in this rapturous concert movie. In 1969, the same summer as the much-raked-over Woodstock, 300,000-plus people attended the free Harlem Cultural Festival over six weekends. Archived for 50 years, the footage is here reassembled by crate-digging director Ahmir-Khalib 'Questlove' Thompson (of *The Roots*) as a timely snapshot of Black expression, framed within its historical contexts for maximum depth and punch.

Performers recall the joy of witnessing "a sea of Black people", there to enjoy a mouth-watering line-up of artists honouring Black music's roots – soul, gospel, R&B, jazz, funk. As a concert movie, it rules. Alongside B.B. King, Mavis Staples, Mahalia Jackson and others, a young Stevie Wonder seems fit to burst with fresh-blossoming talent. Attacking the piano and making every word count, Nina Simone commands attention. And the electrifying surge for Sly Stone raises goosebumps, particularly for gig-starved Covid-era viewers.

Yet *Summer* is more than mere gig nostalgia. Commentators uphold the need for music that unifies in choppy times, fleshed out by Questlove with reference to Nixon, Martin Luther King, heroin and more. And modern viewers anatomise the festival's seismic impact. "The power of music is to tell our own stories," says Lin-Manuel Miranda. Profound and stirring, this is one story that needed retelling. **KEVIN HARLEY**

THE VERDICT

Summer Of Soul is more than a documentary; it's a vital, thrillingly realised piece of history.

SUPER 8 12A

DIRECTOR J.J. Abrams YEAR 2011

Back in the late '70s and early '80s, blockbusters had heart and soul to go with their balls. *Super 8* returns to such innocent times, delivering bang for buck but respecting old-fashioned concepts like, y'know, character, emotion, storytelling...

Its creator is, of course, Jeffrey Jacob Abrams, or J.J. to those who loved *Mission: Impossible III*, *Star Trek*, *Cloverfield* and *Lost*. This is his "personal project", much as *E.T.* was Steven Spielberg's, who here co-produces.

Set in 1979, when J.J., aged 13, was holed up in his cluttered bedroom making models to blow up on film, *Super 8* tells of movie-obsessed Charles (Riley Griffiths) and best friend Joe (Joel Courtney), the leaders of a group of pre-teen kids who run about town shooting a zombie epic on an Eumig Super 8mm camera. Sneaking from their beds to film a night scene at the local train station, they continue to roll as a US Air Force freight charges past and crashes explosively.

Then things get really weird. Generators and car engines burn out, power cables and microwaves disappear. The town's dogs run away. And the military roll in under the stern command of Colonel Nelec (Noah Emmerich), who doth protest too much when questioned by Deputy Lamb (Kyle Chandler), aka Joe's dad.

If *Super 8* is J.J.'s own childhood spiced with a rambunctious monster movie, it's inevitable it should look and feel like an early-Spielberg picture, for *Close Encounters*, *E.T.*, *Poltergeist*, *Gremlins*, *The Goonies* and *Back To The Future* shaped a generation. The film's overrun setting, a small Ohio town, population 11,200, is pure Spielburbia – acknowledged by the *E.T.*-doffing shot of the twinkling burg spread out below, a beacon to attract the trouble that's arrived in the night. The kids' bedrooms, like Elliott's, are

THE VERDICT A mash-up of '50s sci-fi, '80s event movie and autobiography, *Super 8* isn't a top-to-bottom classic like some of the films it's modelled on. But it leaves 90 per cent of blockbusters in the gutter.

jumbled dens, and the town's rolling topography recalls *E.T.*'s famous bike chase while allowing *Super 8*'s climactic, panoramic action to play out at various vertical and horizontal depths.

Like Spielberg, Abrams has an eye for awe, his deft orchestration of indelible images – a tank trundling through a playground, a plot-pivotal landmark framed through a small, blasted hole in a bedroom wall – marking him as a born storyteller. He's no slouch when it comes to suspense either, and it's this skill as much as the kids' goofing that marks the film's first half, when the creature remains cloaked, superior.

If the monster-reveal to come and the increasingly close-up close-ups that follow never match the early frisson generated by shooting empty spaces filled with the viewers' imagination, then it is, perhaps, inevitable. But J.J.'s monster is a good 'un – perhaps too good given its 2011 CGI threatens to jar in a movie that's not just set in 1979 but could, for the most part, have been made in 1979.

The kids, mind, are flawless. Unlike the silicon-soul LA brats who inhabit most modern movies, this terrific troupe recall not just early Spielberg but '80s favourites *Stand By Me* and *The Monster Squad*. Too much thick-throated emotion clogs the finale. The blend of sentiment and spectacle evokes Spielberg at his worst as well as his best. But even this lone bum note won't stop *Super 8* from being, hands down, the film of the summer. Only a young Spielberg at the top of his game could beat it. **JAMIE GRAHAM**



They all watched in horror as their friend learned "never go back to a lit firework" the hard way.

DISNEY, PARAMOUNT



Ricky reluctantly decided he would flag down the next car for directions.

TALLADEGA NIGHTS - THE BALLAD OF RICKY BOBBY 12A

DIRECTOR Adam McKay **YEAR** 2006

Jerked out of Momma's belly at the screech of a speeding Chevy; pilfering cars at the age of eight (eyes squinting over the steering-wheel, baseball bat flooring accelerator); pretty future wife impulsively snared after a post-race tit-flash ("Please be 18!").

Will Ferrell's Ricky Bobby was born fast, raised quick and, by his own frequent admission, is always number one – the undisputed best at being first. Er, a bit like Lightning McQueen in *Cars*...

Talladega Nights is so far the year's funniest film. With the rest of the frat-pack otherwise detained (Vince Vaughn going gooey with Jennifer Aniston, Ben Stiller doing animal voices for *Madagascar*, Owen Wilson manfully propping up *You, Me And Dupree*), only Jack Black In Tights is daring to attempt a tip-up of Ferrell's comedy-king throne.

Feel free to curl your lip at the limpness of *Kicking & Screaming* and the grey-eyed refit of *Bewitched*. But this is a long way from phone-in Ferrell, sunning himself on someone else's ideas. He's having fun; grandstanding on home turf, revisiting his *Anchorman* duet with ex-improv pal Adam McKay. And when he's up and flaring like this, he's like a whirling catherine wheel, spitting out bright comic sparks, igniting and inspiring his co-stars to raise their game.

John C Reilly, for one, is a revelation – practically a reinvention. Although he's always

held his own as a shy, dry kinda guy, he's perilously close to being the funniest thing in the movie, his thicko sidekick Cal imprinting on Ricky like a panting puppy, complete with drooling catchphrase ("Shake and bake!").

And, while Ferrell's jubilant form shows he's always best on his own terms, Sacha Baron Cohen finally proves he can operate on someone else's. As sneering fop Jean Girard, he drives a Perrier-endorsed car, browses Camus mid-race, slinks around in uppity suits, sucking on stinky tabs and cranks the silly French accent so far beyond all previous attempts at silly French accents it's practically a parody of a parody. With each agonising, overcooked vowel and spittle-scattering consonant, it continually threatens to collapse under the weight of its own glorious idiocy.

Talladega Nights' comic punch lands so squarely because there's no sniping, no pointing and laughing at the NASCAR culture the movie piggy-backs on. Everything flows from the characters' absurdities, with no cheap points scored at the expense of their world. Event sequences are presented with affection and the racing action is as crunching and kinetic as the jokes are funny. Still, the

THE VERDICT Forget the recent blips; Ferrell is back in freewheeling form. More than just the year's funniest film, *Talladega Nights* is one of the films of the year.

motorsport theme is merely a convenient backdrop. Ricky is just another twist on Ferrell's *Anchorman* riff: the swaggering, self-promoting, self-loving imbecile with no self-awareness. He's also a sly nod to his countrymen's worldwide bum rep.

On top of being the most consistent grin-grabber of 2006, *Talladega Nights* is packed with other dead-cert year-bests... Funniest Family Meal: "Dad, you made that grace your bitch!" Most Heated Bar-Room Debate: France's cultural superiority over the US ("We have given the world democracy, existentialism and the menage-a-trois.") Least Appropriate Product Placement: "Your mysterious lady-parts need the best protection around. Maypax – official tampon of NASCAR."

It's a pacy, racy blitz of low-slung character sketch, high-flying improv and big, fat belly laughs. The story – Riches To Rags And Back Again – is hardly fresh, but Ferrell and McKay consistently tweak expectations and dig out new angles on old clichés. It's not hard to guess who wins in the final face-off between Ricky and Jean Girard, but you'll never guess how.

So, if you only see one movie this year based around the culture of NASCAR with a lead character obsessed with speed who is later forced to slow down and accept humility and take stock of his life and learn the importance of friends and family, make it *Talladega Nights*. Maybe *Cars* on DVD... **ANDY LOWE**



TENET 12A

DIRECTOR Christopher Nolan **YEAR** 2020

Few films have faced a higher-stakes release than *Tenet*, but after two and a half hours in the thrall of Christopher Nolan's staggeringly ambitious brain-bender it's clear why PVOD was never an option. A monumental big-screen spectacle, *Tenet* is a film that exemplifies precisely what makes the cinema experience – in all its heart-stopping grandeur – quite so special.

Shrouded in enough secrecy to make Marvel Studios look loose-lipped, *Tenet* quickly emerges as a new spin on the kind of cerebral sci-fi actioner that Nolan has come to specialise in. John David Washington stars as The Protagonist, an American agent who's recruited to stop Kenneth Branagh's odious Anglo-Russian oligarch Andrei Sator from unleashing World War 3. Sator's secret weapon? 'Inversion' – an ingenious central conceit that pushes Nolan's multi-faceted, career-long exploration of temporal storytelling to its logical and inspired extreme.

Perhaps buoyed by the confidence that audiences will follow wherever he leads, Nolan's intimidatingly dense script obstinately avoids handholding. At times, *Tenet* can feel like a \$200m remake of *Primer*, with a fiendishly brilliant but confounding narrative

THE VERDICT *Tenet* is a complex, challenging, brilliantly plotted thriller that turns modern blockbuster traditions on their head.

that practically demands one (or two) rewatches to fully appreciate the big picture. "Don't try to understand it, feel it," Clémence Poésy's scientist says early doors. It doubles as a message to viewers, the most dedicated of which will be unpacking the film's many intricacies for months to come.

Just as Nolan took a heist movie and dreamt a little bigger (darling) with *Inception*, *Tenet* expands the horizons of the espionage genre. The credits prominently and proudly state that *Tenet* was "shot and finished on film", and in every respect this is a film that deserves to be experienced at its intended scale. The much-discussed Oslo airport sequence – for which Nolan crashed a real 747 – may be dazzling, but it's an amuse-bouche compared to what comes. When Nolan finally plays the ace up his sleeve and fully unleashes 'inversion' on the viewer, it's pure magic.

The polar opposite of the easily digestible comic-book extravaganzas that have dominated cinemas for the last decade, *Tenet* is a practically perfect re-introduction to the big screen. Whether audiences are ready to return to cinemas en masse is another question entirely. Certainly, *Tenet*'s a more challenging film than some may be comfortable with after a five-month absence, but this an all-too-rare example of a master filmmaker putting everything on the table. The stakes have never been higher, but *Tenet* is exactly the film cinemas need right now. **JORDAN FARLEY**



TIGERS ARE NOT AFRAID 15

DIRECTOR Issa López **YEAR** 2021

The dead won't rest, graffiti animals live, wishes can be curses, and harsh experience is just a shot away from innocence. Faint echoes of famous fan Guillermo del Toro's work aside, Issa López's magical-realist horror establishes a searing identity of its own in the haunted hinterlands between states, where fantasy and cruel reality coexist – often lethally.

After opening titles that tot up the human costs of Mexico's drug wars, that coexistence is violently established as gunfire disrupts a children's class. Soon after, young Estrella (Paola Lara) finds herself orphaned and in the fractious company of four lost boys, trailed by an oddly purposeful line of blood and a whispering army of the dead: an army hungry to confront the gangs and corrupt politicians behind their suffering.

Literary and arthouse references range from *Peter Pan* to *The Spirit Of The Beehive*, but you don't need to get them to get it. López balances spot-on child casting, fertile images and outré flourishes with intuitive precision, setting them against vividly lived-in worlds filtered through a traumatised child's perspective. Sometimes horrifying, often heart-breaking and always wholly assured, the result weds horror-fantasy to social allegory with great poetic concision, urgency and empathy. Once it has you caught in its spell, *Tigers* doesn't let go.

KEVIN HARLEY

THE VERDICT A mesmerising blend of beautiful magical realism, horror and vital social commentary.

THERE WILL BE BLOOD 15

DIRECTOR Paul Thomas Anderson **YEAR** 2017

I am a sinner!" declaims Daniel Plainview (Daniel Day-Lewis). Over and over he cries it; louder and louder. Words said under duress, yes – but the man speaks no lie: he's as bad an apple as they come.

He rots gradually, though. Early on in *There Will Be Blood*, there's a train-ride moment of warm, wordless rapport between Daniel and his baby boy H.W. – just one of innumerable grace notes that add up to glory in Paul Thomas Anderson's fifth and possibly finest feature. Plainview proffers himself as a family-minded, community-spirited fellow, but in time it's clear he's one thing alone: "Ladies and gentlemen, I am an oilman." Prowling turn-of-the-20th-century California looking for drilling prospects, he pitches up in dirt-poor Little Boston, where he swipes the rights to the liquid fortune bubbling below the rubes' feet. But as Plainview's wealth explodes, his soul erodes...

Given the patchy backstory ("I don't like to talk about such things..."), Plainview's more metaphor than man, an emblem of avarice or morally bankrupt capitalism, or just sheer,

self-serving Evil. But, ever the consummate Method man, Day-Lewis gives him startling physical presence: imposing body language, eyes that squint and glimmer, and an insidious John Huston drawl (Plainview could easily be ancestor to *Chinatown*'s vile water-monger Noah Cross). Such oral alchemy maximises the marrow-chill of the character's misanthropic musings: "I look at people and I see nothing worth liking... I want to rule and never explain myself."

Remarkably, writer/director Anderson is able to marshal a worthy adversary for his force-of-nature protagonist. Paul Dano kept his lip zipped for much of *Little Miss Sunshine*, but he's a born gabblor here as Eli Sunday, Little Boston's premier boy-preacher. No lily-white coin-flip to Plainview, he's also fascinatingly flawed, a false prophet who becomes an increasingly sore thorn in the oil baron's side. Pious and precocious, Dano's creepy, shifty fervour bristles thrillingly against his nemesis' godless disdain in a string of flashpoint confrontations.

Since the other players are either peripheral or just passing through (minor

gripe: Ciarán Hinds' scarce face-time), *Blood* could be flagged as a two-hander. But the chamberpiece intensity can't belie the sweep and weight of a full-blown epic. PTA's screenplay is casually based on Oil!, Upton Sinclair's 1920's exposé of the black-gold industry's sticky beginnings. But this is no literal-minded plod through the pages. Rather than replicate the novel's muckraking focus, Anderson anatomises America's heritage from a more oblique angle, conjuring an opus infinitely rich and bracingly strange.

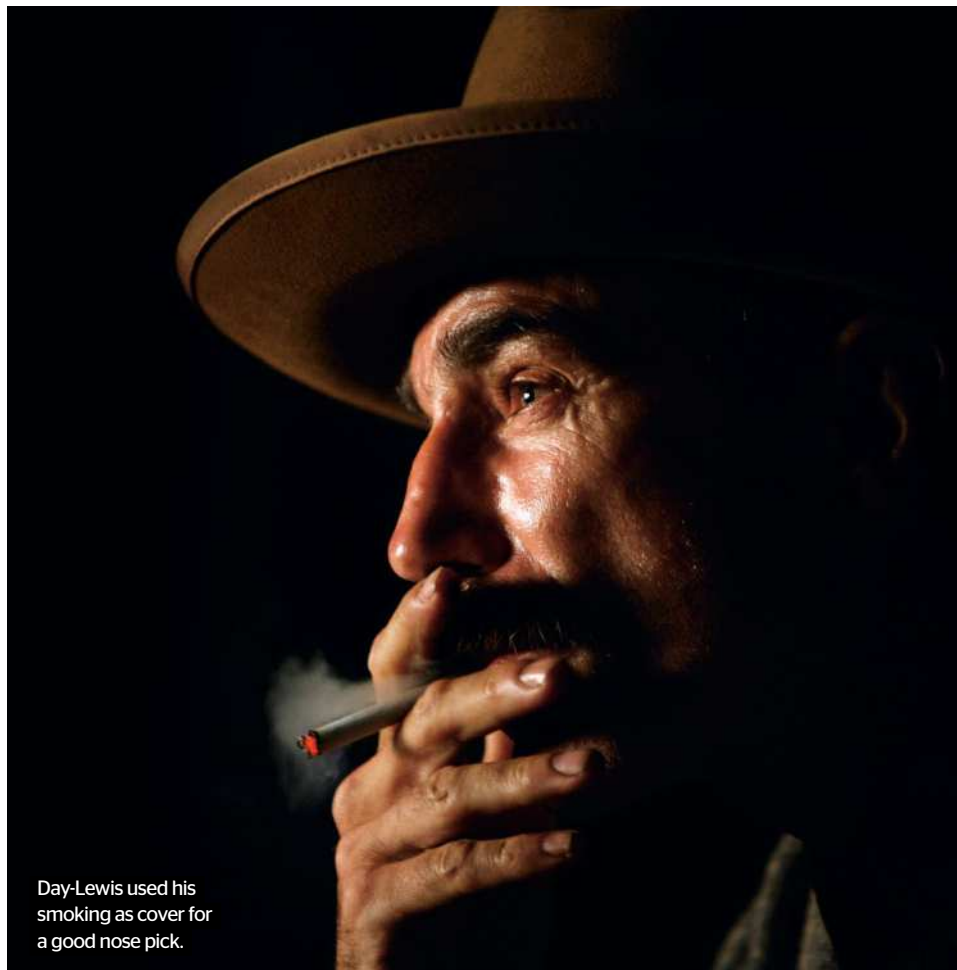
The eccentricity kicks in from the first shot, a parched panorama scored by the piercing, hundred-hornet buzz of Jonny Greenwood's extraordinary avant-garde soundtrack. The Radiohead man strikes a foreboding note that reverberates through the movie, while DoP Robert Elswit and production designer Jack Fisk turn the Marfa, Texas backdrop (stage for *Giant* and *No Country For Old Men*) into a stark period snapshot, at once earthy and unearthly.

As for Anderson... well, you might not recognise him. He's less inclined to show off, to distract with self-conscious camera swirls. Mature and monumental, this is a progression on a par with David Fincher's *Zodiac*; from whizz-bang wunderkind to authoritative auteur. If the overt influences of PTA's earlier work were Altman (mosaic plotting) and Scorsese (coke-frenzy formalism), here he's indebted to two other old masters. *Blood*'s stunning centrepiece – a newly struck oil gusher that erupts into a fountain of flame – echoes the hellish beauty of the locust holocaust in Terrence Malick's just-as-dreamlike *Days Of Heaven*.

Kubrick looms even larger. While the dialogue-free first act – a marvel of show-don't-tell exposition – apes the eerie, primordial mood of 2001's 'Dawn Of Man', the climax mines the dark humour of *Dr. Strangelove* and *A Clockwork Orange*. With Day-Lewis unhinging his full Satanic majesty, it's an outrageous final reckoning – the point where *Blood*'s brooding poetry balloons into opera. Contentious? No doubt. Some might wish for more of the bruised humanism of *Magnolia* and *Boogie Nights*, but few will contest the towering ambition, unflinching boldness and impeccable technique of Anderson's midnight-black vision.

MATTHEW LEYLAND

THE VERDICT A morality play without the moralising, Paul Thomas Anderson's period parable is a hefty meditation on money and madness, intense and immense. There will be Oscars...



Day-Lewis used his smoking as cover for a good nose pick.

THIS IS ENGLAND ¹⁸

DIRECTOR Shane Meadows **YEAR** 2007

YouTube 'This Is England', sift through results. Video One: a girl films from her Norwich-bound train; grannies and skate teens reflected in the tidy villages and urban sprawls rushing past. Video Two: a pop-promo, the number 30 bus' blown top spliced with Stonehenge. Lyrics: "They took the passport, they took the pound / And now they've bombed the underground / They'll never destroy the land of hope and glory / This is England." Video Three: a skinhead, dressed in a tight white shirt, lectures a room of potentials, singling out the sole black member. "Do you consider yourself English or Jamaican?" Pause. Silence. "English." Applause. Three videos and we're none the wiser. What is England?

Video Three – as everyone reading this should soon see for themselves – is a clip from Shane Meadows' *Dead Man's Shoes* follow-up, *This Is England*; the skinhead being neo-fascist Combo (an exceptional Stephen Graham), released from Her Majesty's Pleasure with vendettas to vent. Combo wasn't always this way, though. He used to be part of the original, more lefty skinhead subculture, but prision's turned him. Now free, his new, racially motivated rage soon scares away long-term mate Woody (an immensely likeable Joseph Gilgun) – the man he did time for.

"It was the best night of my life," Combo coos to Woody's girlfriend Lol (Vicky McClure; you guessed it, brilliant), talking of their pre-slammer night of 'passion'. "It was the worst one of mine," she replies. Combo was a kid before being banging up, life ahead. But Woody got the girl, he got the time. Big matter. He's now a disenfranchised man looking for disciples. And, surrounded by fickle teens in awe of the big boy in the room, he's able to entice some of Woody's gang into his hateful way of thinking.

Stuck in the middle is Shaun (thrilling newcomer Thomas Turgoose). It's the last day of term in his Nottingham estate and a summer of opportunity awaits. But having recently lost his dad in the Falklands, the 11-year-old latches onto father figures left, far right and centre. Bullied at school for his baggies in a time of skinny jeans ("Will you behave with the flare comments!?"), first

THE VERDICT An electric, stunning and powerful movie, crammed with extraordinary performances. This Is... The Best British Film Of The Year. You'll be floored.



Little Billy had the hair sorted. Now for the rest of his Britney costume...

Woody and then Combo take him under their wing. The former is jocular – buying his protégé a Ben Sherman shirt and inviting him on wasteland 'hunting' trips. The latter is intense – gifting Shaun a St George's Cross and taking him along to National Front meets.

As a snapshot of youth, *This Is England* is timeless. Shaun is a sponge, absorbing everything from sex to booze to smokes to ideas. As a nostalgic glimpse of 1983, it's immaculate. At the kick-off, Meadows montages what made England exciting back then (CDs, punks, the blasted Rubik's Cube) with what made it fearful (riots, strikes, war). For the first half-hour at least, the film is far funnier than you may expect. As a stocky, cheeky kid in the headlights of puberty, Turgoose's naturalism constantly charms, while his mum Cynthia (Jo Hartley) frets touchingly beneath her power perm. The language ("That's sterling!"), the clothing (Doc Martens, braces, checked shirts) and the music are all magnificent. Framed by a director who treats near every shot as a work of art to hang in the Tate – sod Constable, this is England – if you were unaware of how choice the '80s were before, prepare for a slap in the face. Meadows grasps the England of Video One – the country of unique fashion; a melting pot where ideas can breathe.

However, knocking you gasping some 45 minutes in is the England of Video Two and the moment Meadows cements himself as

a filmmaker of vital vitality. Gathered in his council flat, Combo launches into the film's defining speech "For 2,000 years, this nation has been raped and pillaged," spits Graham, the *Snatch* star hitting a five-minute career-high as poisonous words leave his lips with perfectionist poise. Once he's ranted against "3.5 million" coming into the UK as "cheap labour" the relevance stings. "Phoney" Falklands? Phoney Iraq. The finale of "Thatcher in her ivory tower... she lied to us about the war"? That's the moment Tony Blair stands up. And exits the cinema.

Combo's hatred is skin-deep, but alas couldn't be more resonant in 2007 if he delivered it via webcam. "These people think we owe them a living!" he shouts, echoing 'soft touch' immigration debates rife throughout this country today. But England's never bought intolerance, never done repression. No Mussolini, Franco, Hitler, even Le Pen. We have always treated neo-fascism as a bit of a joke. But times are changing, and religious differences – militant Muslims, fundamental Christians, bigoted atheists – leave the country on the precipice of a worrying battle of intolerance. The England of Video Three is from a film of panic attacks and, for better or worse, is England. Right now. Organise church trips, galvanise your local community, take your mum. Just bloody well see this film.

JONATHAN DEAN



The tension at the stare-off
finals was getting unbearable...

THREE BILLBOARDS OUTSIDE EBBING, MISSOURI 15 DIRECTOR Martin McDonagh YEAR 2017

There's a scene midway through Martin McDonagh's outstanding black comedy/modern-day western/revenge thriller when two protagonists are arguing nose-to-nose. Eyes are blazing. Spittle is spraying. But then their row comes to a resounding halt in the most unexpected, bloody manner. What happens, which won't be spoiled here, is at once horrifying and mortifying and sad and gory and diabolically funny. What's more, the complicated pause it triggers, in viewers and participants alike, is broken by two tender lines of dialogue that are utterly heartbreaking.

Anyone who's seen British-Irish playwright-turned-filmmaker Martin McDonagh's 2008 debut *In Bruges* will already know that this is a writer/director who can switch moods in a heartbeat. But terrific third feature *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* is a notable leap forward, adding compassion and profundity to the volatile mix. It's these flavours, for all the brassy brilliance on display, that linger longest.

At the heart of the tale stands Mildred Hayes (Frances McDormand), feet planted, eyes kindled. It's been seven months since her teenage daughter was raped and murdered in her small hometown of Ebbing, Missouri, and the trail, according to Chief Willoughby (Woody Harrelson), has gone cold. Mildred thus decides to light a fire under the police department by hiring three disused billboards on the outskirts of town and adorning them with a huge-

lettered message to make the cops choke on their doughnuts.

But here's the twist: Willoughby is no ogre or lunkhead, but rather a smart, conscientious man who's much liked by the townsfolk he diligently serves. He's also dying of pancreatic cancer. None of which deters Mildred from getting all up in his grill at every opportunity. "The time it took you to get out here whining like a bitch, Willoughby, some other poor girl's probably out there being butchered."

Watching McDormand and Harrelson take aim at each other while armed with McDonagh's ornate, vulgar dialogue is like receiving an adrenaline shot to the heart. And another. And then another, their vehement exchanges complicated by a friendship that goes back years. Both actors are at the top of their considerable games, with Harrelson bringing heart and dignity to Willoughby's muscular authority, and McDormand spinning grandstanding speeches that thrum with rage, mischief and hostility.

But Mildred's moral centre is unimpeachable. She is, in fact, a hugely likeable, deeply sympathetic figure who would still take your understanding and grind it into the mud. From pioneer stock, she's no-nonsense to the bone. It's a powerhouse performance, McDormand's best since winning an Oscar for 1996's *Fargo*.

THE VERDICT McDormand is an unstoppable force in a fiercely intelligent, profanely poetic movie that shifts tonal gears at breakneck speed.

Also in the running will be Rockwell, who does some of his best work with a character who's mean-spirited, physically abusive, racist... and so much more, as McDonagh's sparkling screenplay again veers direction to flip assumptions on their head. *Three Billboards* is a movie in which even the second and third-rung players are gifted fully fleshed characters to inhabit – Caleb Landry Jones, Peter Dinklage and John Hawkes all provide sterling support – and which refuses to tick any screenwriting boxes unless said box is then royally upended.

Initially setting itself up as a frontier-justice drama replete with saloons and guns and populated by white hats and black hats, it writhes and bucks and turns inside out. Stop the film halfway through and you won't know where it's going. Stop it again 10 minutes from the end and you won't be any clearer.

Such refusal to adhere to formula is exhilarating. Displaying versatility and virtuosity in equal measure, McDonagh has fashioned a film that's cruel and compassionate, noble and ugly, funny and elegiac, showboating and profound. It is a study of violence, authority and privilege, of grief and guilt, of revenge and forgiveness, and it concludes in the most perfect way imaginable. The only way it could, really – and a way that 99 per cent of Hollywood thrillers would not dare to entertain.

Few people outside of the Coens and Tarantino could forge a thriller so bristling with brio. Don't miss it, or you'll have Mildred Hayes to deal with... **JAMIE GRAHAM**



Tommy Lee Jones and Barry Pepper with what is almost definitely not apple juice.

THE THREE BURIALS OF MELQUIADES ESTRADA ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Tommy Lee Jones **YEAR** 2006

Tommy Lee Jones was born to play a cowboy. No surprise there – he has a face like a cracked saddle, a voice as parched as the Sierra Mountains. The kicker is that he was born to direct big-screen features, too – it just took him 60 years to give it a go.

Forlorn, embittered, absurdist, gruff, redemptive western *The Three Burials Of Melquiades Estrada* is, arguably, the finest entry to the genre since Clint's *Unforgiven*. That's some claim given the improbably high standard of the few oaters made over the last 15 years – *Ride With The Devil*, *Open Range* and this year's *Brokeback Mountain* are particular standouts – but hype plays no part in it. *Burials* isn't the kind of film that lends itself to hype. It's measured, controlled, fastidiously concerned with time and place, character and storytelling... a film that's content to carefully finger its themes like an aged, worn cowpoke rolling a cigarette.

The inevitable touchstone is Peckinpah: vivid flavours, gnarled, taciturn protagonist and touching adherence to a moral code. But unlike mad, bad Sam's loaded westerns, *Burials* has little use for thunderous set-pieces and stylised bloodletting, its one shootout (replayed from different viewpoints) finding no poetry in violence. And despite the film's modern-day setting and frequent flourishes of anarchic humour, it's pleasingly old-fashioned.

Written by Guillermo Arriaga (*Amores Perros*, *21 Grams*), this starts off as a portrait of a wretched, stymied community before narrowing its focus to patrolman Mike Norton (Barry Pepper) and cattleman Pete Perkins (Jones), their fates entwined by Mexican immigrant Melquiades Estrada (Cedillo). Mike is his killer, Pete his saviour, doggedly rescuing the body from a shallow grave to take it home. So begins a haunting, grubby, lyrical journey as Pete kidnaps Mike and rides into Mexico with the corpse draped between them. Jones' debut is laconic and introspective, sombre and profound, trotting cautiously towards not some grandstanding shoot-out but a place of peace. It's a strikingly mature work, but it's also given to bursts of squalid violence and smudges of black humour: witness Pete's hilarious attempts to preserve the decaying corpse. And if the script occasionally flirts with coincidence

THE VERDICT Elegant and elegiac. A mightily impressive western.

bordering on contrivance, it's as much to do with the filmmakers' worldview as cutting corners. Life is surprising, absurd and mischievous. **JAMIE GRAHAM**



TIME ¹²

DIRECTOR Garrett Bradley **YEAR** 2020

This masterly monochromatic doc offers an inspiring tale of one woman's determination to unwind the prison-industrial complex. Artist-filmmaker Garrett Bradley intimately profiles abolitionist Sibil Fox Richardson, who's spent decades campaigning for the release of her husband Rob as he serves an extraordinary 60-year prison sentence. With her platinum larynx, the mother-of-six narrates over old footage of the kids sending well-wishes to their father. These sweet home videos combine with Sibil's present-day activism to create a profound and pertinent portrait of love persevering through time.

MUSANNA AHMED



TONI ERDMANN ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Maren Ade **YEAR** 2016

A German comedy? That's nearly three hours long? And centred on a sixty-something father, Winfried (Peter Simonischek), donning fright wig and buck teeth to inveigle his way into the work-focused existence of his estranged, middle-aged daughter, Ines (Sandra Hüller)? The joke's on us, right?

Wrong. Winner of the International Critics' Prize at Cannes and dozens of gongs since, *Toni Erdmann* balances warm-heartedness, goofy humour and broad set-pieces with sadness, loneliness and mental illness. It's a stunningly sophisticated (but accessible) work set in an authentic environment – even when colleagues attend a naked party to take cringe-com to new levels – and it questions the very function of humour (salve, weapon, defence mechanism?) without ever capping up its themes. Also, its writer/director Maren Ade refuses to buy into Winfried's trite belief that Ines needs a husband and kids to find happiness.

A sure favourite for the Best Foreign Language Film Oscar, it's already rumoured for a Hollywood remake. Alexander Payne could perhaps cope – there's a touch of *About Schmidt*, with added belly laughs – but it'll likely be diluted down to a simplistic crowd-pleaser. Best catch it now. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

TOY STORY 3

DIRECTOR Lee Unkrich **YEAR** 2010

Let's go out on a high note!" says Buzz Lightyear near the start of *Toy Story 3*, a line that not only casts an air of finality over Pixar's 11th opus but also throws down the gauntlet to director Lee Unkrich and his team. How do they set about following two films that, in addition to creating a genre, have had a decade or more to nestle in their audiences' hearts? Like the playthings they revolve around, *Toy Story* and *Toy Story 2* have become more than enjoyable ways of passing the time. They have become cherished keepsakes, to be passed down from one generation to the next and periodically revisited through ever-rosier spectacles.

It's not enough, then, for *Toy Story 3* to succeed at the box office. It must be that rarest of things – an instant classic that stands shoulder-to-shoulder with its predecessors like the final volume in a leather-embossed saga. At the same time, it can't simply repeat old glories. It must seek out uncharted ground, introduce fresh protagonists and take familiar ones on an exciting, original and satisfying adventure. Short of asking Unkrich to reinvent the wheel, it's hard to imagine a taller order.

The bad news is that *Toy Story 3* can never hope to replicate the childlike wonder and

delight the first one did 15 years ago. We've all grown up since then, and Buzz and Woody have as well – not physically perhaps, but morally and emotionally. Yet the fact they are, ultimately, merely sentient objects means there's only so far Unkrich can take them, a limitation that sees *Toy Story 3* – initially at least – dramatise concerns and neuroses that have already been articulated in the movies that went before.

Above all others is the encroaching fear of obsolescence that stalks Woody like a cancer: the dread that his beloved owner Andy will one day outgrow him. That day finally arrives in *TS3*, the 17-year-old Andy (voiced as ever by John Morris) having long put away childish things as he and his brood prepare for him going off to college. It's no surprise, then, that this serves as catalyst for this third installment, an overdue clear-out of his dust-gathering toys – Jessie the Cowgirl, Slinky Dog, dino Rex and all – resulting in them being sent by mistake to the Sunnyside Daycare Centre for a new batch of kids to play with.

But this apparent utopia isn't quite the dreamland Buzz and co. think it is, fostering a desire for freedom that crafts *TS3* into a cartoon spin on *The Great Escape*. Yet Unkrich

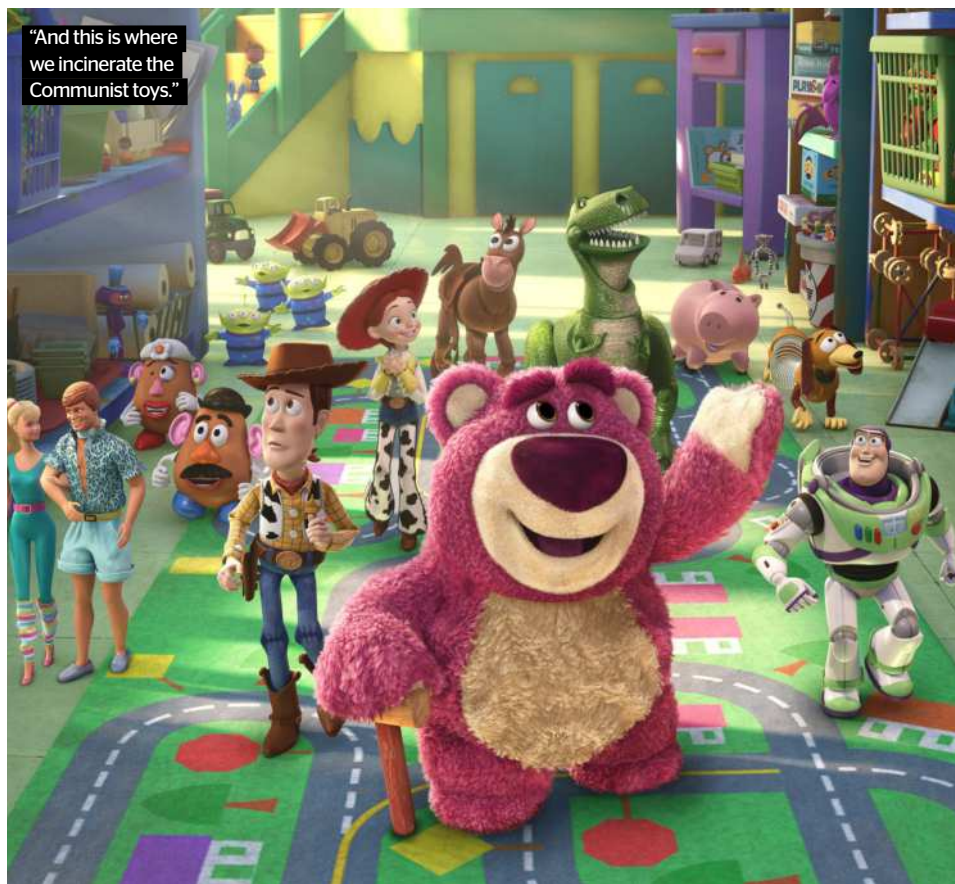
has loftier plans than that, an apocalyptic final act at the local rubbish dump – awesomely realised in 3D as a festering hellhole that is pure Hieronymus Bosch – forcing Woody and friends to contemplate mortality itself. It's a dark turn of events that may force parents to have serious conversations with their nippers.

But let it be said that *TS3* is also continually, blissfully funny, both in the way it uses established characters and in its ingenious integration of new blood. Unkrich ups the ante from the off, realising one of Andy's youthful reveries as a full-blown Old West escapade involving a runaway train, an exploding bridge and a giant porcine spaceship modeled on John Ratzenberger's scene-stealing Hamm. Although the real stand-out is the prison break itself, a superbly executed, *Mission: Impossible*-style extended set-piece that sees Mr. Potato Head (Don Rickles) become Mr. Tortilla, Woody confront a watchful monkey and a benign 'Big Baby' morph into an unsettling instrument of draconian oppression.

Of all the newcomers, Michael Keaton makes the strongest impression as an urbane Ken doll piqued by the notion he is no more than a Barbie accessory. (A dress-up montage to the strains of 'Freak Out' is a comic highpoint.) Yet this is a film of countless pleasures, among them Timothy Dalton's hedgehog thespian Mr. Pricklepants, a flashback that reveals how Ned Beatty's outwardly cuddly teddy bear Lotso lost his sunny side and a little girl called Bonnie whose imagination and innocence facilitate the film's heartbreaking climax and its optimistic open ending.

But what of Woody and Buzz themselves? It would have been easy for either to get lost in the crush, and there are times the former – sounding, via Tom Hanks' larynx, slightly repetitive notes of desperation and neediness – nearly does. But with Buzz, scripter Michael Arndt plays a blinder, introducing a hitherto unpressed reset button that turns this all-American Space Ranger into a tango-dancing Toreador. For two pictures Tim Allen's verbals have been consistently on the money and a ceaseless source of amusement. Here, however, he must share equal credit with Javier Fernandez Pena, a lusty-voiced Spaniard who makes us view Lightyear in a whole new light. Arriba! **NEIL SMITH**

THE VERDICT One of the year's best films, Pixar's long-awaited latest scores in every department. Funny, affecting and dramatically fearless, it's as fine a threequel as you could hope for. Bring tissues – lots of tissues.



THE TREE OF LIFE 12A

DIRECTOR Terrence Malick **YEAR** 2011

Two things before we start on Terrence Malick's philosophical, spiritual, experimental, transcendent, cosmic odyssey. One: it's shorter than *Transformers 2*. Two: it has dinosaurs in it. But really, where on earth do we start? Not on Earth. Not at the start. Further back, in the Beginning...

Over four films in as many decades, near-mystical US writer/director Malick has conjured huge arthouse-blockbuster tone-poems about seismic periods of human existence like the Great Depression (*Days Of Heaven*, starring Richard Gere), WW2 (*The Thin Red Line*, starring everyone in Hollywood) and the discovery of America (*The New World*, starring Colin Farrell and Christian Bale). *The Tree Of Life* makes them look like crayon scribbles on the back of a napkin. A philosophy lecturer turned visionary filmmaker, Malick has finally gone for the big one, unpacking his massive butterfly net and setting out on a quest to capture the existence of God in nature, the meaning of human life and the mysteries of the universe. Whoa.

In terms of crazy ambition, there's nothing else like it. Right from the start, Malick stretches out his arms and attempts to pull together the awesome and the intimate. But at first, it seems like business as usual: some lovely, drifting shots of a beautiful woman (Jessica Chastain) receiving a telegram telling her that one of her sons has died. She asks, "Why?" Then Malick's mission begins. He hits the warp button, beaming us into the cosmos and back to the dawn of Creation itself. We just lost cabin pressure...

For the best part of an astonishing hour, we're immersed in wondrous, mind-blowing, frequently otherworldly images. We see the universe being born. Heavenly Hubble-visions of distant galaxies. Gases, light and matter spread across the void. Cells splitting. Volcanoes splurging. Jellyfish drifting. Dinosaurs! Asteroids crashing. An embryo's eye. A child being born.

Created with the help of 2001: A Space Odyssey's special-effects legend Douglas Trumbull, it might just be the most audacious sequence in cinema since Kubrick's giant leap from the rise of the apes to the 21st century. And *The Tree Of Life* never quite touches those giddy heights again.

THE VERDICT To infinity and beyond... Terrence Malick's spiritual odyssey is baffling, unique and overspilling with wonder. Don't wait for the DVD.



Malick's Genesis ends in '50s Texas, in the town where he grew up, and where strict father Brad Pitt (a fiercely committed turn) and angelic mother Chastain raise their three boys. This is where *Tree* lays roots, as *Children Of Men* cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki films their young son Jack (outstanding newcomer Hunter McCracken) growing in a series of drifting life-fragments – in which very little happens.

Drenched in grandiose classic music, Chastain wanders around looking at trees, while Malick makes her look like an angel (she dances on air at one point) and gives her murmuring lines like, "In what shape did you come to us?" Meanwhile, Pitt scowls imperiously and the kids scamper around.

The Tree Of Life is beautiful. Ridiculously, rapturously beautiful. You could press 'pause' at any second and hang the frame on your wall. But you soon get the feeling that Malick could have made the film either 30 minutes shorter or 30 hours longer and it would have made absolutely no difference.

His goal here is to connect the tensions within this little family (Pitt's stern Nature vs. Chastain's loving Grace) with the giant forces of the universe. Just in case, Malick tells us exactly this in one of the hushed voiceovers that float over what we're seeing.

We're regularly teleported to the present day – for the first time in Malick's career – where grown-up Jack is now Sean Penn, looking angsty, wandering around, not saying much, and looking at rocks.

Even if much of the movie takes place in Jack's mind, it doesn't really come together. You're often left waiting for attention-grabbing scenes (a toddler staring at a baby, kids tying a frog to a rocket) that don't arrive often enough, but enthrall whenever they do.

You'll feel amazed, confused, preached to, ignored, lost, found... and still the camera keeps moving and searching. Then it ends. But not before a finale in which everyone from Jack's past steps out of time to hug each other on a beach like some sort of Thomson's holiday advert... albeit the most moving Thomson's ad you'll ever see.

But if Malick (and the five editors who worked on 600,000 metres of film for three years) never quite wins his struggle with the film's impossible ambitions, maybe that's half the point. Much of *The Tree Of Life's* beauty is in its yearning and wonder. It's an extraordinary grasping stretch – across space and time – to touch what will always be just out of our reach. It's a captivating, unmissable experience. And, you know, *Transformers 3* is out this month anyway. **JONATHAN CROCKER**



TRUE GRIT 15 DIRECTORS Ethan Coen, Joel Coen YEAR 2010

As soon as it was known the Coen brothers were planning a new film of *True Grit*, the internet grumbling started in force. Why remake a great film, demanded the whingers? Well, maybe distance adds charm, but the 1969 adaptation of Charles Portis' novel, directed by reliable veteran Henry Hathaway, really isn't that great. It's mostly remembered for an overweight John Wayne spoofing his own image, getting drunk and falling off his horse. (True, the role won him his only Oscar, but that was essentially the John Wayne Award For Being John Wayne.) At 128 minutes, Hathaway's film is overlong and rambling. The ending slides into a sentimentality that's absent from Portis' novel.

As Texas ranger Le Boeuf, crooner Glen Campbell is plain inadequate – worse, if you can credit it, than Ricky Nelson in *Rio Bravo*. Not a disastrous film, all things considered, but one that's surely ripe for a remake.

And so, 40 years on, here come Joel and Ethan with their take on the story. It's their first true western – OK, there were western elements in *No Country For Old Men*, but this is the real McCoy. Set in the late 1870s, it's their first period movie set pre-20th century (unless you count the dybbuk prologue to *A Serious Man*). And it's their return to remake territory, which they explored with regrettable results in 2004's *The Ladykillers*.

So with all that riding on it, how do the brothers do? Pretty damn well. Not that they've

messed around with the story; for all their supposed irreverence, the Coens treat their literary sources with respect. As before, this is the tale of Mattie Ross, an exceptionally mature and level-headed 14-year-old from Arkansas, who sets out to track down her father's killer with the help of a boozy, one-eyed US Marshal named 'Rooster' Cogburn, with occasional interference from Texas ranger La Boeuf.

The ranger, this time round, is played by Matt Damon, who plays down the Texan's vanity and braggadocio, leaving just enough of it in evidence to be funny without being off-putting. As Mattie, newcomer Hailee Steinfeld doesn't eclipse memories of Kim Darby, who was the best thing about the earlier movie, but she's equally assured in the role, facing down all comers with a clear-eyed self-possession that recalls Frances McDormand's Marge Gunderson in *Fargo*. (Also, at 13 she's much closer to the age she's playing – Darby was 21.)

In the plum role of Rooster Cogburn, Jeff Bridges can't totally resist the temptation to ham it up a bit (though a lot less than Wayne did). But given such a richly larger-than-life character, who could blame him? Bridges lends the Marshal a deep, throaty, mellowed-in-whiskey voice that gives full weight to his hard-bitten pronouncements. When Mattie protests his decision not to bury a couple of

recently deceased baddies, since it's winter and the ground's too hard, Cogburn observes, "Them men wanted a decent burial, they should have got themselves killed in summer."

It's this richness of language, often expressed with a near-biblical formality, which evidently attracted the Coens to this. Much of it's taken straight from Portis' novel. Carter Burwell's score abets this mood, weaving an evocative tapestry of traditional gospel tunes.

Given their fidelity to the original the brothers get less chance to exercise their trademark sardonic humour, though they do sneak in the occasional pungent jibe. Early in the action there's a triple hanging: two of the men are given time to make final speeches to the crowd, one penitent, the other defiant. The third has the hood slipped over his head before he can get out half a dozen words. But then, he's just an Injun....

The start and finish point up the difference between the two versions. Rather than laboriously showing Mattie's father leaving home, heading for local trading centre Fort Smith and being gunned down by his drunken ranch-hand, the Coens cut to the chase, covering these events in a brief voice-over from Mattie as she embarks on her quest for justice. And where Hathaway opted for a feel-good ending, the Coens follow Portis with their elegiac, 25-years-on coda, a poignant meditation on time and loss. This isn't so much a remake as a masterly re-creation.

PHILIP KEMP

THE VERDICT From a classic western novel, the Coens have fashioned a western in the classic mode.



Jim Carrey's Truman imagines, unbelievably, a man on the moon.

THE TRUMAN SHOW PG

DIRECTOR Peter Weir **YEAR** 1998

Proving that a blockbuster doesn't have to be big, brash, vacuous and wedged with a ton of eye-stinging special effects, *The Truman Show* is practically an anti-Event Movie. Instead of taking a low-brow/high-thrill approach to its ingenious idea, Peter Weir has given us a thoughtful, intelligent, wholly character-driven masterpiece. Nor is it just a great movie in its own right; it's a great mainstream movie. Watch it by yourself, take your girlfriend/boyfriend or go with a bunch of friends, you'll enjoy it just the same. Like *Titanic*, *The Truman Show* is a rare multiplex crowd-pleaser that doesn't begin to insult your intelligence and, because of this, it more than makes up for big disappointments *Godzilla*, *Lost In Space* and *Armageddon*.

Of course, the less you know about the plot the better, as this is an extraordinary experience from start to finish. It's the sort of movie that you wish Hollywood made more often: the perfect combination of a witty script (mercifully unhacked by gag-adding writers-for-hire), a refreshingly short running-time and a small principal cast so perfectly suited to their on-screen roles they might have been born to play them. Harris brings a controlled God-complex to the role of *The Truman Show*'s creator/producer/director Christof and Linney excels as Truman's slogan-spouting wife.

McElhone, meanwhile, has the difficult task of playing the plot-advancing, rebellious love interest who tries to convince Truman that it's all a lie. Yet, although their performances are faultless, these actors are constantly being eclipsed by the two real stars.

The first is the bizarre premise. Truman Burbank (Carrey) has grown-up in the artificial town of Seahaven, a prefab suburban nirvana jammed in a happy timewarp sometime between the '50s and the '90s. Five thousand mini-cameras (hidden in plants, car radios, shirt buttons and the like) survey this mammoth television sound stage, following every aspect of Truman's existence and broadcasting it 24 hours every day to an eager world. Actors play his friends and relatives, while Christof (who gets to utter such lines as "Cue the sun"), manipulates this goldfish bowl-style micro-reality from an office concealed behind the Moon. It's only after a series of on-set accidents (a spotlight falls out of the sky and Truman tunes into a

radio frequency instructing the show's actors), that our hero starts to question the world around him.

Naturally, the impact of this concept would be lessened without a believable central character, and Carrey turns in the performance of his life. Forget his rubber-faced zaniness in comedies like *Ace Ventura* and *Liar Liar*. It doesn't matter if you've never liked him before. Yes, there are still traces of the OTT comedian in the character of Truman, but Carrey approaches his role with gentle, honest kindness, creating a real human being with real emotions, who's about to discover his life has been a carefully-orchestrated lie. It's a powerful, masterfully understated and moving performance, veering perfectly between moments of humour and heart-tugging seriousness. Carrey deserves full credit for his part in making *The Truman Show* the huge success it so evidently is.

Clever, funny, enjoyable, this is not just the best mainstream comedy of the year, it might rank as the best of the last five years. With a multitude of subtexts, social comment and satirical sideswipes, it's a beautifully-crafted, emotional piece with an original heart and an irresistible storyline. It's so good you don't want it to end. Films this great don't come along often. Queue to see what is surely one of the defining movies of the '90s. **TF**

THE VERDICT Jim Carrey proves he has more than one acting dimension in this original, clever tale of junk-culture excess. *The Truman Show* makes every other blockbuster look empty and stale. Hollywood take note: intelligent filmmaking can work. More please..



Don't be fooled by the rocks that he's got...

UNCUT GEMS 15

DIRECTORS Benny Safdie, Josh Safdie **YEAR** 2019

How do you find out what an actor is made of? For New York indie-film brothers Benny and Josh Safdie, you put them under extreme duress and watch closely. In 2014's no-fi heroin movie *Heaven Knows What*, non-professional lead Arielle Holmes delivered an electrifying study in desperation and resilience. Meanwhile, 2017's *Good Time* has become go-to viewing for proof that Robert Pattinson deserves the Batmobile keys.

For the Safdies' latest character-driven exercise in pulp-crime anxiety, Adam Sandler headlines. It's cruelly funny, for one thing. For another, the Safdies don't so much reinvent Sandler as reframe him, playing to his impulsive man-child strengths in an environment that stretches them anew.

A jeweller and debt-riddled gambler with an appetite for self-destruction, Sandler's Howard Ratner gets into trouble as he tries to usher imported black opals to auction. He believes loaning them to NBA star Kevin Garnett will boost his luck, but fate decrees otherwise. As misfortune strikes, Ratner pinballs between estranged wife Dinah (Idina Menzel), patient lover Julia (Julia Fox) and no-nonsense creditors in his desperation to retrieve the rocks.

Punch-Drunk Love aside, he's never been better cast. A time-bomb of foolish compulsion

THE VERDICT Sandler is off-the-scale good in the Safdies' latest: a scuzzy shot of adrenaline into the crime pic's heart.

and childlike rage, Sandler maintains our attention and empathy even as his behaviour becomes increasingly moronic and morally impaired with every wrong turn.

Meanwhile, the Safdies cook up a suffocating atmosphere of conflict to magnetic effect. Conversations become f-bomb-strafted explosions, turning the air of NYC's Diamond District blue. Cast-wise, Menzel's soul-freezing stare, Fox's slow-burn nuances and supporting heavy Keith Williams Richards' projections of threat charge the atmosphere with stakes and intensity.

Cinematographer Darius Khondji's images contribute a dense, textured sense of immediacy; a Jewish dinner scene, meanwhile, feels entirely lived-in. Impressively, this inside-out engagement with a specific world manages to evoke the '70s films of Sidney Lumet and Martin Scorsese (who is executive producing here, by the way) without suffering by comparison.

Bursts of expressive direction strengthen the Safdies' hold, such that even Ratner's relationship with doors – surging through them, locked behind them – becomes loaded with meaning. Daniel Lopatin's grandiose synth score helps thicken the mood, pulsing with tension. Some viewers may find this wired worldview abrasive, but the Safdies' uncompromised confidence of vision brings its own tumultuous rewards. As for Sandler, a gold statuette come the Oscars would not be undeserved. **KEVIN HARLEY**

UNDER THE SHADOW 15

DIRECTOR Babak Anvari **YEAR** 2016

You wait 119 years for an Iranian horror movie, then two – both excellent – make their presence felt in a couple of years. After hyper-stylised vampire flick *A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night*, comes the more realist-flavoured *Under The Shadow*, set in a haunted Tehran apartment during the Iran-Iraq War. Along with the Iraqi missiles there arrives, it seems, a more ancient force, as Shideh (Narges Rashidi) and her young daughter Dorsa (Avin Manshadi) are plagued by a malevolent djinn.

Writer/director Babak Anvari blends war, patriarchal rule, folklore, spooky kids and one of the best jump scares since *Carrie's* hand burst from the grave, into a startling debut. The grafting of fantasy onto authentic situations recalls Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook*, but could almost be an Asghar Farhadi (*A Separation*) film, chronicling familial breakdown in an oppressive culture – Shideh flees the house without her chador and is threatened with the lash for her immodesty.

Shot in bleary browns and beiges, the camera gets increasingly jittery as nerves fray, and the ominous sound design – bass rumbles, shrieking winds, authoritative voices on TV and radio – truly unnerves. Seek it out.

JAMIE GRAHAM

THE VERDICT Full of shivers and subtext, this is scarily good. One of the films – horror or otherwise – of the year.



"If that guy keeps talking so loudly on the phone, I'll kill him."



UNDER THE SKIN ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Jonathan Glazer **YEAR** 2014

From *E.T.* and *War Of The Worlds* to *Third Rock From The Sun*, the idea of an extraterrestrial visiting our planet has been mined for tears, fears and laughs alike. But relatively few films – *The Man Who Fell To Earth* is a rare example – have seriously pondered what it would be like if alien intelligence actually arrived on Earth: how strange they would seem to us and how utterly baffling we would seem to them.

Under The Skin steps up to the plate. Jonathan Glazer, the returning hero of British film absent from our screens a whole decade since 2004's *Birth*, has turned in what could well be the most beguiling, inventive, atmospheric and unnerving Brit-pic of the year.

Enigmatic and chilly in tone, it's not the kind of film dripping with exposition. We open on a series of bizarre images set to Mica Levi's eerie score, which can be assumed to suggest some kind of hyper-sophisticated intergalactic travel. Then, we see Scarlett Johansson, in a sensationally detached performance, driving around the Scottish highlands and suburban Glasgow in a van, attracting men

THE VERDICT You may not be sure what you've seen, but you've sure seen something. With neither a petticoat nor a wideboy in sight, this is one of the most original and exciting British movies in quite some time.

into her cab with her, well, Scarlett Johansson, then taking them through a mysterious door in a dilapidated house. What happens in there? It's best not to know; suffice to say, the images that accompany the big reveal will stay with you long after the film is over.

What exactly she does do is just one mystery among many in this intriguing film – and as we realise Johansson is an alien on some predatory mission, even more questions open up. Who is the mysterious biker cleaning up after her? Where is she from? What drives her to lure men to their fate, siren-style? Does she feel compassion? As she seemingly begins to doubt her goals, even more puzzlers arise – can this strange visitor even begin to grasp what it is to be human?

These are big, big themes, and if the ghost of Stanley Kubrick hung a little too heavy over *Birth*, the cold-minded master's influence is here recombined to more welcome effect with the dry wit of Glazer's debut, *Sexy Beast*. From the otherworldly feel he brings to Scottish mountains to outlandish visions straight from the farthest reaches of sci-fi, *Under The Skin* has its fair share of gob-smacking sights. Homegrown movies don't tend to offer so much for the eye and brain alike; Glazer is a treasure to be cherished – and let's hope it's not 10 years until his next visitation.

ANDREW LOWRY



VS. ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Ed Lilly **YEAR** 2018

Between its ferocious word-flinging and focused cast, this rhymes-of-passage drama is a persuasive debut for Brit helmer Ed Lilly. Connor Swindells impresses as Adam, a foster kid channelling his wayward energies into battle-rap bouts. Can his epic diss skills save him? Clear-cut emotional stakes and cutting put-downs bring a subculture to sparking life, banking our engagement through bumps in the plotting.

KEVIN HARLEY

WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE PG

DIRECTOR Spike Jonze **YEAR** 2009

Maurice Sendak, author of the classic children's book that inspired *Where The Wild Things Are*, was asked recently what he would say to any parents who feel the film is too scary. "I would tell them to go to hell," he replied. "If they [*the kids*] can't handle it, go home. Or wet your pants."

We're not mad-keen on the weeing part, but he has a point. Director Spike Jonze didn't set out to make a kids' film. He set out to make a film about kids. Bad call? After all, the source material is a pre-school favourite – a gorgeous 10-sentence fable first published in 1963 exploring the value of imagination. Naughty Max is sent to bed without supper after making mischief in his wolf suit. In his room a forest grows. Then an ocean tumbles by. So Max sets sail to where the wild things are and becomes their king. Sure, it's a bit scary – there are monsters – but by the end Max has learned his lesson and returns home to find his dinner still warm. Twinning a pared-down narrative with panoramic pics of freaky-furry fiends, the book lets nippers face their fears while holding their hands at the same time.

While Jonze's movie is true to the spirit of the book and replicates its look fastidiously,

it's a different beast altogether. It's bloody frightening for one. His 9ft-tall furred and feathered creatures (actors in costumes with CGI touch-ups to add expressive nuance) are uncanny creations that could have walked straight off Sendak's pages. But the ravaged remains of previous 'Kings' strip away any sense of safety. Indeed, there are hints of violence throughout, from the early threats from sulky Judith (Catherine O'Hara) to eat Max (Max Records), up to tempestuous Carol's (James Gandolfini) tantrums and tendency to smash things. It's all cloaked in a heavy cloud of sadness, too – the wild things are lonely, insecure, frightened and unhappy. They cry, they fall out, they get hurt.

So, has Jonze messed up by turning a kiddie classic into a scary and depressing rant? Hell no. *Wild Things* is one of the purest evocations of childhood you'll ever see. It's a true voyage of the imagination, for Max and the viewer alike. It's not an intellectual experience but a deeply emotional trip, one that's profoundly personal. It's visceral. Experiential. Sensual. A film to be felt and to fall in love with. It's a daydream, a fantasy and an escape. An hour-and-a-half where you can soak yourself in uncensored, vicarious sensation. Adults just

don't get to act like wild things most of the time. We have to be responsible and pragmatic, reasonable and diplomatic. We don't get to scream and shout and beat our fists without rebuke. We don't get to stand on a cliff top and howl. So sod the kids. This one's ours.

Sendak first approached Jonze to take on the adaptation a full 10 years ago, after he saw the director's *Being John Malkovich*. Author Dave Eggers (*Away We Go*) came on board to write the script. It's hard to imagine a better team. Jonze's vision, attention to detail and sense of humour add flair, joy, beauty and magic. Check out those landscapes, for example. Untamed forests and endless sand dunes. The romance and nostalgia he evokes with just the early evening sunlight poking through the trees. Then there are the obsessive intricacies of the tiny replica world that Carol painstakingly builds (which bring to mind John Cusack's marionettes in *Being John Malkovich*).

Meanwhile, the Pulitzer Prize-nominated Eggers – who at age 21 had to take responsibility for raising his eight-year-old brother after his parents died – clearly has an acute understanding of the pain, loss, anger and fear that are as much a part of childhood as snow fights and fortresses.

Stretching such minimal material into a feature-length script could have been disastrous, but Jonze's film adds, develops and enriches the original without spoiling a thing. So what's new? Notably the wild things – they've now been given names, lines and personalities. Each is a part of Max – Carol his creativity and recklessness, Judith his negativity, Alexander (Paul Dano) his fear and insecurity, Ira (Forest Whitaker) his neediness and KW (Lauren Ambrose) his relationship with his sister and his mother. The odd new character is added. A fort is built. They play war. Arguments flare up. Detractors will call the film both slight and padded (like that's fair) but it's a disservice to mistake simplicity for triviality. It is what it is – a highly emotional, immersive, regressive journey. As such, it's unlikely to appeal to everyone. But on its own terms it's hard to see how it could be any more perfect.

Where The Wild Things Are will make you laugh like a lunatic and cry like a child. And, yes, maybe even wet your pants. **ROSIE FLETCHER**

THE VERDICT A poignant dissection of youth with nine-foot furry monsters, gorgeous production design, frenetic camerawork and a playful, wistful score from Karen O. Never mind the little ones. This beauty will have most grown-ups blubbing.

Riding on the back
of a horned beast?
That's mad, Max.



NETELIX, ALTITUDE, WARNER BROS

WHEN WE WERE KINGS ^{PG}

DIRECTOR Leon Gast **YEAR** 1997

Undeniably deserving its Best Documentary Oscar, *When We Were Kings* tells – superbly – the story of what is almost certainly Muhammad Ali’s greatest fight (and thus, arguably, the greatest boxing match ever). The year is 1974 and America, still reeling from Richard Nixon’s resignation, gears itself up for what’s been billed (in a typically subtle moment of boxing understatement) as “The Fight Of The Century”. The heavyweight boxing champion of the world is George Foreman, a 25-year-old powerhouse with a killer punch; the challenger is former champ Muhammad Ali, now 32 years old and hungry to regain his crown. Naturally, with Don King (he of the loo-brush barnet) as promoter, the hype is non-stop, ably assisted by an absurd location; a “purse” like a sack (the fighters are offered \$5 million apiece to face each other); and an associated big-name music festival – headlined by BB King and James Brown.

What makes director Leon Gast’s doc so electrifying is that it manages to convey (using tightly edited footage and direct-to-camera anecdotes from Norman Mailer, Spike Lee et al) the overwhelming sense that something monumental is happening. More than just another big-bloke punch-up, the fight was about a country putting itself on the map, and about a gifted sportsman simultaneously rediscovering his roots and facing the toughest challenge of his career.

Hence *When We Were Kings* is a film as much about Ali as about boxing. The erstwhile boxer comes across as a likeable man – big of heart, sharp of wit and devastating of right jab. Yet Gast cleverly manages to reveal the mortal lurking behind the “Black Superman” too: Ali’s tangible frustration when rival Foreman cuts his eye and the fight is postponed just adds to the build-up.

Two quibbles. Firstly, Gast could have spent more time with Foreman for a bit more balance. Secondly... it ends. **TF**

THE VERDICT A documentary that thrills as much as it informs, transporting us into the centre of a historic sporting event.



THE WHITE RIBBON ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Michael Haneke **YEAR** 2009

Soaked in anguish, sexual humiliation, animal cruelty and death, *Funny Games US* was Michael Haneke’s attempt to reach a wider audience. It fell flat on its bloodied face. Unsurprisingly, then, the austere Austrian auteur now returns with his most challenging film to date. Not only is *The White Ribbon* soaked in anguish, sexual humiliation, animal cruelty and death, it’s shot in crisp black-and-white and set in a small village in northern Germany, 1913–14.

Afraid? Don’t be: Haneke’s 11th feature is his biggest and boldest to date, his best too. And for all its formal, thematic precision – rigorous compositions, measured pacing, potent symbolism – it is, ostensibly, a taut and sinister whodunit.

Narrated by an old man recalling his days as the village schoolteacher, the story begins with a doctor crashing from his horse, felled by a tripwire. Then the baron’s barn is torched, his son flogged... Who is responsible? It could be anyone, everyone: when moral guardians mete out sadistic punishments for the smallest transgressions yet themselves indulge in adultery and sexual abuse, who hasn’t got a reason to exact revenge? Haneke is here in his element, applying meticulously controlled technique to heated hostilities. The coldness burns. The dialogue smarts. And the regulated violence – half-glimpsed, off-screen, unseen – devastates, a scalpel slash to the mind’s eye.

But those who complain about the director’s cruelty and severity (“medicinal” shuddered *Variety*) are overlooking pockets of warmth and humour. One subplot even offers a coy romance, while the ruminative voiceover and stark, shimmering visuals suggest dream and parable – lessons can be learned from this strange community cocooned in the mists of time and memory.

THE VERDICT Haneke demands full attention as a patriarchal community crumbles to the ground and the seeds of fascism are sown. A masterpiece.

The White Ribbon marks the ascent of a major filmmaker to the rank of greatness. It boldly evokes monumental Euro-classics of the ’50s and ’60s and refuses to wither in their shadow. **JAMIE GRAHAM**



THE WORK ¹⁵

DIRECTOR Jairus McLeary, Gethin Aldous **YEAR** 2017

Once a year, members of the public join the inmates of the infamous maximum-security Folsom Prison for four days of intensive group therapy. Somehow, directors Jairus McLeary and Gethin Aldous, plus doc crew, were given access. What emerges through their footage is as riveting as it is revelatory. As hardened gang members hug and cold-blooded killers display extraordinary kindness, the sense of shared humanity will break the hardest of hearts.

MATT GLASBY



"Start with a diddle, hit a few double strokes and end with a rimshot."

WHIPLASH 15 DIRECTOR Damien Chazelle YEAR 2014

Why did you stop?" asks feared orchestra leader Terrence Fletcher (J.K. Simmons) as he walks in on student Andrew Neyman (Miles Teller) practising on the drum kit at New York's prestigious Shaffer Conservatory. Desperate to impress, Neyman nervously picks up his sticks and starts pouring his heart out, only to look up and see Fletcher walking away without a word. So begins the duel at the heart of Damien Chazelle's Sundance-winning indie.

Practice, apparently, makes perfect – so when Fletcher offers Andrew an alternate seat in his own band, he does everything he can to earn it. Ignoring his new girlfriend (Melissa Benoist), forgetting his old dad (Paul Reiser) and drumming until his hands are blistered and bleeding, Andrew narrows his focus until nothing else matters. At the same time, Fletcher picks up the scent of a prodigy and starts hammering genius into shape with sheer brute force.

Whiplash toggles between two viewing modes: watching J.K. Simmons explode or waiting for J.K. Simmons to explode. Surely one of the greatest portrayals of a bully ever put on screen, his monstrous, muscular bandleader is less R. Lee Ermey in *Full Metal Jacket* than the shark in *Jaws*. Armed with a savage New York wit, his tantrums are hilarious – armed with a chair leg, they're terrifying. The genius of Simmons' performance is how it teeters unpredictably between humour and horror. It's as if the audience is placed behind a music

stand: one moment sniggering at his pithy put-downs, the next not daring to move in case he hears your seat squeak.

Best known for playing Spider-Man's boss and Juno's dad, Simmons has spent 20 long years as 'that actor from that film'. Here, he seizes his meatiest role yet with both hands and shakes it. His anti-Mr. Holland carries with it all the frustrated weight of a career spent waiting in the wings. He's now a deserved frontrunner for every acting gong going; whoever ends up handing him a prize probably won't know whether to hug him or hide behind the podium.

Daringly, Teller's Andrew isn't that likeable either. We feel sorry for him because he's the mouse in the cat's claws, but he spends most of the film acting like a bit of a jerk. Driven to perfection way beyond whatever Fletcher might be trying to squeeze out of him, his violent sense of ambition makes him a precocious, pathetic Macbeth. Teller nails the sense of blinkered pride that comes with peaking too early. Though nudged into second place by Simmons' electrifying performance, Teller's portrait of a wannabe artist leaves his earlier roles in the dust, good as he was in everything from *Rabbit Hole* to *Footloose*. He spent four hours a day for two months learning to play the drums like a virtuoso – the effort pays off spectacularly on screen.

THE VERDICT A masterclass in technique, power and rhythm, it stings and sings like nothing else.

Confining everything entirely to low-lit New York interiors and pushing supporting characters to the background without a second glance, it's hard not to see parallels between Andrew's quest for perfection and Chazelle's single-minded approach to storytelling – something that might be off-putting if it wasn't all so much fun. Opening with a drum roll and building to a crescendo, *Whiplash* is less predictable than its mentor/student set-up may look. Constantly changing direction, endlessly defying expectation, the narrative's a brilliantly tricky beast. Chazelle starts the third act early and then throws in a fourth and a fifth, all the while keeping the mood light, the beats heavy and the foot tapping.

By the time the final set of breathless set-piece twists and counter-twists slot into place, the whole movie has taken on the mood of a stadium set-list. In short, it does everything it can to get the whole audience on their feet applauding. Which, of course, is exactly what happened at Sundance last year.

Returning to the festival after proving himself with a 2013 short and a winning Black List script, Chazelle's second movie is a dazzlingly confident breakout. (His first, 2009's *Guy And Madeline On A Park Bench*, is a jazz-related romance that sows the seeds of *Whiplash*.) It's a musical that plays like a sports movie. A film about an abusive relationship that somehow has you siding with the bad guy. And a deep, multi-layered study of obsession that'll have you itching to dance in the aisles. You won't want it to stop. **PAUL BRADSHAW**



Whitney Houston with father John, who died in 2003.

WHITNEY 15

DIRECTOR Kevin Macdonald **YEAR** 2018

A year after fellow Brit Nick Broomfield, Kevin Macdonald tackles the enigma that is Whitney Houston in this sure-footed documentary. The difference from Broomfield's *Whitney: Can I Be Me* is huge. Macdonald's film is authorised, with full access to family and friends thanks to Whitney's sister-in-law Pat Houston, who takes an executive producer credit.

As such, Macdonald is given free reign to deep-dive into the singer's life, from gospel-singing child to teen hit-maker to global superstardom. Impressively, he covers her cultural impact with aplomb, from being booed at the 1989 Soul Train Awards to her majestic rendition of 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at the 1991 Super Bowl.

Interviewees include brother Gary Houston, confidantes such as former assistant Mary Jones, hair stylist Ellin LaVar and talent agent Nicole David, and even her reticent ex-husband Bobby Brown, who refuses to be drawn on the drug abuse that preceded Houston's death in 2012.

Compared to Broomfield's patchy film, *Whitney* feels definitive, whether it's Kevin Costner discussing barrier-breaking interracial romance in *The Bodyguard*, or a poignant encounter with Houston's mother Cissy, a former gospel singer, in her local church. "She was a good baby... everybody loved her," she says, close to tears.

Despite the access-all-areas nature, Macdonald never lets this become a sanitised bio-doc. Eschewing the idea Houston was simply drawn towards a drug-fuelled existence, he even unearths shocking childhood revelations that help reframe ideas about why the American sweetheart who sold 200 million albums went down this tortured path.

Macdonald and his editor Sam Rice-Edwards do a fine job in remembering her talents as well as her tragedies. With expertly sourced archive footage, exhilarating montages remind us of the Reagan-era America in which Houston came to prominence. As the film unfolds, there's also a huge amount of sorrow and guilt expressed by those around her, towards both Houston and her daughter Bobbi Kristina Brown, who died in 2015 aged just 22. Macdonald approaches his subject with sensitivity and skill, delivering his best film since 2003 docu-drama *Touching The Void*. **JAMES MOTTRAM**

THE VERDICT

Macdonald leaves no stone unturned in this tremendous look at Houston, one that sheds real light on the singer's psychology.



"Screw you! Chinese Democracy was worth the wait!"

THE WRESTLER 15

DIRECTOR Darren Aronofsky **YEAR** 2008

You don't have to have been young in the '80s to know how buff Mickey Rourke was in benchmark movies like *Diner*, *Body Heat* and *Rumble Fish*, but if you were, you'll be all the more dismayed at what he's done to himself over the last 20 years. He was our Marlon Brando, we thought. And for the most part he's lived down to that estimation in the worst way, slumming it in movies that only revealed his contempt for the business, letting his talent slide.

All of which makes Rourke the perfect – maybe the only – actor who could do justice to Randy 'The Ram' Robinson, the washed-up wrestler at the heart of Darren Aronofsky's beautiful, bittersweet and, at times, suprisingly funny, small-town blues of a movie. Like Rourke, The Ram was Big Time back in the '80s, a potential champion who came close, but no cigar. Two decades later he's trailer trash. He still puts on the moves, but now he's playing school gyms and selling photos for \$8 a pop. The money mostly goes on steroids and his fave stripper, Cassidy (Marisa Tomei, pretty terrific in a clichéd role).

Whatever you thought of Aronofsky's last film, *The Fountain* – and there are plenty of people with strong opinions on both sides of that argument – *The Wrestler* marks a complete change of pace.

Low-key and naturalistic in tone and touch, with long, handheld tracking shots reminiscent of the Dardenne, this takes us way back past the loser-poetry of the first *Rocky* movie, all the way to the gutter Americana of the early '70s. Randy's attempts to forge meaningful connections with Cassidy and his rightfully pissed-off daughter (Evan Rachel Wood) are probably doomed from the start, but we love him for trying.

THE VERDICT

Aronofsky's most authentic film refuses to ridicule the amateur wrestling circuit, while Rourke's portrait of a has-been will surely be the comeback of the year.

Rourke looks waxy, bruised and bloated, but he hasn't lost his charm. You come away with the reminder that this is where so many American Dreamers wind up: trapped in a cycle of self-defeat. For Rourke, at least, the wrestler is the role of lifetime, and he's better than he's ever been. **TOM CHARITY**

WIDOWS 15

DIRECTOR Steve McQueen **YEAR** 2018

Faint incredulity greeted the news that arthouse powerhouse Steve McQueen would follow the Oscar-winning *12 Years A Slave* with a remake of 1983 Brit-TV crime series *Widows*. What next, a big-screen *Minder* reboot? But transformed into this tough, topical and unabashedly thrilling Chicago-set female heist movie, it positively explodes off the screen.

McQueen's muscular, melancholic make-over starts literally with a bang, as Harry Rawlings (Liam Neeson), his gang and their big cash haul go up in smoke after a high-octane botched robbery. As Harry's devastated widow Veronica, Viola Davis essays a raw, dignified grief – one that's inflamed by local kingpin Jamal Manning (a smoothly menacing Brian Tyree Henry) insisting on a refund-or-death deal for his stolen \$2m. Owning nothing but Harry's secret blueprint for a major robbery, the heist she proposes to her fellow widows – single mother Linda (Michelle Rodriguez) and the flaky, helpless Alice (Elizabeth Debicki) is a life-saving necessity, not a caper.

The reluctant amateurs show a defiant desperation that injects some overdue realism into the genre, echoing gritty forebears such as Paul Schrader's *Blue Collar* (1978) or broke

girls bank-job *Set It Off* (1996). There's real pleasure in watching them skill up (or screw up), while cajoling and blackmailing guns, a getaway van and vital info out of unsuspecting targets. Resolutely refusing to dumb down for the multiplex, the movie also weaves in a cynical, all-male story of Chicago corruption, as Manning battles Colin Farrell's devious Jack Mulligan, squabbling son of Robert Duvall's Trumpian politico, to win a lucrative election in a black-majority ward by any means necessary.

Richly lensed by McQueen's regular cinematographer Sean Bobbitt, the settings offer some resonant contrasts. The Mulligans' lavishly antique Old Chicago offices clash with Veronica's stark glass penthouse and the widows' dark shabby warehouse HQ. Meanwhile, Mulligan Jr.'s limo glides through neighbourhoods beset by peeling poverty en route to his gentrified fortress.

Gradually but inexorably tightening like a noose around both plots are the escalating suspicions of Jatemme (Daniel Kaluuya), Manning's psychotic enforcer. Committing a shocking act of brutality in a bowling lane ("This is like that Operation game"), or forcing a terrified freestyle rap from victims, he's proof that McQueen can muster

sphincter-tightening gangland menace as well as heavyweight themes.

That said, there's some fascinating overlap with *Hunger* and *12 Years A Slave* in the gal-gang's stubborn refusal to submit. As Linda puts it: "I want my kids to know I did something. Didn't just sit there and take it." There's shared ground with *Shame*, too, in Viola Davis' powerful portrait of sustained suffering, dogged by knife-sharp flashbacks of loving Harry. Pole-axed by sorrow, scared, angry and vengeful, Davis is the film's motor. It's Veronica's guts and gravitas that push the women's scrappy scheme on; their secret weapon the fact that "no one thinks we have the balls to pull it off".

But the biggest surprise is Debicki, digging courage and ingenuity from battered Alice by masquerading as a mail-order bride to grab Glockes and other vital assets. Rodriguez shows a tenderness untapped in the *Fast & Furious* series, while Cynthia Erivo's late-recruited getaway driver Belle flaunts a quiet toughness that lets her go toe-to-toe with Davis.

Characters this well drawn take time, however. The film's panorama of grief and grift is sprawling and absorbing, rather than swift-footed. It's lightened by co-writer Gillian Flynn's (*Gone Girl*, *Sharp Objects*) trademark grit and dark humour, novel stuff in McQueen's often punishing work. Indeed, there's a Black Lives Matter-style tragedy sprung here that has sharp emotional recoil. But after a midpoint gut-punch, revenge gives a booster rocket to the film's back half. Hans Zimmer's thrumming score steps up the pace as well, as the visceral tension of the robbery run-up starts to bite.

Clumsy, violent and threatened by rookie errors, the heist is the polar opposite of *Ocean's 8's* slick, jigsaw puzzle of a job, heightened by the widows' desperation. Circling plots collide in kinetic car chases and bloody pay-offs, all favouring rough justice over sleek ingenuity. It leads to a searing showdown that's studded with loss and Davis' badass determination. If McQueen fans miss the lyrical, piercing depth of his earlier work, there's an echo of it in the quartet's faint, flawed nobility. Empowering and engrossing, with a cynical eye and a social conscience that adds heft and heart to the heist, it's a hugely accomplished and enjoyable addition to McQueen's oeuvre. **KATE STABLES**

THE VERDICT McQueen segues smoothly to the mainstream with a crackerjack thriller packing a chewy political message.



The heist was going to be big; sorting a decent packed lunch was critical.



THE WOLF OF WALL STREET IS

DIRECTOR Martin Scorsese **YEAR** 2013

I always wanted to be rich,” rattles the voiceover of Wall Street broker Jordan Belfort (Leonardo DiCaprio), inevitably recalling goodfella Henry Hill’s “As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a gangster.” The cacophonous trading floor spreads out before Jordan’s wide blue eyes: green numbers hurtle across bulbous screens; manic men scream into phones. “You wanna know what money sounds like? ‘Fuck this, shit that, cunt, cock, asshole.’”

Welcome to Martin Scorsese’s 22nd feature film, another of his examinations of the rites and rituals of a particular sect, be it the wiseguys of ’70s Little Italy (*Mean Streets*) or the society scions of late 19th-century New York (*The Age Of Innocence*). With its rise-and-fall arc, its hedonism and hubris, its gleeful exploration of the dark side of the America Dream, its money, crime and narcs, its sex, drugs and rock’n’roll (though the soundtrack also takes in Madness, Simon & Garfunkel and a fair bit of Euro pop), *The Wolf Of Wall Street* forms a loose trilogy with *GoodFellas* and *Casino*. And if it can’t quite match the energy and quality of those classics, it nonetheless stands as Scorsese’s finest for 15 years.

When we first meet Jordan Belfort, he’s more pup than wolf, his lowest-rung job at L.F. Rothschild requiring him only to “smile and dial”. A first-day lunch with big boss Mark Hanna (Matthew McConaughey, hilarious) sows the seeds of the chaos to come, though: Hanna advises him that the stock market is

“all fugazi” while preaching the worthlessness of morals and the necessity of greed, cocaine and, to stay relaxed, jerking off twice daily. Then, on 19 October 1987, the very day Jordan becomes a licensed broker, the market crashes and Rothschild goes under.

Jordan joins a penny-stocks firm in Long Island, employing a bunch of expert salesmen (mainly weed) from his old Queens neighbourhood and making Donnie Azoff (Jonah Hill, terrific) VP despite his phosphorescent teeth and shoulder-slung pastel sweaters. The triumphant result is named Stratton Oakmont, and if there’s one thing these guys know how to do, besides sell, it’s party – Jordan blows \$26,000 on a lunch, is married to a model, shags prostitutes five, six times a week, and hoovers Quaaludes, Xanax, cocaine and morphine. It’s only a matter of time before the FBI (in the form of Kyle Chandler) come calling...

Perhaps deciding the crazed behaviour is enough, perhaps thinking he took stylistic verve as far as it could go in *GoodFellas*, Scorsese shoots largely with a static camera. His use of whip pans, crash zooms, freeze frames and tracking shots proves so infrequent that Spielberg, visiting the set, suggested he

THE VERDICT Despite the US censors trimming back the screwing and swearing, this is an audacious, riotous epic. Scorsese and DiCaprio’s fifth and best pairing, it’s liable to give the Academy a heart attack.

might want to move the camera. But *TWOWS* is far from muzzled. New collaborator Rodrigo Prieto’s busy compositions combine with old hand Thelma Schoonmaker’s confident cutting to create pace and bustle, and DiCaprio, slick as his black hair and resplendent in a flurry of sharp suits and loud ties, routinely addresses viewers down the barrel of the lens.

It is, of course, all part of Scorsese’s plan to charm viewers into accepting Belfort’s outrageously selfish, unthinkingly cruel behaviour. It works, too – more so because Terence Winter’s (*Boardwalk Empire*, *The Sopranos*) screenplay cleaves to our anti-hero, refusing to investigate the fallout of his misdeeds as he steals from rich and poor alike to line his own pockets (and mirror). It’s a decision some will take issue with, just as some, justifiably, accuse Scorsese of being in thrall to his gangsters. But this is Jordan’s tale, and it’s sold by a magnetic, never-better DiCaprio. “I fucked her brains out... for 11 seconds,” runs the voiceover as he collapses on top of Naomi (Margot Robbie), a beauty who is to become his trophy wife. Humour and bracing honesty go a long way towards balancing Jordan’s shockingly aggressive pursuit of ‘happiness’.

A touch too long, yet never slack, at three hours, *TWOWS* benefits from independent funding, Scorsese’s brass balls and an A-grade cast’s turbulent improvisations to emerge as an epic, boldly broad screwball comedy about the state of America, then and now. **ROB JAMES**

WOLFWALKERS PG

DIR. Tomm Moore, Ross Stewart **YEAR** 2020

A rambunctious animation about a transformational friendship, Cartoon Saloon's *Wolfwalkers* turns fairytales on their head. Co-directors Tomm Moore and Ross Stewart's film centres on Robyn (Honor Kneafsey), a would-be wolf hunter shut up in Oliver Cromwell's Irish fortress in 1650. Robyn's life is upended when she forges a reluctant bond with the feral Mebh (Eve Whittaker), a 'wolfwalker' whose bite brings out the animal in her.

Grabby, as well as gorgeous, the girls' fast-paced quest to save the wolf pack from Cromwell's assault is laced with family jeopardy (Sean Bean's wolf-hunter dad, caught between love and duty) that gives it emotional heft, as well as pulse-quickenning adventure.

Humming with Celtic culture and history, like Moore's previous Oscar-nominated Irish folklore fables *The Secret Of Kells* and *The Song Of The Sea*, the animation is fantastically dynamic and imaginative. It also resonates with the film's well-woven themes of fear vs. freedom. The oppressive, brown-grey woodcut Puritanism of the village melts into exhilarating amber watercolour whorls of forest leaves as Mebh and her pack swarm through the trees like a scene from *Princess Mononoke*.

But just wait till the filmmakers' play their visual ace, the innovative 'wolf-vision': a synaesthetic night-world of vivid, swirling smell trails that plunges you into the wolfwalker's point of view. Not only will this wonder of a movie up your eco-awareness; it'll make you hungry like the wolf. **KATE STABLES**

THE VERDICT Stunningly realised, *Wolfwalkers* is a treat for the eyes as well as the heart.



YOUR NAME 12A

DIRECTOR Makoto Shinkai **YEAR** 2016

I s Makoto Shinkai 'the new Miyazaki'? Comparisons to Studio Ghibli's animation master accompanied Shinkai's previous films: lustrous visions such as *Voices Of A Distant Star* (2003) and *The Garden Of Words* (2013), but Shinkai emerges as his own man with this deeply affecting, richly imagined and lushly gorgeous fantasy. A time-travelling, body-swapping, gender-twisting, disaster-based teen romance, *Your Name* resembles little else around.

A hit in Japan, Shinkai's genre-bender begins with a twist on meet-cute clichés between provincial teen-girl Mitsuha (Mone Kamishiraishi) and Tokyo teen-boy Taki (Ryûnosuke Kamiki) – after a teasing opening montage involving comets falling, the pair awake to find themselves inhabiting each other's bodies.

Once he's got us on our toes, Shinkai keeps us there. The outer-body premise is well-milked for gentle humour to start – Taki becomes fixated on his newfound breasts – but the playful pitch doesn't swamp feeling. Raised in an environment of tradition, Mitsuha pines for city life; Taki, meanwhile, wrestles with the tragi-comic inarticulacy of adolescent masculinity. Smartphones are cleverly used to co-ordinate the plot-lines, a co-ordination given a metaphorical parallel in the cords Mitsuha is tasked with meticulously braiding.

The braiding becomes more intricate as the duo wonder why fate linked them and, in a twist on the will they/won't they cliché, whether a meeting is in the stars. Time loops,

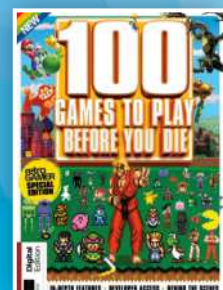
THE VERDICT Prepare to be spirited away. A brain-scrambler to make hearts swell, Shinkai's giddy romance brims with emotion and invention.

tumbling comets, lost towns and themes of eco-disaster mix in the ensuing action, a mash-up of melancholy raptures, mind-warping metaphysics and cosmic cataclysms.

It all sounds like too much to take onboard. But Shinkai holds his material steady. Between style and substance, he knows just what's needed to keep the plot focused, viewers rapt and emotions engaged. Working with Ghibli-schooled animation director Masashi Ando (whose credits also include 2015's senses-stoking *Miss Hokusai*), Shinkai makes glowing work of his digi-mation vistas: the limpid images glisten as if radiated with emotion. But don't think about pausing to admire the scenery. Races against time and musical montages usher us breathlessly towards the climax, chivvied along by vibrant songs from Japanese band Radwimps.

Adding more flavours, the end stretch recalls Wong Kar-wai's rainy-day romanticism in its mix of sliding doors and deferred liaisons. A satisfying conclusion seems like too much to expect from so rich a weave, but Shinkai's careful weaving of poignancy, plot threads and metaphor delivers one. For Mitsuha and Taki, the outcome is best experienced, not explained. For animation fanciers new to Shinkai, it could be the beginning of a beautiful relationship.

KEVIN HARLEY



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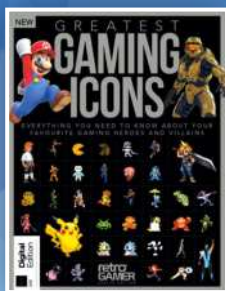
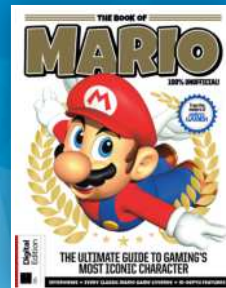
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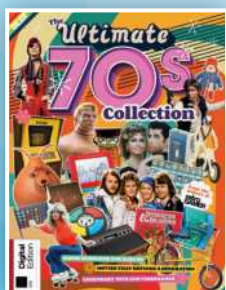


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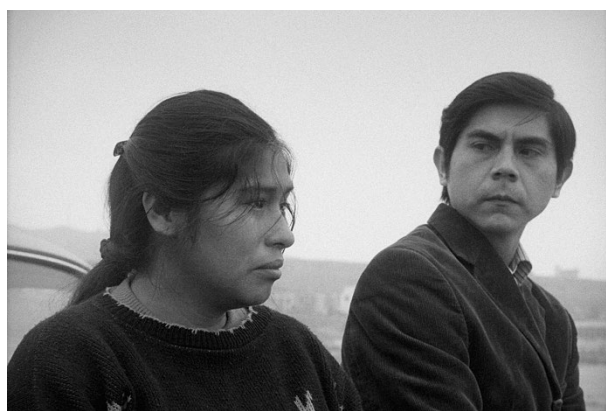
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