

+ SPLINTER REVIEWS (IV)

This Month, featuring: *A Dirty Shame*, *Collateral*, *Criminal*, *Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind*, *I Heart Huckabees*, *Garden State*, *The Gods Of Times Square*, *Going Up River*, *I, Robot*, *Ladder 49*, *La Mala Educación*, *The Manchurian Candidate*, *Mean Creek*, *Orca: The Killer Whale*, *Outfoxed*, *Palindromes*, *Shark Tale*, *Shaun Of The Dead*, *Sky Captain And The World Of Tomorrow*, *Team America: World Police*, *The Tulse Luper Suitcases*, *The World According To Bush*, and *The Yes Men*.

***A Dirty Shame* (2004)**

In the wake of “wardrobe malfunction” related hysteria it’s a good thing we have John Waters to knock some sense into us with his most joyful film yet. While most of his cast, as is often the case, is overly wooden and campy, Tracey Ullman is inspired as the prude who reaches a sexual awakening after being hit on the head. This film is a well deserved rap on America’s noggin.

-Collin Smith

***A Dirty Shame* (2004)**

John Waters’ NC-17 attempt to restore his gross-out street-cred is, in fact, one of his tamest films in years. Waters has a gift for making sexual perversion seem totally innocent. He also has a gift for making films that are completely frivolous, trivializing every issue they raise. This alone probably isn’t grounds to dismiss *A Dirty Shame* but Waters is also guilty of shamefully recycling material from *Cecil B. Demented*, *Serial Mom* and several of his other films, a sad admission that he’s

fresh out of ideas. At their best, Waters’ films can be extremely charming. At their worst — and this is one of his worst — they’re shallow and off-putting with characters so ridiculous that they barely seem human.

-Jon Doyle

***Collateral* (2004)**

The very least we’ve come to expect from Michael Mann is carefully crafted formal austerity and there’s plenty of that in *Collateral*. But Mann’s gift for characterization is almost entirely absent, replaced by half-baked plot complications and illogical action set-pieces. Add Mann to the list of Hollywood auteurs (ie. David Fincher) who, in an effort to re-establish their box office credibility, have been side-tracked by impersonal mainstream entertainment. Mission accomplished now here’s hoping he attempts something a little more ambitious next time.

-Jon Doyle

***Criminal* (2004)**

Working as a producer in recent years, Steven Soderbergh has used his clout in the film industry to enable several of his closest friends to become movie directors (ie. George Clooney with *Confessions Of A Dangerous Mind*, Don Cheadle with the upcoming *Tishomingo Blues*, and *Ocean’s Eleven* screenwriter Ted Griffin with the untitled Jennifer Aniston comedy that he was recently fired from). It would appear that Soderbergh has taken this practice to a new extreme with *Criminal*. The film’s co-writer/director Gregory Jacobs has been Soderbergh’s assistant director for several years and doesn’t appear

to have any major qualifications to direct this American re-make of *Nine Queens*. But surprisingly, with Soderbergh's (pseudonymous) screenwriting assistance, Jacobs has crafted a modest but distinctive con movie that effectively avoids most of the genre's tired clichés.

-Jon Doyle

***Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind* (2004)**

How happy is the multi viewer's lot!

Watching Joel fight for his memory dots.

Eternal Sunshine burned a spot on my mind!

I would joyfully watch it eight more times.

-Shanna Plischke

***I Heart Huckabees* (2004)**

Five years after completing his impressive first trio of films (*Spanking The Monkey*, *Flirting With Disaster*, *Three Kings*), David O. Russell returns with a fascinating disappointment. While inferior to Russell's previous films, *I Heart Huckabees* features some truly inspired scenes, ideas, and characters. Playing a philosophically troubled, anti-petroleum, pro-bike-riding firefighter, Mark Wahlberg steals the film. He's one of many lively, original, and hilarious pieces in this chaotic puzzle but there's also several maddening pieces (Jude Law, Naomi Watts, Shania Twain!). The filmmaking is rough and wildly undisciplined but Russell's appealingly hopeful worldview is a pleasant change of pace, especially when dealing with dire issues of identity, mortality, and familial dysfunction. In the insane era we're living in, it's encouraging to see a film that makes an intelligent, heartfelt, and philosophical case for human compassion, even if that film is a total mess.

-Jon Doyle

***Garden State* (2004)**

Dear Miss Portman,

I don't normally write letters like this but I just saw your new movie and I think you are so pretty. You smile pretty and walk pretty and have pretty skin and clothes. And I really like you in your silly hat. I just wish you didn't cry so much. It's pretty too but you shouldn't be so sad all the time. Maybe it's because of the epilepsy. If you were bed sheets, I'd sleep without my pyjama shirt, that's how much I like you now. Make a new movie soon. Your newest fan,

-Brian Crane

***Garden State* (2004)**

Yet another actor attempts to prove himself as a credible director by creating a hodgepodge of stylistic rip-offs. Although writer-director-star Zach Braff (from the TV show *Scrubs*) aspires to a stylized, Wes Anderson-like, reinterpretation of iconic American comedies from the 60s and 70s (ie. *The Graduate*, *Harold & Maude*), he lacks Anderson's energetic originality and he has little affection for his film's easily ridiculed supporting cast. There's an irritating air of cynical superiority in the film's point-of-view, as Braff overloads his characters with obvious weaknesses then mocks them with the same simple-minded cynicism that the film pretends to critique. While *Garden State* has moments of genuine wit and formal invention, it's ultimately a sentimental, heavyhanded, and predictable look at the romance of depression.

-Jon Doyle

***The Gods Of Times Square* (1999)**

Richard Sandler didn't set out to do anything more than record the manic street preachers, zealots and cranks in Times Square, and as *The Gods Of Times Square* shows, he barely did that. Completed over half a decade with a passion less befitting a documentary of this kind than a half-hearted homework assignment, it catalogues where it should probe, repeats itself ad nauseam, and allows queries like "so... (uhm) tell me about God" to stand in for deeper questions of faith, sanity and New York City.

Incidentally, Sandler caught the emergence of the new religion of Times Square, as Mickey Mouse moved in, which only serves to make his film seem—indeed like many of his subjects—schizophrenic, as he temporarily abandons his original mission. That mission—exploring people so desperately alone that they're a literally screaming in the streets—is one deserving of better a documentary than this.

(If you'd like to discuss it further, you'll find me out in the streets screaming at strangers until one of them makes that better film.)

-Gareth Hedges

Going Up River: The Long War Of John Kerry (2004)

Going Up River persuasively argues John Kerry's place as the logical successor to John F. Kennedy, one of America's most popular presidents. With his "ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country" ethic, Kerry is presented as the living embodiment of JFK's famous words. But this isn't simply a Kerry campaign advertisement. In fact, the film is most impressive while illustrating the rarely seen rebellion of Vietnam vets, trashing their war medals and dismissing their country's military and political leadership. More than thirty years later, this imagery remains powerful and it's a little rattling to see a realistic candidate for president lead the revolt. Just as liberals will applaud Kerry's anti-war activities, conservatives will (and have) label him unpatriotic. But, for those desperately seeking an alternative to George W. Bush, George Butler (*Pumping Iron*) reveals a John Kerry with dimensions not apparent in the more moderate image his campaign team has strategically devised.

-Jon Doyle

I, Robot

Filled with predictable plot developments, cardboard characters, and overly familiar science fiction ideas, *I, Robot* should be totally unwatchable. Miraculously, it's not. I'm definitely not an expert on this topic but, by my judgment, *I, Robot* has some of the most impressive special effects ever created. Unlike Michael Bay and countless other CGI hacks, Alex Proyas (*The Crow*, *Dark City*) knows how to bring a film to life with special effects. If you possess the absence of brain-power necessary to overcome shockingly stupid dialogue and one of Will Smith's most irritating performances, there's a lot to enjoy in this dopey effects extravaganza.

-Jon Doyle

Ladder 49

Some of the fire-fighting scenes are mildly enjoyable and John Travolta has been worse...maybe. That's the best I can say about *Ladder 49*, a totally juvenile exercise in fire-fighter hero worship. I respect the sacrifices that firefighters make but, if they're really as simple-minded and obnoxious as these characters then I seriously fear for the well-being of anyone trapped in a burning building. Amazingly, the filmmakers seem to think these characters are endearing and likable. After twenty minutes of their "charming" frat-boy shenanigans, I was ready to see them burn. And, thankfully, some of them

do. But seriously, this film's nightmarishly sentimental, *For Love Of The Game*-like flashback structure is painful to watch and unintentionally funny. Every scene is intended to make a single un-insightful point or introduce a single, run-of-the-mill, safety-oriented plot concern: a child is worried about his father's safety, a wife is worried about her husband's safety, etc. Okay, fire-fighting is dangerous. We get it. But why did they have to make this movie?

-Jon Doyle

Mala Educación, La (2004)

This is probably the most normal movie Almodóvar has ever made. In fact, it's even a little mundane. In the end, it's all about Gael Garcia Bernal and whether he is more beautifully stunning as a man or as a woman.

-Collin Smith

The Manchurian Candidate (2004)

Hot on the heels of his widely loathed – but sadly under-rated – *Charade* re-make, *The Truth About Charlie*, Jonathan Demme returns with his take on another beloved American classic from the early 60s, *The Manchurian Candidate*. Unlike Demme's last re-make, this is pretty close to the original film in terms of content. However, Demme re-works the cold, detached, precision of the original and creates a film that is more emotionally involving and entertaining. It is also worth noting that Meryl Streep's wild performance as Raymond's domineering mother is in the same league as Angela Lansbury's. Still, Frankenheimer's version had an originality and visual inventiveness that this new film lacks and the original's ultra cynical ending was more satisfying and disturbing than the awkward variation that Demme's team has devised. It's a worthy re-make but not a replacement.

-Jon Doyle

Mean Creek

Rarely does a good film collapse as completely in its second half as *Mean Creek* does. In its first half, there's an odd, ambivalent sense of anticipation, as a group of kids plans the (potentially violent) humiliation of a peer they've had problems with. These characters constantly contradict themselves and reveal surprising dimensions and complexity. The unreasonable turn diplomatic and the peacekeepers turn violent, all in the blink of an eye. It's rare to see such a complex and nuanced depiction of children in a modern American film. It's also rare to see

such portrayals dramatically self-destruct with a single plot development. With nowhere to turn creatively, in the second half of the film, the filmmakers settle for all the moralizing, black-and-white clichés that were so pleasantly absent from the first half of the film and it quickly falls apart.

-Jon Doyle

Orca: The Killer Whale (1977; DVD)

Far from just being JAWS meets Sea World, *Orca*, released approximately a year after Spielberg's era-defining blockbuster, is a fascinating stew of mildly success creativity and artistic catastrophe. What the end result is, I'm not entirely sure, but I do know that by film's end I was drawn into the story's silly little drama. Not by Ennio Morricone's far-too-accomplished score, often matched with polished montage sequences of killer whales at sea, or by the presence of the ever-reliable (but not here!) Charlotte Rampling, whose band-aid voice-overs must have been commissioned to replace some blundering expository scenes left on the cutting room floor, but by Richard Harris—in one scene, one shot. "I'll fight you, you revengeful S.O.B.," growls Harris, the film's Quint, eyes like daggers, and from there we're hooked. Honorable mention goes to the film's opening Great White sequence that uses stunning file footage soooooo well integrated (by one of the film's *three* editors) that one's left wondering just why Spielberg ever built that phony fish!

-Colin Burnett

Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War On Journalism (2004)

Presumably, to outfox the Fox, one must be as narrow in focus and sloppy with research as the Fox. The Fox in question is the Fox News Channel, a right wing cable network that is right at home in George W. Bush's America. That the Fox News Channel is but one element of supervillain Murdoch's vast media empire doesn't matter much here; in fact, *Outfoxed* doesn't have much to say about Murdoch, news or journalism at all. Not surprising as it comes from moveon.org & Robert Greenwald, the producer/director of another triumph of low-risk earnestness-over-insight filmmaking, *Steal This Movie*.

What emerges in *Outfoxed* is an amusing clip reel interrupted by high and low profile talking heads—including Walter Cronkite and reformed neo-con hitman David Brock—who say much less here than they have said elsewhere (especially in the case of Mr.

Brock), which would be fine if it wasn't so insufferably earnest (Don Henley's "Dirty Laundry" plays over the credits). As hollow polemics go, this film takes stating the obvious so seriously you may weep.

This only goes to show that fighting fire with ire only makes more fire and can never match fighting fire with pies (which would at least restore levity and introduce the much needed element of surprise).

-Gareth Hedges

Palindromes (2004)

I have nothing against films being a forum for the discussion of ideas; in fact I hope that they will be. But after watching *Palindromes*, an astonishingly cynical rant on how nothing changes, I wish those ideas could have been accompanied by some sort of engaging narrative. Instead, Solondz views story as an obstacle to making his points and showing off his skill. While *Palindromes* provides us with some interesting ideas to chew on, there is little reason to want to.

-Collin Smith

Shark Tale (2004)

The folks at Dreamworks Animation and PDI seem more concerned with putting big stars in their movies than making endearing, enduring characters. Audiences never get a chance to forget they are watching Will Smith, Robert Deniro, Jack Black, etc. And why should we care? The story is the same boring morality tale that we have seen over and over again, but with "up to the moment" popculture jokes already past their due date. Finally, the animation style is so A.D.D. that you never get to appreciate all that you are seeing on screen. From anyone else this would have been a disappointment, but from these people it's business as usual.

-Collin Smith

Shaun Of The Dead

George A. Romero, the widely acknowledged master of the zombie film (*Night Of The Living Dead*, *Dawn Of The Dead*, *Day Of The Dead*), recently said that *Shaun Of The Dead* is the only zombie movie he prefers to his own trilogy. I don't know if I agree with Romero but this is high praise and *Shaun Of The Dead* is a worthy recipient. Like Romero's *Dawn Of The Dead*, *Shaun* succeeds largely because of its hybrid of inventive comedy and suspenseful zombie hijinks and paradoxes. But even more than Romero's films, *Shaun Of The*

Dead uses characterization to great effect. Unlike the constantly able characters in *Dawn Of The Dead* with their militarylike precision, *Shaun Of The Dead* revolves around hung-over, incompetent twenty-somethings who'd rather play video games and deal with romantic entanglements than fight zombies. It's a unique take on the genre and, unlike this year's *Dawn Of The Dead* re-make, one that lives up to its legendary zombie predecessors.

-Jon Doyle

***Sky Captain And The World Of Tomorrow* (2004)**

I felt like such a nerd watching this film. I spent the entire 107 minutes with a big grin on my face going, "Cool! Cool! Cool!" The film is too hyperstylized for the blockbuster crowd and its references will go over their head. However, for film geeks, this is a dream come true.

-Collin Smith

***Sky Captain And The World Of Tomorrow* (2004)**

A decidedly personal and experimental piece of filmmaking that film culture simply isn't prepared to acknowledge as such.

-Colin Burnett

***Team America: World Police* (2004)**

Fuck yeah.

-Brian Crane

***The Tulse Luper Suitcases* (2003-2004)**

The world premiere of Peter Greenaway's seven-hour HD opus *The Tulse Luper Suitcases* occurred in Montreal on October 20-22, 2004. I note the date because despite Greenaway's insistence on the mutability of History, this film is firmly lodged in a specific aesthetic moment. TLS is a catalogue of Greenaway's familiar formal and philosophical obsessions: the written word, bathtubs, theatre, vengeance, framing, repetition, geography, and cataloguing itself. That said, this film is unlike anything Greenaway has done before – it marks Greenaway's rejection of his own celluloid lineage. Referencing the past doesn't necessarily imply nostalgia and there's something exhilarating about TLS's gleeful abandonment of tradition.

-Zoe Constantinides

***The World According To Bush* (2004)**

A feeble and obsequious Lefty diatribe. You know, it's a genuine shame: what's "left of the Left" is so Hell-bent on besmirching Bush and pleasing its own in the process that its members now regularly and unabashedly discard bare-minimum standards of critical thinking and self-scrutiny. In this case filmmaker William Karel establishes painfully tenuous links between Bush and crew and every Lefty boogeyman under the stars, from the Nazis to the Israelis. (I hasten to point out the glaring paradox of forcing these last two to play for the same team; reminds me of a silly little tag I once saw scribbled onto the side of a condemned building: Israel=(insert swastika).) First the appearance of articles and columns all over the place hoping for the U.S.'s failure in Iraq, then Moore's documentary, then Naomi Klein's call for jihad on NYC in *The Nation*, and now this. Clear! The Left will soon find something else to shock some life back into itself!

(Oh, and you might note that this film bears the signature of that prevaricating jokester who helmed *Dark Side Of The Moon*. This time the joke's on him.)

-Colin Burnett

The Yes Men

Put simply, this is a non-fiction film about fictional spokespeople for the World Trade Organization. By now, it's hard to believe that anyone could support the WTO and *The Yes Men's* title characters prove that maybe nobody does. When they abruptly (and dishonestly) announce that the WTO is disbanding to a group of Australian economists, the economists actually seem to agree that this is a positive development. In the recent wave of political documentaries, *The Yes Men* is the first (that I know of) to include a massive inflatable penis with a live surveillance feed of sweat-shop workers. Unfortunately, in adopting the WTO's identity, the yes men also adopt their bland speaking and performance style and this doesn't make for very effective punch-line delivery. While they take a moral and humane position on world trade, they are only intermittently effective as satirists. As a result, this well-intentioned (and dangerously self-congratulatory) documentary is only intermittently effective as entertainment.

-Jon Doyle