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FILM REVIEW: *The Blue Butterfly* (2004)

+ A SMATTERING OF THOUGHTS ON SOME RECENTLY VIEWED FILMS

by Collin Smith

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THE BLUE BUTTERFLY

(2004)

Directed by
Léa Pool

Written by
Pete McCormack

Cinematography by
Pierre Mignot

Editing by
Michel Arcand

Art Direction by
Jaime Fernandez

Starring
William Hurt
Pascale Bussières
Marc Donato

Good live action family movies are a rare breed, perhaps as rare as the titular figure of Léa Pool's new film, *THE BLUE BUTTERFLY*. The Canadian director has almost succeeded in capturing the elusive quality that made recent films like Sayles' *THE SECRET OF ROAN INISH* (1994), Cuarón's *A LITTLE PRINCESS* (1995), and Noonan's *BABE* (1995) such masterpieces. Unfortunately this film often retreats into clichéd family movie conventions that keep it from becoming as memorable as the best of this genre.

The story is of a young boy (Marc Donato) who is dying of cancer and his quest to capture the rare Blue Morpho, a butterfly of exquisite beauty and, as he believes, magical power. He convinces a jaded scientist (William Hurt), who coincidentally needs to reconnect with his own inner child, to take him from Montreal to the rain forests of Central and South America in this search. The butterfly is quite obviously intended to represent their dreams and what is just out of their grasp.

Pool skims the surface of their desires but never delves too deeply into the pain each is suffering. She also timidly explores the consequences of the visit these Northerners pay to the jungle in their attempt to capture and take away such a unique thing of beauty, but her analysis of these issues remains fairly benign. She seems afraid to go too far into that jungle, instead following their adventures at a safe distance so that no one is too threatening.

The assumption that a family film must be non-threatening is the most disappointing aspect of this film. Recently, Pixar's extremely popular comedies have proven that family films can challenge the status quo. *A BUG'S LIFE* (1998) presents an attractive socialist argument; *MONSTER'S, INC.* (2001) attacks corporate capitalist greed; and last year's *FINDING NEMO* argues that we can't protect our children from the world—we have to let them live it. The best children's movies don't hide the big scary world from their audiences; they open it up and spark something magical. Unfortunately, most of the movies aimed at children ignore this call in an attempt to remain as accessible and safe as possible.

THE BLUE BUTTERFLY ultimately fails to give its audience enough credit. Children can be very perceptive, yet this film falls into the trap of talking down to them. Characters often say exactly what they are thinking, as if they are trying to make their motivations crystal clear. Rarely does the dialogue sound like it is spontaneously said, instead coming off as code intended to distinguish the characters and sketch them out in narrow, easily distinguishable lines.

The film is shot in a safe and predictable manner as well. In the same way that Pool avoids the beautiful complexity of the issues surrounding a dying child and the guilt a father feels when he knows he's failed, she rarely explores the dangerous splendor of the rainforest. The moments when we get a good sense of the world these people are lost in are few and far between. The rest of the time the characters appear in the kind of easily digestible head shots that we see regularly on television, and in this way the composition doesn't allow us to enjoy the natural majesty that her characters find themselves in. We therefore never get a real sense of the scope of the danger, the hope or the desperation they are living. Only once, near the end of the film, are we given a chance to feel the power of the landscape and the wildlife of the area, but that moment is shamefully fleeting and quickly dismissed.

The one exception to this is Pool's National Geographic-like fascination with the insects of the tropics. She grants us small glimpses of this magical world by frequently cutting to extreme close-ups of the creatures, generously giving each species an opportunity to show a unique personality. The film truly comes alive at these moments and it is these vignettes which we will remember long after the plot and characters of the film have fallen away. It's certainly unfortunate that the people are given much less of an opportunity to make an impression.

The Blue Butterfly tells a simple story that both children and adults can enjoy, but it fails to take us to new places, to create a memorable world or to challenge our assumptions. While the film may inspire young people to become insect enthusiasts, it is doubtful the film will inspire them to follow their dreams. Thus the metaphor of the blue butterfly fails. In the end, it probably wasn't the butterfly our young hero was after; it was something bigger, but we aren't given the chance to see that. []

Here's a smattering of thoughts about some of the films I've seen so far in 2004:

City of God

Fernando Meirelles

Brazil

2002

This two-year-old piece is devastatingly beautiful and perpetually haunting. It's the rare sort of violent film that helps us understand why people act violently, and it accomplishes this both through the story alone and how each character's particular story is told. Thanks to accomplished direction, we're invested in each character and enveloped by the film's complete portrait of a community devastated by political, social and literal violence. There's nothing particularly new here, but the filmmakers' style and technique take us to new places and new understandings.

The Cooler

Wayne Kramer

USA

2003

While most romantic comedies try to reflect the idealized versions we have of ourselves back at us, this one allows us to enjoy ourselves as we really are. It asks us to love ourselves with all of our flaws and demons. It also recognizes that love, like most of our lives, is really just a crapshoot.

La Grande Séduction

Jean-Francois Pouliot

Canada

2003

This film tries so hard to be cute and charming that it sacrifices all manner of sense. I imagine that there's a great deal of humor to be mined out of a small community attempting to woo an urban doctor to their ways. Unfortunately, said community doesn't resemble anything close to a real village. It's as if the director decided the film needed to be ridiculous to make us laugh. In my estimation, he's committed the highest sin a filmmaker can: he insults his audience.

The House of Sand and Fog

Vadim Perelman

USA

2003

What I loved about this one is that it's not about blame but about how our fears lead us to hurt each other. There are also the intense and rich performances of Jennifer Connelly, Ben Kingsley, Shohreh Aghdashloo, and Ron Eldard. When any combination of these four is on screen together it's impossible not to be riveted.

Les Triplettes de Belleville

Sylvain Chomet

Canada/France/Belgium/UK

2003

Hopefully this will put an end to the ridiculous assertion that 2D animation is dead. Audiences will respond to traditionally drawn animation when the characters are illuminated, the art is stunning and, most importantly, the story is infectious. Belleville shows us just why animation is an important art form and shouldn't be relegated to Saturday morning or to Teletoon.

Shattered Glass

Billy Ray

USA

2003

This isn't a very memorable film but certainly worth watching for the quiet force of Peter Sarsgaard. His performance is nuanced yet powerful, and all in his eyes. While the rest of the cast, including Hayden Christensen, are competent in their roles, Sarsgaard steals the show.

Dirty Dancing 2: Havana Nights

Guy Ferland

USA

2004

There is no reason why dance can't be as revolutionary as any other art form, but this film is more interested in selling soundtracks to teenage girls than in exploring this potential. The dancing is as safe and mundane as the film's analysis of Cuban/ American relations. While Diego Luna is luminous, his co-star is so unfortunately blond that she disappears in her own blandness, along with the rest of the film.

Whale Rider

Niki Caro

New Zealand

2003

Charming and inspiring despite the fact that this story is familiar and its lessons are redundant. While there's very little that's original about the story, it is crafted in an entertaining and engaging manner.

Bubba Ho-Tep

Don Coscarelli

USA

2002

The best movie to depict Elvis and JFK hunting down a killer mummy that I've ever seen. Really. []

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