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+ Splinter Reviews

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I'M NOT SCARED (IO NON HO PAURA) (2003)



DARK WATERS [DVD] (2004)
 A direct-to-video, Blockbuster shelf-filler that sinks cinematic gutlessness to new depths. How so? By performing the most shameful bait-and-switch that I've witnessed in a while. The box, temptation for lovers of shark attack films, claims that the movie is about genetically-enhanced super sharks à la DEEP BLUE SEA. I expected nothing at all from it, except perhaps for a few silly and, if I was lucky, gruesome and slightly tense, death scenes, but somehow it still managed to disappoint, especially because the sharks—all CGI—only make two or so appearances and sink their teeth into so few victims, having been shoved aside by an uber-lame story about a secret military operation. Perhaps my appetite will be satisfied by this Summer's OPEN WATER, released at Sundance this year and shot on MiniDV and with real live sharks.
 -Colin Burnett



DOGVILLE (2003)
 While I am not usually a fan of Trier's pompous stylistic choices, his misanthropy, or his religiously masochistic devotion to humanity's malevolence, he may have stumbled onto something here with this morality play. The film's stark beauty is surprisingly breathtaking. Equally surprising is that his ending is powerfully satisfying. This wouldn't have worked in a 'normal' movie but his stripped, jarring art direction keeps us removed from emotion and focused on his message. If it wasn't for the level of his arrogance in his delivery, this film could have easily been one of the most powerful films of the year. It remains unforgettable regardless of whether you agree with his take on the nature of goodness.
 -Collin Smith



ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND (2004)
 This film comes so close to being brilliant that when you realize how great its faults are it is all the more disappointing. As it stands, it has significant logical holes which would have been easier to overlook if the film makers had managed to make us believe in the characters. However, we are constantly asked to accept the emotions that characters are articulating without seeing any evidence that those emotions could be real. This is a story about love and identity yet we are given no reasonable amount of depth that would lead us to believe in that love or any kind of identity. The real power of the movie is not to erase the memory of its leads but the memory of critics who leave the cinema believing their have come away with an experience that is more than the most disappointing film of the year.
 -Collin Smith



HOME ON THE RANGE (2004)
 This is the last traditionally animated film that Disney, or any other major American studio will release for a long time. Ironically, in terms of tone and visual style, it has more in common with the Warner Brothers' Looney Tunes shorts than recent Disney blockbusters. Clever, irreverent and hilarious, this film marks the return of the delightful songs of Alan Menken. Here's hoping that American 2-D animation will return to a new renaissance in the near future.
 -Collin Smith



I'M NOT SCARED (IO NON HO PAURA) (2003)
 ... of what? Though stubbornly emphasized at the beginning and at the end, the title makes just about as much sense as the film's tagline: "Secrets. Betrayal. Murder." Both seem to be referring to another film. No matter; these minor discrepancies don't sink the film's saving grace: the photography. The black and gold palette in particular serves the material well. These Italian hills, like a wavy sea of golden wheat, are a sight for sore eyes—in this case literally so, for a kidnapped boy who's kept shackled in a hole under an abandoned house. Yet the beauty and significance of the images only really register by virtue of the film's languid fades to black. Director Salvatores 'kidnaps' a worn cinematic transition device and breathes new life into it, manipulating fade-outs in such a way as to suggest solitude and fade-ins the wonder of sight. A film whose most profound moments occur as the images disappear into and re-emerge from pitch black.
 -Colin Burnett



KILL BILL VOLUME TWO (2004)
 The Nation's Stuart Klawans lays into Tarantino's unstable diptych for being a maze of digressions. While this is true, I ask if it is necessarily a bad thing? Thurman travels through the film as if caught, trapped, in a labyrinth of disparate spaces, scenarios, styles and moods on her way to the climax of an admittedly feeble story whose main thrust is a domestic dispute told entirely in hyperbole. The director has experimented with this kind of thing before, but here more than ever he is explicitly engaged in stylistic play, the most redeeming elements of which are Robert Richardson's showy photography and the director's own unique solutions to a panoply of self-imposed staging problems. What makes this OK, aside from the inspired results, is that none of these techniques 'editorialize,' that is, serve to couch the proceedings in added layers of meaning; they are done simply for themselves. By not relying upon 'the gimp,' Tarantino proves that he isn't one, setting the stage for a foray into solid film craftsmanship. And to those who aren't convinced that this is enough: next time you see the movie, pay attention to how the staging works to create a rhythm that fluctuates between stillness and a variety of kinds of movement so as to demonstrate that someone making this film knew what they were doing.
 -Colin Burnett



THE LADYKILLERS (2004)
 I have always believed that the Coen brothers are at their best when they are reveling in their intellectual, non-sequiter, absurdist humor and this remake of Mackendrick's 1955 film provides just enough plot to contain their enjoyable mayhem. Tom Hanks reminds us of how funny he was before he became an Oscar winning actor in the wonderfully ridiculous role of Professor G.H. Dorr, while the rest of their cast perfectly personify the other caricatures needed for this caper. It's always a pleasure to have something this genuinely funny to laugh at in the cinema.
 -Collin Smith



from The Montreal Jewish Film Festival, 2004:
DZIGA AND HIS BROTHERS (2002)
 The beauty of the archival footage and stills is marred by the monotony of the documentary's construction. "What would Vertov do?" should have been their mantra, but instead a voice of god narration and linear order leaves one pining for the rhythmic editing of MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA. O Vertov, where art thou?
 -Janos Sitar



from The Montreal Jewish Film Festival, 2004:
KASENJA: THE JAMAICAN JEWISH WEDDING (2003) / AWAKE ZION (2003)
 The joy created in the pairing of two seemingly incongruous elements is evident from the peels of laughter and snickers emanating from the audience during the screening. Prefacing AWAKE ZION with KASENJA is interesting because the idea of cultural marriage suggests an intimacy and widening of familiar circles in a polyethnic and multireligious society; there is room for growth and intermingling that was thought to be impossible before. Laughter bound that audience together as the borders of culture were made visible and then traversed without fear.



While marriage indicates a linear push forward as love and the potential for new life is celebrated, Monica Haim traces the lines backwards to find that the cultures of Rastafari and Judaism are not as distant as people think. This celebratory documentary (in progress) points to a relationship that begins with the legendary affair between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba and beyond the 1930 coronation of Haile Selassie I in Ethiopia. Haim guides the audience through the dancehalls of New York and headphones of people around the world. I felt honoured to witness the boundaries breaking down as the snickers dissipated and Hasidic dancehall sensation Matissyahu's skills on the microphone became a point of unification.
 -Janos Sitar



THE PUNISHER (2004)
 Marvel Comic's anti-hero could have provided the basis for a gritty, film noir revenge saga, which is why it's so surprising that after adapting its other properties, such as SPIDER-MAN and X-MEN, so successfully, that Marvel would allow such a cheap and insulting production to be released. THE PUNISHER is strictly B-movie material complete with all the corny dialogue and hammy performances but with none of the guilty pleasure. Thomas Jane looks more like a gay porn star than a tough guy, and still the movie manages to be revoltingly homophobic. It's as if someone dared John Travolta to make a worse film than BATTLEFIELD EARTH.
 -Collin Smith



THE SNOW WALKER (2003)
 This is a simple story about a Canadian pilot and an Inuit woman who crash in the wild and manage to find each other lost in all that space. Ernest and sincere, the film's rendering is remarkable. Few movies take advantage of the natural beauty of the North West Territories or understand the relationship its people have to the land. Too much time is wasted away from the two central figures, but while they are on screen the film is a complete pleasure.
 -Collin Smith



SUPER SIZE ME (2004)
 Morgan Spurlock's microcosm of fast food and instant obesity sheds light on the macrocosm of the average American diet and one of its holiest institutions: The Mack Shack, Rotten Ronnie's, Mickey D's. Watching the footage of Spurlock emotionally breaking down as his liver becomes pate is no where near as frightening as the footage of a young girl eating chips and pop for lunch and finding out that the school does nothing about it. The line between personal and corporate responsibility is constantly being questioned as Spurlock so willfully attempts to live like an average American by only taking 2000 steps a day and eating what is rapidly becoming the most common food available. While this could be thought of as a soft-lefty doc that really only caters to corporate hegemony, the sheer grossness of the experiment and the look of shock on the doctors' faces is enough to guarantee that this is something that McDonald's will be hard pressed to manipulate in their favour. If they ever return Mr. Spurlock's phone calls.
 -Janos Sitar

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