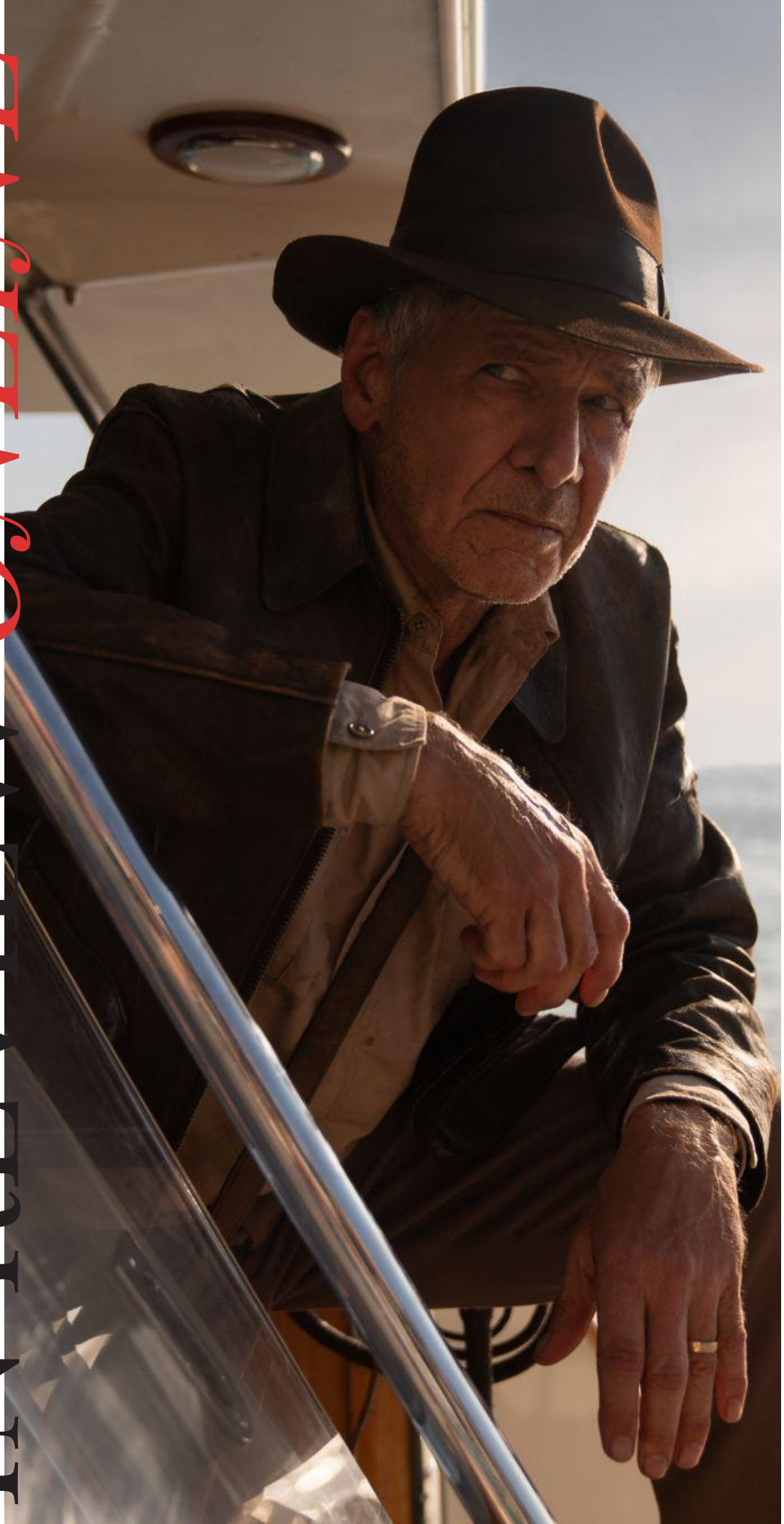
IN REVIEW ONLINE



FEATURES

FILM REVIEWS

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Tracing a labyrinth of half-recalled memories, *Revoir Paris*, the fourth feature film from director Alice Winocour, explores violence while also turning its head from it. A lauded performance by Virginie Efira as Mia anchors a film that studies the complexities of PTSDvia the absences that memory leaves. Not a one-hander, however, *Revoir Paris* uses an ensemble to dig deep into the eponymous city's layers, constructing a portrait of its protagonist's fragmented memory. A perfect pairing with Winocour's earlier effort *Disorder*, an anxiety-driven thriller about a veteran with PTSD working as a bodyguard, *Revoir Paris* films its violence at ground level, and reveals its aftermath as it's able to be processed. We spoke to filmmaker Alice Winocour about the writing process, how to pull back from tension, and the reconstruction of memory.

THE SOUND BEFORE THE IMAGE

An Interview With Alice Winocour

What drew you to this particular setting for *Revoir Paris*?

I think, to me, when you write a story, your direction will be more like an unconscious process. Definitely, for [*Revoir Paris*], it comes from a personal story, as my brother was caught in the Bataclan attack in 2015. So it was a long time ago, but then I think I needed to do it. It's a fiction film, of course — it's not about the attack itself. It's more about the consequences of a traumatic experience. I directed a movie, *Proxima*, after the events, and when I got back to Paris, I felt I needed to do [this] film.

Were there specific communities you looked to when creating the support system of survivors depicted in this film?

I met a lot of survivors and victims of the attack that inspired this, as well as others. I met all these people with my brother, and this community inspired the idea of the film, that you can't reconstruct yourself unless [the process] is collective.

Could the story you wanted to tell have existed for you in any other city?

I think of course the story could take place in a different country. But Paris is its own character in the movie — it's a film about the chaos of that city.

Given that some of the events may bear a resemblance to the past, did you have any issues when shooting on location?

Because it was not a historical reconstruction, it was easier. But my brother made me understand it was impossible to stage a real attack for the first few minutes of the film. What was difficult is that we shot the film during the trial of the Bataclan attack, so it was fresh again in the city. When we had the candles in front of the restaurant, we put up big signs saying "This is filming" for people to know it wasn't a real attack or memorial.

How do you decide when to cut a memory and let things be forgotten in a grander puzzle, rather than let a larger flashback play out?

It's true, it's fragments of her memory, and I myself built the film on fragments of how my own memory works. I was obsessed with the idea of fragmentation; these sounds [are] out of order because memory is complex. Sound is very important in this process of abstraction; when you suffer from post-traumatic amnesia, it's sometimes the sound that's still in your head. For example, the birthday candles crackling or the sound of the rain — these details to me were more important than images. Those sounds came before the image, and brought it [forth].

How do you extract a performance from an actor that is not emotionally linear but still compelling?

It was difficult because this character was a kind of naked soul. She has nobody. People suffering from PTSD describe symptoms

of not being in their own body, of it feeling alien to you, [like] you floating a bit. Like you're in limbo, and have to go into your body again. The process of the shoot for us, the love scene, with Vincent, it's like a way to get her back in her own body. At the beginning, she's like a kind of ghost.

What was your process developing the ensemble of others at the restaurant whose experiences are then contrasted?

I tried to create a picture of Paris, this cosmopolitan city. And I thought that because it's an investigation into her own memory, and also a real one to find the man's hands that she remembers, I wanted her to go through all the layers of French society, from this Senegalese cook to the daughter who had lost her parents in the attack. To me, she's an essential part of this. I was also rewriting the script as I cast these characters, and it became a choral film. It seemed a bit bleak, but that's how it happened, and it's a collective, national trauma. And so that point of view had to be not only the path of a single character.

How much do you find you end up rewriting a character around the actor?

It's never the same! For example, the character of Nastya Golubeva, who's the daughter of director Leos Carax... I did a lot of rehearsals with her every weekend. It was her first time really in a film that was not her father's. And she had a lot of grace and innocence that worked its way into the character.

Sound tends to lead to emotional moments in your films before image, in a layered soundscape that feels more like horror or sci-fi genre films than it does naturalistic drama. That feels especially true in *Revoir Paris*. Do you see yourself making a film [in the future] that leans into that?

Actually, I'm writing a horror movie at the moment! It comes from my childhood, as cinema was something I experienced before my teenage years, watching the same movie several times with my brother. We were very obsessive, and I would watch a lot of Hitchcock films, movies like *Psycho* that talk more to your nervous system than directly to your brain. And cinema has to be a really physical experience, and to me that [comes from] sound design. I'm blind in one eye, always have been. So it's super important for me. I have a discussion about the sound before the image sometimes, and in a film about memory, sound is most important to me. I like a close-up in the sound, sometimes louder and not fitting with the image. Because [*Revoir Paris*] is a mental film, investigating [Mia's] own memory and constructing corridors within her memory to explore. I really like the idea that the sound [like with the birthday candles] can be [integrated] unnaturally to add the feeling of a dream; or more accurately, a nightmare.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity. — ***INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY SARAH WILLIAMS***

THE FRIENDS OF EDDIE COYLE

Peter Yates

Appropriate for a film set in and around Boston, Peter Yates' 1973 crime-drama *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* is about a man who mistakenly believes he's at the hub of the universe only to come to the sad conclusion that he's an easily replaceable cog. Robert Mitchum's title character is a well-liked, middle-aged intermediary, floating between assorted criminal figures in the Boston underworld. Eddie predominantly facilitates illegal gun sales to supply a crew of bank robbers, trying to scrape together as much money as possible before facing sentencing on a conviction in New Hampshire for driving a truck filled with stolen whiskey. Eddie's considered a standup guy who's done time and kept his mouth shut, but that was in the past. He's fifty now, and spending even a handful of years in prison away from his family has him considering his options and desperate to make moves. He might be looking to trade in one set of friends for another, but, between the mob and the feds, no one can be credibly accused of looking out for him.

Even this film's title can be interpreted as faintly mocking Eddie, diminishing his prominence within his own life story. But it also speaks to the film's dispersed, practically egalitarian approach to scene-setting: sketching out a working-class hierarchy of lowlifes and street-level operators who conduct business out of the trunk of their cars at the grocery store or at an MBTA station. The stickup crew knocking over banks all over the South Shore, led by Jimmy Scalise (played by famed character actor, and one-time real-life Winter Hill Gang associate, Alex Rocco), doesn't know about wiry gun dealer Jackie Brown (Steven Keats) and all his headaches selling machine guns to hippie, would-be revolutionaries. And Jackie, in turn, doesn't know Dillon (Peter Boyle), a button man that fronts a mob bar who, true to his day job, appears to be the straw that stirs the drink. But that's what Eddie's for, dourly acting as a go-between, shuttling cash and guns all over town so none of these people ever have to be in the same place at the same time. It all has Eddie wondering whether the various names and dealings to which he's privy might be enough to feed to ATF agent Dave Foley (Richard Jordan, who'd reteam with Mitchum only a year later on *The Yakuza*) to curry favor with the judge in New Hampshire. But there's no shortage of wiseguys talking to the cops, which puts Eddie in an awful spot, crippling his ability to negotiate a favorable deal for himself while also drawing unwanted attention from some of those former friends.

Mitchum was already in his mid-50s when he shot *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* and looks considerably older than that here. His face is ashen and jowly, his hair looks dry, and he's costumed in unflattering earth tones and grays, as if the lifeforce itself has been drained out of him. There's a practiced gravitas to the performance, with the actor imposing his will through force of personality, all without ever raising his famed baritone drawl. Yet we come to understand how performative that confidence is, and how much he's the proverbial duck sitting on a lake: calm above the waterline but all frantic movement under the surface simply to keep afloat. With prison only days away, Eddie can't find more than a few minutes of time for his wife and kids (the ones who he claims couldn't stand to see him go back to jail), instead spending his final days of freedom brokering deals for fistfuls of cash, only to turn around and flip those same business contacts to Foley. He's simultaneously squirreling away for a future that doesn't exist while recklessly taking a flame to every bridge back to his old life.

Mitchum's screen persona was primarily that of a heavy, with the actor radiating malevolence and projecting strength simply in how he carried himself. This film cuts against that image, painting Eddie almost as a pitiful figure unaware of the forces at work conspiring against him. When it counts the most, Eddie is utterly oblivious; he's either blinded by his faith in institutions and the word of untrustworthy people, or he's drunk himself into a stupor at a time when he should probably keep his wits about humoring his hard luck tales of woe only for so long before growing restless and changing the subject. And for all his performative bravado, he's reduced to pleading with Foley to reward his finking with just a little life rope. When the character does finally meet his ignoble end, he couldn't make it easier for his killer: passed out in the passenger seat of a car, unaware of the revolver put to his forehead. Like the weather in New England, he's in like a lion, out like a lamb.

The Friends of Eddie Coyle was directed by British filmmaker Peter Yates, whose immediately preceding film was *The Hot Rock* (1972), a breezy heist flick that takes its cues from the laid-back charms of its star, Robert Redford. The earlier film treats crime as a series of high-wire acts with elaborate plans involving dozens of moving pieces (at various points, helicopters and hypnotists are employed) and has a tone that resides somewhere between perpetual amusement and admiration. There's nothing like that in *Eddie Coyle*. Holding up a bank here is presented as an act of patience, research, and cold determination; the plans themselves prey upon the fear of bank employees and empathy for the branch manager whose family, the robbers are told, is being held at gunpoint. Yates shoots the film's two robbery sequences with precision but also clinical detachment, as if the whole thing were merely a very large withdrawal (that is, of course, until one of the employees triggers the silent alarm and pays dearly for it). The same goes

for the film's aborted car chase, which is as clumsy and abrupt as the one in *Bullitt* — another Yates-directed film — is thrilling and distended. In other words, in *Eddie Coyle*, being a criminal is treated as if it were any other standard blue-collar job — which, then, makes it more understandable why people would fall into the line of work, even as its depiction is scrubbed clean of any glamor or excitement.

But it's not just that the criminal life lacks glamor here; it's also down to the particulars of the actors and settings as well. Everyone looks awful, with shaggy and windswept haircuts, or skin that appears clammy or pocked with blemishes. Jordan even has a prominent unibrow. All the characters seem like they eat badly, drink too much, or don't get enough sunshine — which is an apt way of characterizing many people who live in the northeast (lest there be claims of casting aspersions, please note this writer spent the first eighteen years of his life living in the greater Boston area). The film's locations are functional yet industrial-looking. Overwhelmingly, scenes are staged in underpopulated bars or depressing-looking cafeterias. The film's final set piece takes place during a Bruins game at the old Boston Garden, capturing the hive-like energy of the building but also how damp and claustrophobic it was. You can practically smell the sweat coming through the screen.

This all speaks to *Eddie Coyle*'s lived-in sense of authenticity, but also to its ingrained understanding of labor. These are characters of modest means, modest intelligence, and modest ambitions; everyone's just kind of scraping by and dealing with the constant hassles that come with the line of work. Eddie believes himself to be a private contractor, but really he's a glorified middle manager. He's able to provide for his family but little else. The character's been lulled into a false sense of security, failing to recognize how expendable he actually is once the going gets tough. There have been more stylish, or more conventionally thrilling, crime-dramas, yet this film endures because it genuinely captures the clock-punching drudgery of "the life," as well as the sensation of constantly being behind the eight ball. It demystifies a century's worth of gangster movies (notably, it was released by Paramount in between the first two *Godfather* films, which, for all their undeniable strengths, present organized crime from the top down with little interest in the life of a lowly mafia soldier), by acknowledging that these people still have to answer to someone and that, while loyalty is a term that gets bandied about a lot, these are ultimately transactional relationships. You're only as valuable as you are useful, and there's always someone behind you who can take your place; that's as fitting now as it was then. **— ANDREW DIGNAN**

INDIANA JONES AND THE DIAL OF DESTINY

James Mangold

Lest the sun not rise again, Indiana Jones must return, he must gallivant to another side of the globe and retrieve the magical MacGuffin, and he must do this in perfect conjunction with John Williams' leitmotifs, lest the shadowplay fail, lest the ritual remain incomplete, and Tezcatlipoca reveals his displeasure. It's strange to be thought of as a god, but that's how studios treat the mysterious "mass audience" that will consume their most expensive creations. This audience's appetite is unknowable, but its power is enough to destroy any studio if they are displeased with their offerings. Village elders recall what has appeased this god in the past, but sage wisdom is not enough. And so, another dance as Indy — the moves are right, but the tempo is wrong.

To clear the air a bit, it's worth highlighting two rather bothersome discussions that seem to accompany each review, not only of this movie, but nearly every franchise film. The first deals with what this picture's director, James Mangold, pointed out when presented with negative reviews: that each piece seeks to compare his *Dial of Destiny* to the others in the franchise rather than evaluating this as a standalone venture. This review will also compare Mangold's work with the four previous Spielbergs, as this is the only meaningful way of talking about franchise pictures. Just as every human is given historical meaning through their place of birth, their religion, their families, their education, and other arrays of identities and values that are bigger than any one person, so too an Indiana Jones movie gains meaning only through historical factors of its birth, which includes its progenitors. That also includes the second discussion, which is the business side of all this. Talk of market research, IP, capital, and the cynical timing of remakes and sequels seems like the language of the trades and business papers, but it's all also the pulmonary system of franchise films and must be mentioned.

That said, this thing can at least be a good time. Steven Spielberg and George Lucas approached the series as if making an adventure serial from their childhood, so James Mangold's *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny* could simply be yet another thrilling episode of Indy and the gang. But, Indiana Jones is now

a mythos, and now this film will be seen as the sendoff to one of the most beloved protagonists in cinema history, correcting the public disappointment of 2008's *Crystal Skull*. Like it or not, that stupid concern, the definiteness of it all, prevents this from being just another Indy adventure. And, though Mangold could have ignored this anyway, he doesn't.

The film opens with quite the feint. Indiana Jones (Harrison Ford, magisterial) boards a train filled with the type of people he's been known to dislike: Nazis. His face, de-aged, manages to avoid the uncanny valleys associated with such VFX tech, but his octogenarian voice breaks the illusion. He meets up with old friend Basil Shaw (Toby Jones, delightful) and discovers half of a powerful relic, the Antikythera, which, when combined with its other half, offers (arguably spoiler territory) godlike powers. It's aboard this train that he also meets Nazi physicist Jürgen Voller (Mads Mikkelsen, a believable Aryan), who wishes to use this relic of Archimedes to do predictably Reichish things.

With the magical object and bad guy introduced, the film thrusts forward to the present day, where a weathered Jones jolts awake to the sound of his young neighbors blaring the Beatles. He's divorced, his son died in Vietnam, nobody swoons at his lectures, and, worst of all, he does not live in an apartment befitting the legendary Indiana Jones. But, after some prodding from Shaw's daughter Helena (Phoebe Waller-Bridge), Indy's off to recover the Antikythera, by traveling the globe with some help from old friends. There are plenty of homages to the previous films throughout the adventuring scenes, even an homage to Ke Huy Quan's Short Round found in Ethann Bergua-Isodore's scamp, Teddy. Like always, there's a bit of the supernatural that bolsters the climax's action sequence, though this one is much closer to a Paradox Interactive cutscene than the face-melting conclusion of *Raiders*. And Mangold, sensing his responsibility, gives Indiana Jones a dignified retirement.

Thankfully, there are no winks, no nods, and no sarcastic, out-of-place, self-referential quips that usually plague franchise films. Mangold and his collaborators have a serious temperament and have no patience for the kind of writing that more befits fanfiction and forum posts. And *Dial of Destiny* subsequently hits all the notes — it's an Indy film through and through. It's enjoyable in that way.

But this self-seriousness casts a gloomy veil over the project, as a purposeless Indiana Jones waddles from adventure to adventure out of a sense of duty, the kind embedded in an elderly neighbor who struggles each year to hoist an American flag for the Fourth of July rather than one located in his usual *joie de vivre*. This, combined with the dull yellows of the image and boring CGI sets, is a seriousness lacking in Spielberg, who would never make a film out of mere duty. But, Ford's somber, aged Indy could be read as meta-critique of these legacy sequels. Do we really want Indy to come out of retirement, just to dance for us again? If so, *ecce homo*. **— ZACH LEWIS**

DIRECTOR: James Mangold; **CAST:** Harrison Ford, Phoebe Waller-Bridge, Antonio Banderas; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Walt Disney Pictures; **IN THEATERS:** June 30; **RUNTIME:** 2 hr. 24 min.

NO HARD FEELINGS

Gene Stupnitsky

Historically held in low-regard, the coming-of-age comedy (or, to be less discrete, the teen sex comedy) has long served as a useful snapshot of the culture's evolving anxieties and shifting mores. From the anti-authority thumb in the eye of *National Lampoon's Animal House* to the post-(Bill)Clinton public dissemination of sex and preoccupation with bodily fluids of *American Pie*, to the post-(Hillary)Clinton panic that maybe young women really can't have it all of *Booksmart*, there's almost always more going on with these films than simply keggers and T&A. If you want to get a sense of what's roiling the discourse — as it relates to dating, technology and even the intersection of youth and politics — look to the (horny) teenagers.

Such is the case with Gene Stupnitsky's (*Good Boys*) new film *No Hard Feelings*, which uses its somewhat outlandish premise to explore helicopter parenting and how the tendrils of the internet have shaped a generation of young men who, the film argues, would rather hole up in their bedrooms and engage with digital stimuli than venture out into the world and talk to real live girls. Even in its comedic exaggeration, there's a thinly-veiled panic to the film that a down-for-whatever Jennifer Lawrence in booty shorts isn't enough to overcome years of isolation, desensitization, and teenage boys having their cell phone all but glued to their hands. At the same time, the film offers up a fairly

damning commentary on how unforgiving and cruelly compressed the timetable is for young women as figures of willful objectification, with last season's sex-bomb being dismissed as "ma'am" with alarming rapidity. It's the sort of lowbrow comedy where even when the jokes aren't necessarily connecting, there's usually something else interesting going on concurrently.

At 32 years old, and nobody's idea of a withered old maid, Lawrence plays Maddie, a Montauk local, growing increasingly unnerved by the gentrification of her seaside community. Having inherited her late mother's house, Maddie was unprepared for the housing market to explode as wealthy out-of-towners converged on the Long Island hamlet, driving up her property taxes to levels she can no longer afford. In danger of losing the house and unable to work her side hustle of being an Uber driver after her car is repossessed, Maddie's begun to explore increasingly desperate options. That leads her to a provocative Craigslist posting from wealthy parents Laird and Allison Becker (Matthew Broderick and Laura Benanti), who are willing to hand over the title to the old Buick parked in their driveway to any young lady who will help drag their bookish son Percy (newcomer Andrew Barth Feldman) out of his shell by surreptitiously dating him before he departs for Princeton in the fall. With all parties agreeing that this isn't strictly sex work — though the film at least acknowledges that there's nothing wrong with the profession — it's also understood that the car is as good as Maddie's once she sleeps with Percy — provided he never learns of the pact — which she is all too willing to accommodate. The problem is no matter how often Maddie shows up around Percy in a short skirt or suggests that they go skinny-dipping after trying to get him drunk, he refuses to take the bait, behaving as the consummate gentleman who'd rather get to know her first. Kids today!

What emerges is an unwitting battle of wills between Maddie's mercenary concerns (and her transactional views on sex) and Percy's fundamental decency. For all his time spent watching extreme porn or playing online video games in his private hours, Percy remains blissfully removed from the expected urges of

adolescent rebellion, demonstrating no interest in getting his driver's license, underage drinking, or even talking to girls. In flouting the widely held view of incels as embittered, seething trolls, the character is presented as unfailingly shy but also considerate and empathetic; looking past Maddie's overt advances to try and learn more about her disappointing childhood and understanding how it's shaped her present. But also, no case is made that there's anything typical about Percy's old-fashioned romanticism — he shows up to a first date at a townie bar in a suit jacket and tie, but also... shorts. It's summer, after all, and it's too hot for slacks. The film does explore the idea that what previous generations defined as cutting loose or sowing wild oats can seem downright intimidating and even corrosive to kids that were raised with mom and dad peering over their shoulders, having been conditioned since the cradle to academically overachieve at the expense of nearly everything else.

Lest that all sound too finger-wagging, rest assured that *No Hard Feelings* remains the sort of ribald comedy where a former police dog is triggered by hearing the word "cocaine" and a naked Feldman clings to the windshield of a speeding vehicle that's racing to beat a train crossing. Stupnitsky came up writing for *The Office* and broad comedies like *Bad Teacher*. And yet, this film is all the more commendable when it *doesn't* necessarily go for the easiest joke imaginable. Stupnitsky turns down repeated opportunities to do lazy pratfalls in establishing how a car-less Maddie has to navigate town (and a series of precipitous inclines) on rollerblades, instead emphasizing how ungainly they are on steps or when attempting to steal a car while still wearing them. The film is initially annoyingly coy when it comes to depicting nudity — only to later upend expectations in an altercation that can best be described as the distaff response to the most famous scene in *Eastern Promises*. But *No Hard Feelings* is at its sharpest when it foregrounds the generational divide, particularly when Lawrence crashes a house party filled with irritating teenagers who laugh in her face, repeatedly inquire whether she's a friend of someone's mom, and ask her to not stand in the background of their livestream videos. A snappy comeback to two belligerent bros, telling them to "go fuck yourselves," spectacularly blows up in Maddie's face, when the young men interrogate the inherent homophobia in the comment. Meanwhile, Maddie can't understand why nobody behind closed doors is having sex and is aghast that there are parents in the house (who, in turn, are horrified that a 30-something woman is harassing the teenagers and getting drunk with them).

Lawrence, who is a bonafide movie star — an Oscar-winning actress and unofficial member of Taylor Swift's squad — doesn't *need* to be making teen sex comedies, but let it not be said that she's slumming it here for a paycheck. The actress, who, even as a recent mother in her early thirties retains her prominent apple cheeks and girlish glow, throws herself into the situation with aplomb; falling on the right side of the nebulous line between anything-for-a-laugh adventurousness and flop-sweat desperation. The role requires the actress to give (clothed) lap dances and take a garden hose at full blast to the face, after being maced by a terrified teenager. But what's actually "brave" here is taking on the chin a procession of cutting remarks made about the character's age. There's a sense that Maddie is flailing in her thirties, still living off of tips and having one-night stands with every guy sitting at the end of the bar, while her contemporaries are having children and moving out of state. Being the life of the party, as well as — by all sane standards — still "a babe" doesn't insulate the character from getting dunked on by snarky teens or wealthy tourists. Even in its rote, "everyone learns a lesson" formula, there are moments of genuine vulnerability here. Not to suggest that this is Stupnitsky's *Birth* or anything, but the director does allow the camera to linger on Lawrence's face as she's moved to tears, in one scene, by a soulful rendition of Hall & Oates "Maneater," reminding anyone who might have forgotten that she remains one of the most disarming actresses of her generation.

And despite all of that, it's still Feldman who's the revelation here. Tasked with the seemingly impossible role of playing "a straight guy who repeatedly turns down Jennifer Lawrence for sex," the young actor must come across as chivalrous and honorable without appearing addled or, worse, exclusively a screenwriter's creation. What's impressive is how much of the character's shyness, and his hesitation to engage, is actually tied up in Percy's clearly defined moral compass — and a burgeoning sense of self-respect, which is further tested once his parents' scheme invariably comes to light. By all rights, this film should play as a fantasy with a conceit that's all but impossible to square, and yet,

there's a sort of old-fashioned integrity to Feldman's performance. Maybe getting laid isn't prioritized over genuine emotional connections by this generation of teens, and if that's the price for enduring interminable TikTok videos and the act of holding up every off-color joke as a microaggression, so be it. We're a long way from the boys in *Porky's* spying on the girls' showers, and it's difficult to see that as anything but progress. — ***ANDREW DIGNAN***

DIRECTOR: Gene Stupnitsky; **CAST:** Jennifer Lawrence, Andrew Barth Feldman, Matthew Broderick; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Columbia Pictures; **IN THEATERS:** June 23; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 43 min.

GOD IS A BULLET

Nick Cassavetes

Adapted from a Boston Teran novel and making the rather incredulous claim that it's based on actual events, Nick Cassavetes' *God Is a Bullet* is a rather nasty piece of work — a proudly reprehensible, yet plodding exercise in provocation, daring you to be outraged by its puerile worldview. It's ostensibly about a man of deep faith descending into a seedy and violent underworld to rescue his young daughter, led by the hand of a skittish insider, only for his strongly held religious beliefs to be challenged by the wonton ugliness with which he's confronted. In the most charitable yet superficial sense, the film resembles the work of Paul Schrader, most specifically 1979's *Hardcore*, which is perhaps the most conflicted of the filmmaker's many riffs on *The Searchers* (1956). But in its flashy yet empty visuals, its predisposition to wallow in human suffering, and particularly its exploitation and degradation of women, Cassavetes' film more closely aligns with something like Joel Schumacher's soulless knock-off *8mm* (1999). The suffering is almost certainly the point here — and suffer the viewers shall.

God Is a Bullet opens on Christmas Eve, with affable desk jockey police officer Bob Hightower (Nikolaj Coster-Waldau of *Game of Thrones*) calling his fourteen-year-old daughter, Gabi (Chloe Guy), to wish her a merry Christmas. Gabi lives with Bob's ex-wife and her new husband, and, mere seconds after he hangs up, the house is invaded by the followers of a satanic cult, the Left-Handed Path, fronted by the maniacal, heavily tattooed Cyrus (Karl Glusman). Cyrus and his cronies rape and murder the ex-wife, kill the new husband, and abduct young Gabi with theintention of forcing her to participate in their physically and sexually abusive satanic rituals, before getting her strung out on drugs and pimping her out to truckers. Upon discovering the horrific crime scene the next morning, Bob dedicates his life to tracking down Gabi, spending months running down leads that go nowhere. That all changes when Bob is approached by Case Hardin (Maika Monroe, reuniting with her *Watcher* co-star, Glusman), a twitchy former cult member turned Left-Handed Path apostate who knows all too well what the cult is up to. She volunteers to help Bob get his daughter back, but she won't just tell him where Cyrus is (she claims bringing in the police or the FBI will only get the girl killed); rather, she insists that they hit the road together, as a covert tandem, to try and infiltrate the cult. That means that Bob's going to have to transform himself, inside and out, if he ever wants to see his daughter again.

Bob and Case drive to the middle of the desert to connect with a character called the Ferryman, a transactional figure who provides guns, false documents, and tattoos to the Left-Handed Path. The Ferryman is played by Jamie Foxx in an extended cameo which only further throws off the dramatic balance of the film, and requires the actor to appear in full body tattoos, a prosthetic arm, and makeup meant to simulate vitiligo, truly epitomizing the "too-muchness" that the film is striving for. Over the course of several hours, the Ferryman inks up Bob's torso and arms, while Case tattoos a spider under his right eye (Monroe, like all the actors in the cult's orbit, has several facial tattoos), all of which is a mere entrée to the sort of transgression and permanent scarring Bob will endure before he can rescue Gabi. As the pair inch closer to Cyrus, they encounter assorted drug dealers, killers, and all-around gutter trash whose warnings to back off become exponentially less subtle (at one point, a rattlesnake injected with meth is involved). All the while, Bob clings to the flimsy tatters of his belief in God and the doomed hope that he can someday resume his old life with Gabi, praying in vain that neither of them will be too changed by their experiences.

It's impossible to talk about *God Is a Bullet* without addressing its violence — not only its pervasiveness, nor how graphicly it's depicted, but how it overtakes scenes, permeating seemingly innocuous exchanges with its corrosiveness. (The film is being

released into theaters sans rating, but it's inconceivable to thinkit could secure an R in its current form.) Characters aren't just shot in this film, they're reduced to wet chunks of meat by shotguns and large caliber rifles, as limbs and mandibles go flying in a shower of blood. People aren't merely stabbed; their throats are slit ear to ear, unleashing a cascade of arterial spray. The dominating motif here is violence toward women, extending beyond the subjugation and sexual trafficking of an underage girl — pretty icky stuff and almost entirely extraneous to Cyrus' ultimate motivations, merely a lazy shorthand to remind us thathe's a bad dude — with the film demonstrating a certain zeal in showing female characters having their noses broken, their eyes blackened through repeated punches, and their brains blown across the backsplash. In an especially upsetting sequence, Cyrus unloads a handgun clip into the face of an unsuspecting female associate simply to make a point, turning the actress' face into a pocked crater of blood and bone matter before the body even hits the ground. And It's not just in scenes

REVOIR PARIS

Alice Winocour

Still, despite the lack of an entirely taut story, and the sense that Winocour's directions remain conservatively rooted in a familiar sense of mise-en-scène, what does count — apart from Efira's effectively moving presence — is the filmmaker's gentle tone and observational approach, both of which help create distance between the film's core — Mia's interiority — and the clichéd socio-political intrusions that pepper its narrative. Even more important to its success, *Revoir Paris*' unique sound design (a simultaneous array of Anna von Hausswolff's ambient score, a melange of urban soundscapes, and the film's easy-flowing dialogues) and its soft, velveteen visuals, courtesy of DP Blaise Harrison, enhance the captivating mood and atmosphere through which Mia's journey is filtered. ***— AYEEN FOROOTAN***

DIRECTOR: Alice Winocour; **CAST:** Virginie Efira, Benoît Magimel, Grégoire Colin; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Music Box Films; **IN THEATERS:** June 23; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 44 min.

with the satanic cult, either: actress January Jones appears in a side storyline of questionable relevance only to have her face slammed into the hardwood floor of her home half a dozen times by her husband, punishment for talking back to him. Gorehounds and fans of extreme cinema will, no doubt, find their interests piqued, but even they — over the course of two and half exhausting hours — should question whether the juice was worth the squeeze.

There's little sense of forward progression, and Cassavetes barely seems able to keep tabs on the plot — even at 155 minutes, the film feels as though large chunks of it have been hacked away, rendering its second half an incomprehensible blur of new locations, confusing timelines, competing interests, and unresolved subplots. This thing is just an endless slog of stakeouts, ponderous conversations about faith (including one that gives the film its title), and cryptic-sounding yet nonsensical, hardboiled dialogue like, "You're fucking with the black rider, yuppie boy, we aint giving you another pass." Cassavetes has had a fascinating, if underachieving, career: spurning the option to follow in the scrappy footsteps of his father, pioneering indie director John Cassavetes, to work as a hired hand on studio projects ranging from the true crime nihilism of *Alpha Dog* to mawkish crowd pleasers like *The Notebook*. There's no discernable perspective to his new film, though, beyond "the world is a cruel, unforgiving place filled with evil people." Thankfully, Cassavetes still knows how to instill a relatively low-budget project like this with a level of slickness and inherent production value; even in the depths of its depravity, there's an appreciable showmanship to sequences like the build-up to the climactic shoot-out at an abandoned gravel pit, anticipated by Monroe smearing her own blood on her face as warpaint and literal fireworks backlighting our villains to the sounds of Jane's Addiction's "Ocean Size" (the soundtrack couldn't have been cheap, featuring cuts by David Bowie and Bob Dylan, amongst others). But truly, we're talking polishing a turd here. There aren't enough Silkwood showers in the world to wash off the stink of a film this loathsome and yet still unfailingly dull. — ***ANDREW DIGNAN***

DIRECTOR: Nick Cassavetes; **CAST:** Nikolaj Coster-Waldau, Jamie Foxx, Maika Monroe; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Wayward Entertainment; **IN THEATERS:** June 23; **RUNTIME:** 2 hr. 35 min.

DESPERATE SOULS, DARK CITY AND LEGEND OF MIDNIGHT COWBOY

Nancy Buirski

There's been a recent trend of revisiting the makings of great Hollywood classics, and with her new documentary — *Desperate Souls, Dark City and the Legend of Midnight Cowboy* — Nancy Buirski adds to this retrospection, tapping into five decades worth of articles, interviews, and media footage to create a portrait in collage of the making of the 1969 watershed film *Midnight Cowboy*. Over the course of her doc, Buirski makes a compelling case not only for the existence of Glenn Frankel's 300-page, 2021 book *Shooting Midnight Cowboy: Art, Sex, Loneliness, Liberation, and the Making of a Dark Classic*, but for *Midnight Cowboy*'s veneration as the best of the decade it concluded, and the mark of the decade born anew.

By relying less on the Netflix-docu sterility of relentless talking heads, Buirski creates a living, breathing depiction of an unsanitized New York during a time of incredible, destabilizing change — the moon landing, the Manson murders. With an adept fluidity, Buirski zooms in on and out from subjects big and small, from the social context of the Vietnam War to Jon Voight and Dustin Hoffman's brilliant performances, and from the blacklisting of screenwriter Waldo Salt to the near collapse of the grimy metropolis that is distinct in form and texture from the New York City that remains today. Importantly, Buirski also threads thought-provoking context around the personal and social histories of the cast and the worlds in which they grew, allowing the viewer to understand, empathetically, *Midnight Cowboy*'s role in symbolizing a widespread acceptance of homosexual subject matter that would have previously drawn censorship. The year 1969 was not only a year of moon landings and murder; it was the year of the Stonewall Riots and the birth of national gay liberation.

At times, the didactic repetition of this same theme speaks to a broader lack of focus throughout this documentary that is at odds with its more fluid style. With a runtime of an hour and 41 minutes, *Desperate Souls, Dark City and the Legend of Midnight Cowboy* ambitiously tackles the diagnosis of the state of a society through the critical lens of the *making of the film*, and perhaps unfairly so. If this was not challenging enough, Buirski

also focuses, with meandering tangentiality, on personal stories of the cast and crew. The result is a film that richly arranges itself in a state of disorder, but that sometimes doesn't give enough time for interesting subject matter to coalesce into something meaningful; something strong and firm rather than soft and gaudy. A stark example of this can be found in the treatment of James Leo Herlihy, the author of the novel that was adapted into the original film, and a close friend to Tennessee Williams and Anaïs Nin. He's only mentioned once with any real focus, and the message imparted is cursory at best. The other two mentions are swept away within the film's rhythms, unfortunately filtering salient signals of a time gone by into background noise.

In certain moments, it feels as if Buirski's film is overflowing, the volume of information that it tries to condense too great. But the flow of that motion is also often beautiful, and can be completely engrossing, especially as it shifts between film footage and archival footage of New York — of America — in the 1960s. There are moments of contradictory confusion between the creeping score, the original footage, and the talking head narration, but even in these moments — which are sometimes totally jarring — *Desperate Souls, Dark City* captures the cultural ferment of a decade, as well as the brilliance of an accidental synergy found at a critical point of shifting societal tectonics. Director John Schlesinger was able to cohere all of this in a meaningful way, made all the more impressive by doing so at a scale as simple as the tender platonic love of two hustlers in New York.

But as is said in the documentary, "It's not all about culture. It's about what's good." At the end of the film, Michael Childers, John Schlesinger's longtime partner, comments that after a stroke on New Year's Day in 2001, John was mostly confined to a wheelchair for the remaining three years of his life. Michael notes, "He couldn't sleep, but we had more communication than ever through our eyes." With *Desperate Souls, Dark City and the Legend of Midnight Cowboy,* Buirski does Schlesinger's spirit justice with her rich and melodic visual style, which proves itself a worthy means by which to study one of America's great films. **— *CONOR TRUAX***

DIRECTOR: Nancy Buirski; **CAST:** —; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Zeitgeist Films/Kino Lorber; **IN THEATERS:** June 23; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 41 min.

SEIRE
Park Kang

"Seire pits old-fashioned superstitions against modern-day rationalism, preoccupied with dreams, birth, death, and the intangibles that lie beyond the realm of so-called common sense. Rotting fruit, crying babies, sexual desire — Park's film plays on our inherited visceral reactions and lizard-brained impulses with some memorable imagery, as well as an ability to shift between dreams and reality without having to resort to cheap gimmickry." ***— FRED BARRETT***

DIRECTOR: Park Kang; **CAST:** Seo Hyun-woo, Ryu Abel, Sim Eun-woo; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Film Movement; **STREAMING:** June 16; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 42 min.

STAN LEE

David Gelb

It's quite impossible (or rather absurd) to think about pop culture, and the many generations of teenagers and young adults that have fueled it, without recognizing the versatility of comic books, and the unending array of superheroes that have gradually leaped off of cheap magazine pages and into colossally budgeted blockbusters. And if there's one author among the fandom of comics nerds and geeks whose name and reputation has as high a status as the superheroes themselves, it's the legendary Stan Lee. This is due not only to Lee being one of the most prominent creative minds behind the Marvel comics universe, alongside long-time collaborators Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko, but also to his genial, always smiling demeanor — he himself has become a media "character," which has made him an easy draw for the spotlight, and an idol of fan clubs, comic books symposiums, and everything else. Which is also to say that Stan Lee's life and career isn't the stuff of obscurity — plenty of die-hard fanatics know his story and reputation quite intimately, while even casual fans and the comics-curious will have, by this point in our Marvel age, surely heard or read a good deal about him.

All that to say, as long as you don't go into David Gelb's *Stan Lee* — a 100-year birthday anniversary documentary — expecting lots of headline-grabbing information, never-before-known trivia, or different perspectives on this cultural figure, the experience of having a familiar story collated and offered all in one place can still be plenty enjoyable. By remaining faithful to the colorful world of Stan's artistic creation and its jovial spirit, Gelb keeps his straightforward and plainly hagiographic narrative on the light-hearted and fun side — a compliment, really, to Stan's comic strips. Obviously, with Stan as the main character of this documentary — and almost the sole narrator, though occasionally he's supplemented by his wife Joan Boocock, as well as the voices of Lee's secretary, Flo Steinberg, and Kirby — Gelb allows the Marvel author's affable personality and charm to speak both for himself and the imaginary universe that he had a hand in creating. *Stan Lee* relies on old footage, assorted material from the vaults of Marvel archives, letters and print documents, and a handful of recreations of certain episodes from the Lee biography — his time as a voracious book-reading West Side Manhattan kid; as a young comics wunderkind; and as a veteran pop culture icon — using clay figurines. Gelb sort of follows the same procedure that used to be known as the "Marvel Method": writers and artists collaborating, side by side to, as Lee puts it here, enable pictures and stories to blend together perfectly and create a great comic. This filmmaker's humble yet skillful work is mainly fueled by the idea of "illustrating" and (re)envisioning the awe-inspiring stories taken from inside Lee's mind.

Stan Lee is breezy, kinetic, and to the point; it never bothers itself with excessively in-depth readings, or too elaborately

attempts to psychoanalyze Lee or his art. Gelb shapes an adequately precise portrait of Lee's marvelous genius and his massive achievement. Indeed, this documentary finds a fine balance: It briefly sketches out Lee's chronological biography, and expends just enough effort on the "philosophy" behind the creation of different favorite Marvel characters, putting them in context with the grander historical, social, and political backdrops. Similarly, Stan Lee's successful effort at revolutionizing the art of comics was founded on a perfect mix of fantasy and reality, entertainment and moral teachings, and escapist fun with humanistic concerns. In this documentary, even beyond all the inspirational first-person-narrated stories (which, inevitably, will later lead to some authorship and creative disagreements between Lee, Kirby, and Ditko), the importance and contextualization of Lee's artistic heritage (which one may consider a mix of Andy Warhol and Ernest Hemingway) shines, as does the heartfelt message that Lee's story imparts to youngsters about the importance of believing in ideas and dreams, despite whatever circumstances, and doing what you love to do and creating what you're compelled to create. Beyond all that, what's maybe most impressive here is the vintage texture and aura that Gelb captures throughout. Almost ironically, then, this particular tenor of celebration of Stan Lee's life and work takes its audience far, far away from the bombastic, CGI-driven Marvel Cinematic Universe behemoths that frequent movie theaters and brings us instead to a place much closer to the visionary origins of hand-drawn, illustrated panels. It's not necessarily a trip back to *simpler* times, but a reclamation of a more soulful, vibrant realm of fantasy. **— *AYEEN FOROOTAN***

DIRECTOR: David Gelb; **CAST:** Stan Lee; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Disney+; **STREAMING:** June 16; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 26 min.

MAXIMUM TRUTH

David Stassen

The current American political climate is in a state of such disarray that we have now reached a point where individuals are basing their ideologies and beliefs on a limited edition beer can, a detail that is objectively hilarious, until you think about it too much and realize how terrifying the implications are. The advent of social media has turned everyone into armchair analysts, fostering the widespread (mis)belief that their opinion matters, likes and retweets serving as the ultimate metric. In theory, a satire centering this surreality would seem like a no-brainer, with enough ammunition to provide material for dozens of screenplays. Yet therein lies the rub: how do you satirize a world that is already the ultimate satire?

David Stassen and Ike Barinholtz have trod this terrain of America's dire political present recently — 2018's *The Oath* threw Orwell, *The Purge*, Thanksgiving, and a "fictional," fascist autocrat into a blender, to mixed results — and new mockumentary *Maximum Truth* similarly has no interest in meaningfully plumbing the depths of 21st-century political discourse, its participants both in front of and behind the camera seemingly beaten into submission before the first day of shooting by the farce taking place around them. One could then ask then why even make the film, but then audiences would be deprived of seeing Barinholtz fall down a flight of stairs — a regular Lucille Ball, that guy. Barinholtz stars as Rick Kingston, a former lawyer who discovered that he could sue various companies for bullshit reasons and get lucrative settlements, and who now fancies himself a "consultant," which means he's willing to work for anyone inclined to give up the green, politics be damned. That this opportunist and fame whore is already seen by the public as a joke takes quite a bit of fun out of the proceedings from the jump, as scathing political comedy is rarely born out of self-awareness.

As *Maximum Truth* opens, Rick is spearheading a protest against a new play opening in L.A. that supposes Abraham Lincoln had a male lover, a joke that wasn't all that funny when Billy Eichner tried it in *Bros* nine months ago. But get this: Rick is a closeted gay man, claiming that his live-in lover, Marco (Tony Rodriguez), is his assistant. Can you believe the irony?! *Maximum Truth* is only getting started, though, so hold on to your monocles. A rich socialite named Nancy Jo Nackerson (Beth Grant) — her name is irrelevant, it's merely fun to type — whose deplorable husband invented fracking, hires Rick to get the dirt on a beloved political candidate (Max Minghella) running for Congress who apparently hates the rich; oddly, specific political parties are never mentioned here, because specificity is obviously also where satire goes to die. Rick teams up with his buddy Simon (Dylan O'Brien), a gym-obsessed musclehead who is, wait for it... really

stupid and toxic. Couldn't you just die of surprise?! Simon sells protein supplements out of his garage (of course), and he can't even spell the word "shredded" right (of course), because he's a big dumb animal (of course). Naturally, Rick and Simon run into one dead end after another in their quest for debaucherous evidence, whether it be a supposed sex tape or allegations of sexual harassment and racism.

And so goes *Maximum Truth*, a film that goes out of its way to paint its protagonist as an absolute dunderhead, leading to a conclusion where it's revealed that he is... indeed, a dunderhead. There's no build-up or comedic tension, even as a strict deadline is built into the plot itself, that of a scheduled press conference in only three short days. The film as a whole is utterly repetitious, each new scenario leading to the same pathetic punchline: the candidate is a saint, Rick and Simon are stupid. For his part, Barinholtz can play charismatically smarmy in his sleep, but unfortunately, there are times here when it feels like he's doing just that. It's O'Brien who fares best with the material, displaying a fair amount of comedic chops even as he's forced to play a stereotype so clichéd that it would have felt tired in 1995. That the movie ends on a joke seemingly making fun of rideshare drivers seems especially cruel, as if Stassen and Barinholtz were unable to fathom anything quite so demeaning at that — hot take, the working class sure does suck. But even worse than that offense? Self-entitled comedians who believe they have something to say about the world we live in but are too afraid to get their hands dirty, where a cheap line of dialogue like, "My message is that of whoever pays me the most," is presented as incisive satire and not just another fart in the 78-minute crop dusting that is *Maximum Truth*. **— *STEVEN WARNER***

DIRECTOR: David Stassen; **CAST:** Ike Barinholtz, Dylan O'Brien, Kiernan Shipka; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Momentum Pictures; **IN THEATERS:** June 23; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 31 min.

MIDDAY BLACK MIDNIGHT BLUE

Samantha Soule & Daniel Talbott

Neuroimaging studies of people who have recently experienced grief show that coping with death and loss significantly impacts human brain function. Voluntary actions, like memory recall and talking, are affected, as well as involuntary ones, like regulating heart rate and feeling pain. Many people report sadness and yearning, of course, but some also state a lack of focus and

frequent confusion. Common sense also obviously speaks to this, but it's worth putting in straightforward terms that traumatic experiences can also literally change our brains on a material level, creating, destroying, or rerouting certain neural connections and fundamentally altering our experience of our internal or external worlds. The cliche observation that "everyone's experience of grief is different" may be evident, but it's interesting how profoundly this is true from the perspective of applied science rather than social science. Understanding this allows us to more singularly experience its various depictions in art.

In *Midday Black Midnight Blue*, the feature debut from writer/director duo Samantha Soule and Daniel Talbott, main character Ian's grief is realized as a haunting, opaque experience. In its every move, the film seems to showcase his feelings of loss as a crushing, all-encompassing nightmare, one that often interjects in illusory form, and persists even two decades after the death of a woman he loved, Liv (played by Soule). Everything from the screenplay to the editing to the cinematography reflects this particular oppression, steeping the film in attempts at conjuring a profound statement on grief. But instead, Soule and Talbott's approach ends up creating a convoluted film that feels unproductively hazy, and which saps much of the potential emotionality.

The directors' guiding mode of expressionism is quite tangible, with most of *Midday Black Midnight Blue* oriented only to situate viewers firmly in Ian's unenviable shoes. Shot on location on Puget Sound's beautiful Whidbey Island, the film is instead a surprisingly muted and drab affair. Soule and Talbott intentionally elide the island's beautiful landscapes in favor of more inconsequential medium and close-up shots, an articulation of the claustrophobic ennui that dominates his existence. Even the few wides included here are poorly composed and feel washed out. It's an overt tactic, one that does little to add any depth to Ian's depiction and unfortunately results in a fairly ugly film. *Midday Black Midnight Blue*'s plot, which in sticking with the directors' approach is less of a traditional narrative and more of a meandering collection of memories and interactions, likewise abstracts and fragments Ian's existence, follows him through his daily routine, which seems to mostly consist of spinning memories of Liv, the good and the bad, on repeat. The film's most successful stylistic gambit comes in scenes where past and present are woven together, the real and imagined playing out on top of each other in the same physical space, with us left to watch Ian as he watches his realities, fantasies, and memories unfold. The impression is that Ian is slowly losing his grasp on reality, and these sequences become more jumbled and jumpy as the film progresses, sometimes repeating the same "memory" multiple times to different results.

There's much debate in the critical community on how exactly to engage with or esteem *vibes* films, with their merits existing on an altogether different spectrum of subjectivity. So too is that the case with depictions of grief in film, and so the particular mode of expression Soule and Talbott opt for makes a certain amount of sense. To be sure, then, there will be viewers for whom *Midday Black Midnight Blue* will resonate, and likely with force. But for most, it's likely to land as a confusing attempt at catharsis that, in its efforts to construct palpable melancholia, instead suffocates viewers within its insistent misery. **— *EMILY DUGRANRUT***

DIRECTOR: Samantha Soule & Daniel Talbott; **CAST:** Chris Slack, Samantha Soule, Will Pullen; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Good Deed Entertainment; **STREAMING:** June 16; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 28 min.

I'M A VIRGO

Boots Riley

It's hard to be too critical of a work like *I'm A Virgo,* which so clearly has its heart in the right place. It's a comic book-inspired Marxist critique of contemporary policing and economic disenfranchisement, replete with Michel Gondry-esque visual charm and an endearing sense of oddball humor. It's also directed by Boots Riley, avowed communist, frontman of iconic rap group The Coup, and director of one of the most distinctive American debuts of the past decade, *Sorry To Bother You.* But then again, it is also being released by Amazon, corporate supervillain #1, so it's not like Riley can claim full innocence. On the surface, the series looks and sounds like a quirky standout in a cookie-cutter streaming landscape. It follows Cootie (Jharrel Jerome), a 13-foot tall giant isolated from birth by his foster parents (Mike Epps and Carmen Ejogo), as he is suddenly thrust into an absurdist vision of contemporary Oakland defined by an erotically-tinged burger chain, Big Bang Burger; a pseudo-fascist, jet pack-wearing vigilante/corporate CEO known only as The Hero (Walton Goggins); and an existentially-laden *Simpsons*-esque show called *Parking Tickets*. As Cootie finally ventures forth from his home, he joins up with a friendly group of stoners and a fry cook gifted with super speed, Flora (Olivia Washington), who help him grow politically, sexually, and emotionally.

There's something undeniably electric about the show's premise and pop-surreal worldview; and in the opening acts, when Riley first sputters from one absurd allegorical device to another, the energy is infectious. Unfortunately, without much rhythmic or tonal variety, it also quickly becomes a monotonous enterprise. Riley is too happy merely being clever to actually be entertaining, and the show ultimately boils down to little more than a series of weird anecdotes — Look, Riley says, Cootie's uncle is a former pop-star! Look, there's a cult of latte-wielding Steve Jobs impersonators who worship Cootie! Look, a random side character wakes up one morning suddenly doll-sized!

Quirk is leaned on so heavily in *I'm a Virgo* that emotional depth and narrative engagement are almost entirely elbowed out. Major characters, like Cootie's friend Scat (Allius Barnes), never develop

personalities beyond their colorful names. When the plot teeters into tragedy for one character, due to a lack of health insurance, it's hard to feel anything but a shrug. There's nothing wrong with clever artists letting all their random ramblings hang out, but *I'm A Virgo* is too overdetermined and focused on making a *point* to allow for a genuine sense of intellectual curiosity to blossom. It's like *Robot Chicken* by way of *Jacobin* magazine, with anarchic free-spiritedness giving way to literal-minded intellectualism.

This could be forgivable if even the show's most commendable aspect — its penchant for jocular leftist allegory and unsparing ability to call a spade a spade — didn't feel underdeveloped and tossed-off. By trying to skewer everything from for-profit healthcare to astrology to over-policing to male modeling, Riley fails to develop any critiques beyond easy, surface-level put-downs. By the time Elijah Wood cameos in the third episode as a lawyer advocating for more ethically delivered lethal injections, the pile-on of topical issues is already so great that another broadly-drawn satire of liberalism is only grating. The show even has visually arresting, pseudo-psychedelic lectures on the basic tenets of Marxism, for chrissake. "All art is propaganda," claims the show's villain, The Hero, in one episode; it's delivered as a joke, but it unfortunately comes across more like the director's reluctant confession.

Or maybe the reason why the show feels like such a misfire is simpler; as Audre Lord said, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." Maybe a glossy, comic-book-style satire of corporate-sponsored authoritarianism produced as an original property for the Amazon monolith was only ever going to hit easy targets and feel surface-level. In fairness, even if *I'm A Virgo* is not the Dziga Vertov Group, it's not that Kendall Jenner Pepsi commercial, either. But still, coming from the guy who in November 2001 was flagrantly celebrating 9/11 as a rebuke of U.S. imperialism, the lack of bite found in *I'm a Virgo* is a stunning disappointment. **— *JOSHUA BOGATIN***

DIRECTOR: Boots Riley; **CAST:** Jharrel Jerome, Olivia Washington, Brett Gray; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Amazon Prime Video; **STREAMING:** June 23; **RUNTIME:** 3 hr. 31 min.

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film & music *criticism*