



CORALINE

Employing extraordinarily supple, nearly tactile stop-motion animation and 3D effects, the children's film *Coraline* is filled with visual magic, and just about corners the market on unsettling imagery. A grinning pair of parental doppelgängers, with buttons sewn into their eye sockets, serve a dinner composed of mango milkshakes and chocolate beetles. Two morbidly obese British dowagers unzip their skins and emerge as lithe trapeze artists. A feral alley cat talks, and a theatre full of mutts attends a vaudeville, and it's all strange and clever and tantalizingly designed. Is it ungrateful, if not downright senseless, to admit that I could hardly wait for this movie to end?

Given the staggering vapidness of most modern entertainments aimed at the pre-teen demographic, it's probably unfair to ask for more of *Coraline*, especially considering the film's stylishness and impressive pedigree. Based on the award-winning children's book by literary wunderkind Neil Gaiman, and written and directed by Henry Selick (of

The Nightmare Before Christmas

and

James & the Giant Peach

)

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the movie tells of a lonely little girl (voiced by Dakota Fanning) who enters a bizarre, alternate-universe version of her unsatisfying Real World, ultimately discovering the monstrosity behind this make-believe land's playful façade, and it's nothing if not stunning to look at. Hardly five seconds pass without your witnessing some sort of memorable oddity: a Russian acrobat with stick legs and a protruding gut; a friendly neighbor with painful-looking Quasimodo posture; a moonlit garden that explodes with vibrant colors. And for a family film, it's chock full of sights to give both kids and their chaperones the heebie-jeebies, particularly when Coraline's button-sporting "other mother" morphs into spindly horror with razor-sharp tentacles. (Parents might be even more off-put by the seriocomic scene that finds an elderly Brit portraying Botticelli's Venus, with her frighteningly enormous breasts "covered" only by two undersized starfish - even for a PG-rated movie, it's pretty shocking stuff.)

If only *Coraline* actually *moved*. For a while, the film's methodical pacing and thoughtful silences feels like a tonic to the hyperactive rush of most family endeavors. But after about a

Eyes Wide Shut: "Coraline," "Push," and "The Pink Panther 2"

Written by Mike Schulz

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half hour of visual whimsy, I found myself praying for something to eventually
happen

, and it was at least another half hour before something finally did; the movie's deliberate setup
is

so

deliberate that it's exhausting. Despite the on-screen wonders,

Coraline

grows repetitive awfully quickly - banal home-life sequences, outlandish fantasy-life sequences,
repeat - and, for this adult viewer at least, the material isn't psychologically trenchant enough to
warrant either the film's slowness or its strangeness. (The moral of the story can be effectively
boiled down to "There's no place like home.")

You can argue, of course, that the movie isn't *designed* for adult viewers (just as Gaiman's book
wasn't), and it's not like there aren't plenty of grown-up delights to be found; as a fan of the
outré, I got a big kick out of Selick's frequent nods to David Lynch. (That vaudeville scene, with
its intimidating, blood-red curtains and cavernous emptiness, is a great, giggly-spooky

Mulholland Dr.

homage

.
)

Too much of the film, though, seems like mere weirdness for weirdness' sake - it's a miraculous
visual experiment with a flimsy narrative and too many random annoyances. (Teri Hatcher
voices Coraline's two mothers and sounds about a decade younger than Coraline herself,
though no point is ever made of this.) Near

Coraline

's finale, the little girl turns to her pal and sighs,

"I'm glad it's finally over." To my chagrin, I found myself agreeing with her.



PUSH

Director Paul McGuigan's grim, scuzzy superhero thriller *Push*, in which a team of Bad Mutants
wages war on a team of Good Mutants in present-day Hong Kong,
has one of those tortuously complex comic-book plots that probably only makes sense after

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seven or eight viewings. (Its story concerns secretive Nazi experiments, and the employment of godlike beings as military weapons, and a race to prevent a foreseen though changeable future, and other such rigmarole.) I really didn't care about

Push

enough to let even a second viewing be an option, but I still had a reasonably good time; with its lightning-quick editing rhythms, and its dynamically saturated colors enhancing the picturesque squalor, the movie suggests what you'd get if

City of God

's Fernando Meirelles directed

X-Men

, or if the cast of NBC's

Heroes

teleported into

Slumdog Millionaire

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The film's only huge failing, in truth, is that the acting sucks so badly. *Push* has a bunch of terrifically satisfying action scenes and imaginative effects, and many of the biologically engineered characters are so fascinating that they deserve movies all their own; I especially loved the Sniffers, whose olfactory skills allow them to witness events of the past, and the Pushers, who can alter a person's behavior by psychically implanting new "memories." (It's like watching Obi Wan Kenobi's Jedi mind trick used for evil.) What a shame, then, that the performers enacting these figures are so resoundingly phony. Nearly everyone on-screen sounds distractingly

elsewhere

, as if all of their dialogue were being uttered solely in the looping studio, and no one appears to know just how seriously to take their roles; Dakota Fanning, Chris Evans, and the glowering Djimon Hounsou seem perpetually torn between aggressive earnestness and camp. The movie is kinda fun, but you'll enjoy it more if you're not much bothered by humans who don't

act

like humans, and even then you might find it tough to handle the fantastically dull Selma Blair lookalike that is

Push

's

Camilla Belle. To be fair, she might be a

little

more expressive than

Hellboy

's Blair, but that's a bit like saying that granite is a little more expressive than concrete.

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THE PINK PANTHER 2

I'm not sure when it happened, exactly, but at some point during *The Pink Panther 2*, this silly, cheesy comedy totally wore down my resistance. I'm deeply ashamed.

I did, though, hang in there as long as I could. With its overly bright lighting, inert compositions, and predictably obnoxious, horn-filled score, this sequel to 2006's revamp of the famed Peter Sellers series is about as clumsy as Inspector Jacques Clouseau himself, and director Harald Zwart doesn't even *pretend* to be interested in its plot. (Not that he necessarily should, as it involves a thief who's stolen the legendary Pink Panther diamond. Again.) Plus, the movie's waste of so many gifted cast members - Andy Garcia, Alfred Molina, Jean Reno, John Cleese, Jeremy Irons, and Emily Mortimer among them - is enough to make you cry; most of the supporting performers here, deprived of enjoyable running gags, amble through the film looking vaguely miserable. (The ravishing Bollywood star Aishwarya Rai Bachchan is given nothing to do but stare at the camera, which makes her seem the sanest one around.)

But one good laugh or one inspired piece of slapstick can make up for about five minutes of tedium, and at that rate, *The Pink Panther 2*'s 90 minutes wind up pretty well covered. Although he doesn't appear to possess much talent for directing *people*

, Zwart paces the antics at a speedy clip, and does stage some expert visual gags; Clouseau's handling of a toppling wine rack and a series of surveillance cameras earn surprisingly hearty chuckles, and the inspector's Wile E. Coyote-esque tumble from a Vatican balcony is physical-comedy heaven. Best of all, though, Zwart appears content to stay the hell out of Steve Martin's way, and the movie is never funnier than when the camera simply fixes itself on the star's lunatic mugging and flailing and mangling of the English (French) language. Martin is such a confident, proudly ridiculous funnyman here that you can enjoy his childish clowning without guilt, and when he and Lily Tomlin team up for a series of gloriously goofy routines between Clouseau and his primly officious etiquette instructor, you might find yourself not only easily enduring but actively *liking The Pink Panther 2*

. It's no comedy classic, but any movie with enough comic sense to deliver an

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All of Me

reunion is nothing to stiff at.

For a review of He's Just Not That Into You, see "[Save the Dates](#)."