

### III, Legal Aliens: "District 9," "The Time Traveler's Wife," and "Ponyo"

Written by Mike Schulz

Sunday, 16 August 2009 16:45

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#### **DISTRICT 9**

Director Neill Blomkamp's *District 9* is a science-fiction/horror/action flick that finds a race of malnourished, understandably irate alien creatures being forcibly detained in a Johannesburg internment camp. It's also, if you can stomach the frequent bursts of bloodshed and gooey splatter, an almost insanely good time, an unapologetic "B" movie elevated to "A" status through wizardly filmmaking, macabre humor, thematic cleverness, and some of the most inventive CGI work in years.

As with the infinitely cuter E.T., the grotesque, otherworldly visitors in *District 9* - stuck in present-day South Africa following a spacecraft malfunction in the early '80s - just want to go home. Humans being humans, though, we won't let them, and one of the movie's most unexpected elements is its rather astonishing sense of unforced realism; employing hand-held cameras and faux documentary footage, Blomkamp and co-screenwriter Terri Tatchell delineate the hostilities between the humans and aliens through such subtle and offhanded means that, for long stretches, you barely notice how incredible the effects are. (Precious little about *District 9* seems "staged" in the traditional sense, and even the violence appears to have been caught on the fly; it's the first film of its type I've seen in which the visuals seem practically *improvised* .)

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Those effects, though, *are* incredible. And as the movie follows a bureaucratic pencil-pusher (the excellent Sharlto Copley) on his journey toward alien empathy - a more touching journey than you might expect - *District 9* percolates with, or more precisely

*oozes*

, escalating tension, bracing thrills, and inspiring narrative confidence. The dialogue is occasionally clunky, and events do take a too-conventional turn in the final reels. Still, this fast-moving, satisfyingly grisly entertainment is the rare sci-fi offering that has every right to be labeled "visionary,"

and somehow, miraculously, it appears that Blomkamp managed to pull off his bold and exciting achievement for a relatively low-budget \$30 million. That means that for the price of one

*G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra*

, we could've had just shy of six

*District 9*

s. Would anyone else have been content with the trade?



#### ***THE TIME TRAVELER'S WIFE***

Even without having read Audrey Niffenegger's bestseller, it's not hard to understand the appeal, and central metaphor, of *The Time Traveler's Wife*, which concerns a devoted husband whose "genetic anomaly" causes him to routinely vanish; it's all about a man who

*literally*

can't be as emotionally or physically present as his long-suffering spouse needs him to be. I'll take it on faith that the book is a moving read, yet "moving" isn't exactly the description that comes to mind regarding director Robert Schwentke's film adaptation, though "maudlin" and "silly" and "kind of icky" do spring to mind. (I presume the scene in which the naked, middle-aged traveler chats up his six-year-old wife-to-be is less discomforting in print than on-screen.) Happily, the soulful Eric Bana and Rachel McAdams invest this sci-fi love story with as much emotional honesty as it can bear, and given its bizarre flip-flops in tone, the movie is certainly too nutty to ever be boring. But when it's not making you wince or giggle inappropriately,

*The Time Traveler's Wife*

is so downbeat and gloomy that it might make even die-hard romantics long for a decidedly less

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lovestruck, male-centric version, in which a husband's genetic anomaly makes it irritatingly impossible to

*leave*

his wife's side.



#### **PONYO**

*Ponyo*, the latest animated beauty from director Hayao Miyazaki, blends a little bit of *Pinocchio* and a

*lot*

of

*The Little Mermaid*,

but it has a magical, fizzy charm that's all its own. Like Hans Christian Andersen's sea creature, the title character here - a curious young goldfish with a face of a cherub - is an ocean dweller who falls in love with a boy on land, and who disobeys her father's orders by opting for life as a human. But unlike Andersen's tale,

*Ponyo*

isn't the least bit grim. Instead, this frisky, funny, and thrillingly imaginative work applauds its heroine's adventurous spirit, and emerges as a true celebration of youthful exuberance and imagination.

This English-language version of Miyazaki's Japanese release features winning vocals by the likes of Tina Fey, Liam Neeson, Matt Damon, Cate Blanchett, and Lily Tomlin - plus a miniature *Mary Tyler Moore Show*

reunion between Cloris Leachman and Betty White - and the sound design and music are topnotch. (Joe Hisaishi's score, with its occasional echoes of "Ride of the Valkyries," suggests Wagner in a playful mood.) Yet as should be expected by the director of

*Howl's Moving Castle*

and the Oscar-winning

*Spirited Away*

, the chief pleasures in

*Ponyo*

are visual, as Miyazaki offers one memorable, delightfully evocative image after another: a car

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driving through a nighttime storm, the illumination from its headlights piercing the trees; Ponyo's Sea King father cleansing the polluted ocean with a wave of his scepter; Ponyo herself, in human form, joyously running on the water. At one point, the object of the fish-girl's affection witnesses a pack of gurgling waves - with eyeballs - following him onto land, and as they return to the depths, he says, "

*That*

was weird." It certainly was, kid. Weird and wonderful.