

End-of Daze: "2012" and "Pirate Radio"

Written by Mike Schulz

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2012

After *2012* - the movie, not the year - it will be exceedingly difficult for Roland Emmerich to deliver yet another of his expensive, apocalyptic disaster cartoons. So, you know, I guess we should be grateful for small favors.

Following the marauding aliens of *Independence Day*, the marauding lizard of *Godzilla*, and the ... er ... really

slowly

marauding second Ice Age of

The Day After Tomorrow

,
2012

finds its director turning his sights on nothing less than the extermination of the entire planet, complete with devastating earthquakes, volcanoes, tsunamis, meteor showers, and other destructive forces of nature. (According to the movie, though, none of this will apparently interfere with our cell-phone reception or ability to access the Internet.) Emmerich is clearly aiming for the death-junkie spectacle to end all death-junkie spectacles, and the film is replete with moderately to impressively convincing scenes of chaos and turmoil, laced with just enough tongue-in-cheek humor to keep the on-screen carnage palatable (and thereby ensure hearty box-office returns). So why isn't

2012

more

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fun

than it is?

Part of its failing is its length. At 158 ridiculously protracted minutes, the movie gives you all the wizardly visual effects and mass bedlam you could want, and then keeps *going* for another hour and a half; you can feel the audience's enthusiasm collectively wane whenever Chiwetel Ejiofor's tortured scientist makes another plea for someone to just

listen

to him already, or whenever a sneering Oliver Platt gives you another reason to never, ever trust high-ranking political henchmen. (The climactic scenes set aboard a life-sustaining ark - one beset by flooding, the onset of a catastrophic collision, and irritating romantic claptrap - are especially tiresome, mostly because we've already

seen Titanic

.)

But it goes without saying that blockbuster-hungry crowds will be less interested in people - or, in this film's case, "people" - than in watching things go crash and boom, and it turns out that the larger disappointment of *2012* actually comes from the stultifying sameness of Emmerich's disaster sequences.

The first time John Cusack and his shrieking kids outrace impending doom, with seismic shifts threatening to demolish their speeding limo, it's enjoyable as all get-out; you don't buy a minute of it, of course, but the ride itself, boasting wondrous effects and snazzy editing, makes for kinetic, trashy amusement. (Wouldn't you know it, Cusack and clan get trapped behind two senior citizens who insist on going the speed limit.) But this same blueprint - harried chase filled with near misses leading to the eventual "We made it!" triumph of the musical score - is then repeated for *every* scene of approaching destruction, whether characters are traveling by car, camper, plane, or boat, and the repetition finally proves more exhausting than enthralling. I didn't yawn at *2012* when the actors were talking; I yawned when they *were n't*.

Yet Emmerich is repetitive in other ways, too. (A 158-minute running length will do that to a guy.) When Cusack's ex (Amanda Peet) is literally separated from her new beau (Tom McCarthy) by a sudden crack in the earth's crust, it's a nice joke. But when, a little while later, a crack in the Sistine Chapel's ceiling separates the touching fingers of Michelangelo's God and David - which is a much *better* joke - you don't laugh; you wonder why Emmerich is replaying a gag you just saw in the previous reel. A scene of Ejiofor making a goodbye call to his father is kind of touching, but the sentiment grows increasingly maudlin when Platt makes a goodbye call

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to his mother, followed by George Segal making a goodbye call to his *son*

, followed by Danny Glover's president making a goodbye call to his *daughter*

(Thandie Newton). And if the echoing effects within *2012*

weren't bothersome enough, the movie also features all sorts of repeats from the director's own *oeuvre*

. After

Independence Day

, and its laughable last-minute rescue of the German shepherd, didn't Emmerich have enough sense to avoid this film's similar salvation of a yapping Pekingese?

Amidst the silliness and dullness, there are random pleasures to be found; Cusack, as he has in the past, develops a friendly, wholly believable rapport with his child-actor co-stars, and Woody Harrelson looks to be having a great time as a justifiably paranoid, mountain-dwelling weirdo with stringy long hair and fake teeth. (I also liked the film's in-joke of a character named Roland being the film's first on-screen fatality, an unexpected bit of self-mockery on Emmerich's part.) Those perks and the visuals aside, though, *2012* is a tedious bore, and also, dishearteningly, a bit of cheat. We're told, per the movie and a specious reading of the Mayan calendar, that the world will end in the year 2012, but it turns out it won't, really - survival, it appears, is within reach so long as you have a billion euros or John Cusack as your dad. It's hard to believe the Mayans *missed* that.



PIRATE RADIO

Like *2012*, writer/director Richard Curtis' sex-drugs-and-rock-and-roll celebration *Pirate Radio* features scenes that defy belief, is oftentimes distractingly repetitive, and runs way too long.

(Does any featherweight comedy need to last 115 minutes?) Unlike

2012

, though, it's never boring. A fiction based on fact, concerning a motley crew of '60s radio DJs who transmitted rock classics off the British coast, the movie includes too many comic gambits that you just don't buy - one DJ has, apparently, been on the boat seven months without the

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others noticing - and it's probably more aggressively "zany" than it needs to be. (Kenneth Branagh, as a trilling, supercilious government minister, has a little too much fun with the name of Jack Davenport's character - "Twatt.") Yet in its aimless, obvious way, *Pirate Radio* is a lot of fun.

Beyond boasting one of the year's best classic-rock soundtracks - a distinction it shares with another scrappy little winner, Ang Lee's *Taking Woodstock* - the film is chock-full of Curtis' typically bright, genially crass dialogue, and the cast could hardly be bettered. Performing a feature-length riff on his Lester Bangs from

Almost Famous

, Philip Seymour Hoffman is like an expletive-spewing teddy bear, and he's surrounded by an exceptional array of British comic talent, including Rhys Ifans, Nick Frost, Chris O'Dowd, Tom Brooke (hysterical as a dimwit appropriately named "Thick"), Rhys Darby, and the incomparable Bill Nighy.

Mad Men

's

January Jones shows up for two scenes, and all but steals the movie as a cluelessly hateful hottie in a push-up bra. And just as

Pirate Radio

is reaching its climax, Emma Thompson quickly sneaks in, makes a sizable comic impression, and sneaks back out. She never shares any scenes with real-life ex-husband Branagh, but realizing that they're in the same movie for the first time since the couple's 1995 divorce is, for some of us, a bigger shock than anything in this sweet, surprisingly conventional film. Or, for that matter, than anything in

2012

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