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INSIDIOUS

It features every cliché in the haunted-house handbook. It borrows liberally from other, iconic horror movies. It's by the director of the original *Saw* and the slightly more bearable killer-mannequin flick *Dead Silence*. And for all of the momentary jolts provided by the loud bangs and shrieking violins on its soundtrack, the most shocking thing about *Insidious* is how irrationally *good* it is.

This is hardly an opinion I expected to have before viewing James Wan's latest fright film, and certainly not one I anticipated during its opening credits, which find Joseph Bishara's too-hardworking theme music underscoring a black-and-white slide show of "creepy" genre images. (A door opening by itself! An invisible creature leaving footprints in the hall! A ghostly visage reflected in the mirror! *A-a-a-a-a-a-a!*) Yet slowly but surely, my initial, interior giggles at *Insidious*' employment of formula trappings turned into the nervous giggles of someone getting really (and happily) freaked out at the cineplex, an experience that, for me, hasn't happened since the first *Paranormal Activity* in 2009. I entered the film dubious and left a little bit shaken, and two days after seeing it, I can still instantly recall more than a dozen of its more memorable scares.

Insidious could be described as *Poltergeist* meets Kubrick's *The Shining* meets early- and mid-period David Lynch, but that's hardly a disparagement; hell, if you're gonna steal, steal from the best. Patrick Wilson and Rose Bryne play the amiable, if mildly discontented, married couple Josh and Renai Lambert, who have just moved into a new suburban house with their three young children. After taking a tumble in the attic, their son Dalton (Ty Simpkins) – he appears to be about seven – lapses into a coma that doctors have no medical explanation for. Three months after his spill, the still-unconscious boy is removed from the hospital to be cared for at home. And that's when the odd, minor disturbances previously experienced in the house (books thrown to the floor, items gone mysteriously missing) grow into *major* ones, among them horrific growls coming from the baby monitor, and Renai's vision of a white-masked intruder lurking behind her infant's crib. Could the house be haunted? More troublingly, could Dalton himself be haunted?

This is all familiar stuff, and it becomes even more so when the Lamberts enlist the paranormal aid of a cheerful medium (Lin Shaye, arriving like a burst of sunshine) and her goofy, Mutt-and-Jeff assistants (Angus Sampson and *Insidious* screenwriter Leigh Whannell); suddenly, a movie that was already derivative of *Poltergeist* becomes even more so, spiced with an added dollop of *Ghostbusters*. Yet *Insidious* *needs* Sampson and Whannell, because their odd-couple comedy shtick serves as necessary relief from the intensity of the film's first half. It also desperately needs Shaye, who delivers ridiculous, spirit-world hypotheses – including the suggestion that, because of a secret from Josh's past, Dalton's condition is *genetic* – with such wonderfully sincere conviction that her every cornball pronouncement significantly ups the dramatic ante.

Trust me, though, that ante was plenty high before that. The performances certainly help; Byrne, Barbara Hershey (as Josh's mother), and the superbly well-directed Simpkins are all first-rate, and Wilson, whose self-described "voice of reason" Josh is also something of a narcissist and weakling, turns in some of his strongest screen work to date. But most of the credit is Wan's. Not previously known for his subtlety, the man delivers a series of spectacularly unnerving visuals and scenes of sustained terror – that baby-monitor sequence is a wince-inducing nail-biter – and his beautifully-paced film also provides a number of sensationally eerie aural kicks. I wanted to applaud Wan for recognizing that Tiny Tim's ukulele rendition of "Tiptoe Through the Tulips," with Tim's quivering falsetto piercing the ether, just might be the creepiest popular ditty in the American songbook. (God knows it's been haunting *me* since the mid-'70s.)

And after Shaye and her team enter the picture, Wan shows that while his and author Whannell's ideas may not be original, they at least have exquisite taste in the freak-outs they choose to usurp: the frozen-faced grotesqueries from *Carnival of Souls* and Lynch's *Eraserhead*; the Black Lodge visits from *Twin Peaks*. They also display the combined talents to make these borderline steals seem almost fresh. (The "man with the face of fire" is like a more monstrous imagining of *Twin Peaks*

' Killer Bob, and when Wan and Whannell pay tribute to the “Come play with us, Danny” ghosts from
The Shining
, they have the wit to do it through the image on a View-Master.) All things considered,
Insidious
is great scare-flick fun, and that’s without even mentioning perhaps its most inspired (and certainly long-awaited) gesture, when the Lamberts realize that Something Is Not Right in their new dream home and actually do what every family
should
do in this genre: They
move
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SOURCE CODE

Hot on the heels of *The Adjustment Bureau* comes *Source Code*, another science-fiction thriller with a relatively silly premise, and an even better time than the enjoyable Matt Damon flick; director Duncan Jones’ clever, breezy, and surprisingly thoughtful outing, written by Ben Ripley, makes for a terrifically engaging 90 minutes. The film finds Jake Gyllenhaal’s helicopter pilot Colter Stevens an unwitting participant in an experimental military operation, one that allows him to relive the last eight minutes in the life of a railway-explosion victim. (Don’t ask how; Vera Farmiga’s and Jeffrey Wright’s enigmatic Army officers will tell you, but even then the explanation is fuzzy.) Ordered to find the person responsible for the train’s bombing, Stevens – who “dies” after eight minutes in this other man’s shoes – is transported to the train disaster again and again and again, slightly altering events with each new visit, and continually perplexing the pretty woman (Michelle Monaghan) who appears to be traveling with him. There’s more to it than than, of course, but Jones – following his heralded yet under-seen Sam Rockwell vehicle *Moon* –
keeps the excitement percolating, and despite the awkward shoehorning of Gyllenhaal’s and Monaghan’s inevitable romance into the film’s opening reels (the soundtrack introduces its romantic-longing music
awfully
early), the film also manages to be unexpectedly moving. Thanks to the cast, it’s also
really-
unexpectedly funny, with Gyllenhaal’s boyish exuberance, Farmiga’s miniature double takes,

and Wright's delirious eccentricity lending more dimensions to these sketch characters than they actually merit. In the end,
Source Code
is really nothing more than a sci-fi
Groundhog Day
without the thematic richness of Harold Ramis' comedy, yet the movie is presented with such assurance and energy and skill that, as popcorn entertainments go, it's close to irresistible.

HOP

Hop tells of a slacker rabbit (voiced by Russell Brand) who wants to ditch his preordained duties as the Easter Bunny for life as a rock 'n' roll drummer, and it opens in his homeland of Rapa Nui, a.k.a. Easter Island. *That's kinda funny*, I thought. It was also about the last kinda-funny moment I enjoyed in this uninspired and deathly dull family outing, despite the frequent laughs and end-credits applause of my screening's youths (who shouldn't necessarily know better) and adult chaperones (who *should*). It's hard to imagine that any movie that finds Hank Azaria doing one of his peerlessly nutty Latin-flavored accents could be this boring. Yet director Tim Hill – of
Alvin & the Chipmunks
and, ugh,
Garfield: A Tail of Two Kitties –
has somehow pulled off the near-impossible; with its bum jokes, halfhearted "action," and typically tacked-on sentiment, you find yourself cringing for gifted human performers Gary Cole, Elizabeth Perkins, Kaley Cuoco, and Chelsea Handler. (You might cringe for lead James Marsden if you were fully convinced that the actor deserved better.) With its candy-colored palette,
Hop
looks yummy enough, but it's a bunny flick with absolutely no kick. How sad to discover that synthetic, charmless, holiday-themed kiddie drivel isn't just for Christmas anymore.