

## Hocus Bogus: "Now You See Me" and "After Earth"

Written by Mike Schulz  
Sunday, 02 June 2013 16:49

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### ***NOW YOU SEE ME***

Given its premise, its cast, and the fact that it's a summertime release without a superhero or a number (or both) in the title, it was easy to feel jazzed about the prospect of *Now You See Me*, director Louis Leterrier's effects-driven caper about larcenous Las Vegas magicians scoring the heist of the century. Unfortunately, it took all of three minutes for that anticipatory excitement to turn, for me, into irritation, which then turned into active aggravation, which then turned into a disengaged torpor that lasted until the end credits rolled. Ta da.

You could hardly accuse *Now You See Me* of not getting down to business right out of the gate, as the film quickly introduces its quartet of shady illusionists (Jesse Eisenberg's cardsharp, Woody Harrelson's mentalist, Isla Fisher's escape artist, and Dave Franco's pickpocket) and establishes the means by which – both individually and as a team called The Four Horsemen – they hoodwink their astonished patrons. Yet something feels wrong from the start. There's so little breathing room between the performers' lines, and their speedy banter is so aggressively, self-consciously "clever," that the movie appears to be running on autopilot even before the start of its formulaic (if wildly implausible) chase-flick narrative, which finds Mark Ruffalo's FBI agent and Mélanie Laurent's Interpol detective acting as Wile E. Coyotes to the magicians' collective Road Runner.

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It's initially entertaining to watch Eisenberg employ his fast-talking gifts – usually reserved for anxious, neurotic comedy – in the role of an über-confident hustler; Harrelson's dry readings deliver some mild amusement; and in a couple of sketchy character roles, Morgan Freeman and Michael Caine seem to be enjoying themselves. But nothing about Leterrier's slick and over-caffeinated presentation gives us any reason to believe in it or connect to it. This is partly because, for a movie dependent on the element of surprise, there's almost no genuine surprise in Leterrier's film; we know in our bones that the tricksters will stay several steps ahead of their pursuers at least until the movie's final minutes, just as we know that the testy comic hostility between Ruffalo and Laurent will lead to an inevitable, pointless romance. (There were groans at my screening when the two finally kissed.)

But it's mostly because the magical acts shown here are inherently unsatisfying, given that the question "How did they do that?" can be easily shrugged off with "Through CGI, dummy." On a couple of occasions, we're shown exactly how The Four Horsemen pull off their extraordinary feats, and the explanations are so ridiculously improbable, if not downright impossible, that you feel more gyped than you would have had the solutions been withheld. Numerous other tricks, however – the sudden on-stage appearance of a teleportation device, Fisher floating upward in an eight-foot-tall soap bubble, the Horsemen vanishing after leaping off a Manhattan skyscraper – are devoid of wonder because they come off as effects conjured solely through computers, and God knows we're all used to those by now. (In a season that's thus far given us Iron Man, the Starship *Enterprise*, and Baz Luhrmann's roaring '20s, Isla Fisher in a soap bubble is hardly the miracle of miracles.) Through the course of *Now You See Me*, Eisenberg's catchphrase is "The closer you look, the less you see." Sadly, that also holds true for *Now You See Me* itself.



### **AFTER EARTH**

Not so long ago, and despite our frequent disappointment with the results, M. Night Shyamalan movies were treated as events. You have to really search, however, to find the man's name anywhere near the advertising for his science-fiction adventure *After Earth*, and this consequently begs a question: Has the writer/director of

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*The Last Airbender*, *The Happening*,  
and

*Lady in the Water*

finally shepherded a movie so irredeemably awful that even  
*he's*

ashamed of it? An excruciatingly slow, unbearably sentimental outing in which young Jaden Smith alternately evades and battles aliens while wrestling with his daddy issues (personified by Jaden's actual daddy, Will Smith), the film – with its witless genre tropes and incoherently staged action and laughably stilted dialogue – probably would've been a joke under any circumstances. Yet it takes a truly special talent to make the Smiths as thoroughly unappealing on-screen as they are here, and in his direction of

*After Earth*

's  
father-and-son team, Shymalan may have actually set a new (low) bar for himself.

For the most part, the visual effects aren't bad, and every once in while – as when the camera gracefully lingers on the fallen, 10-foot-long body of what looks like an extraterrestrial bald eagle – we're treated to an image that boasts some lovely, unforced sci-fi grandeur. But there's absolutely nothing unforced about Will Smith here; with his injured general consigned to a downed spaceship's cockpit for most of the movie's length, the star delivers grim pronouncements and motivational declarations with humorless, unvarying severity, and you could lead a trucking convoy through his pauses between sentences. (Will Smith has made bad movies in the past, but never before has he seemed to have such a bad time in one.) Jaden, meanwhile, appears to have misplaced every dollop of charm and naturalism on display in *The Pursuit of Happyness*

and 2010's

*Karate Kid*

remake. With his eyes watering and chin aquiver, and whiny-voiced and grating when he's not being morose and petulant, the kid is difficult to both look at and listen to, which just makes the film's conception as a Jaden Smith vanity project all the more lamentable. (Will and wife Jada Pinkett Smith are two of the movie's co-producers – or, if you'd rather, co-enablers.) The only remotely interesting thing about

*After Earth*

's lead is his outfit, which changes hues depending on the threat level surrounding him, like an interstellar mood ring redesigned as a unitard. At one point, to Jaden's concern, it turns completely black. For the 100 minutes of Shymalan's latest, that would've been the color of my unitard, too.

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