Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 18 December 2001 18:00

VANILLA SKY

Vanilla Sky could be subtitled *Jerry Maguire Climbs Jacob's Ladder to Reveal What Dreams May Come* , and if that's not enough reason to run for the theatre's exits, the movie's actual presentation should be.

It takes a truly gifted filmmaking team to create a work this stupefying, and it provides a unique challenge to a film critic: You want to warn people away from the movie, surely, but part of you also wants people to view it for themselves so they can witness how sublimely ridiculous it actually is. Based on Alejandro Amenabar's *Abre Los Ojos* (Open Your Eyes) from 1997, the new version has been written and directed by Cameron Crowe, and while Mr. Crowe has proven himself phenomenally gifted with the gentle comedy of
Say Anything ...
,
Jerry Maguire
, and parts of
Almost Famous
(the new-to-DVD "bootleg" cut of which is vastly superior to last year's Oscar-winning version), he's completely at sea in this romantic-drama-comedy-thriller-sci-fi morality tale. Then again: My God, who wouldn't be?

As *Sky* sycophant Peter Travers exclaims in the film's print ads, the movie features "mind-bending secrets no review should give away," but here goes: We are introduced to David Aames, some sort of publishing mogul so rich and powerful and cocky and beautiful that he's inevitably played by Tom Cruise. He has ongoing, apparently casual sex with gal pal Julie (Cameron Diaz) but finds himself falling for Sofia (Penelope Cruz), a sultry knockout he meets at his 33rd birthday bash. After one amazing, intercourse-free night with her, David is surprised to find Julie waiting for him outside Sofia's apartment. Not picking up on the signals we in the audience are registering – Cameron Diaz's devastated, unbalanced anger is the strongest emotion in the film – David jumps in her car for a short ride, which ends in a suicidal crash, leaving David physically and emotionally scarred.

That's precisely when the film stops making sense, and we have about 90 minutes left to go.

From there, we're presented with a series of bizarrely edited scenes involving: 1) David's need to reunite with Sofia, despite his now-gruesome looks; 2) several plastic surgeons' attempts to bring David back to Full Handsomeness; 3) the board members of David's magazines plotting a takeover; 4) David's lawyer (Kurt Russell) trying to clear David of a murder charge; 5) the possibility that Julie isn't really dead; 6) the possibility that Sofia doesn't really exist; and 7) a futuristic business operation, straight out of *A.I.* , involving cryogenic freezing and the supplanting of dreams. All of which should lead any sane viewer to one logical response: "
Huh?
"

If you want to truly appreciate the beauty of an inventive dreamscape like *Mulholland Dr.* or the succulently tricky plotting of a
Memento
, you should catch
Vanilla Sky
immediately to see what can result when works of this sort fall completely flat. It's bad enough that the plotting makes no sense – not even at the end, when all the film's questions are "resolved" for us – but Cameron Crowe shows little instinct for the fantastic; one lovely scene of Cruise running in a deserted Times Square has some resonance, but in general his staging is torpid, and he draws out his scenes beyond any possible interest. (The film probably wouldn't be any better with 40 minutes shaved off, but it might at least
move
.) Most astonishingly for a Cameron Crowe film, his dialogue borders on the unspeakable; when Cruise and Cruz gush to each other, "We'll meet in the next life, when we are cats," you'll be hard-pressed to decide whether to roll your eyes, laugh out loud, or wish for someone to smack Crowe in the head.

At the very least in a Cameron Crowe picture, you know you'll be treated to some terrific performers, and in addition to Diaz, we're given Jason Lee, whose sweetly naturalistic style allows him to come off as the only human being in the film, and those delightfully eccentric redheads Tilda Swinton and Alicia Witt make cameo appearances. But they can't compensate for the life-sucking vacuum at *Vanilla Sky*'s center, namely Cruise and Cruz. Tom might be doing a parody of a Tom Cruise performance, with his hammy egocentrism and wailing-little-girl tantrums, and Penelope is, as usual, an incredible drain on the film. Yes, she's beautiful, but until she learns to inflect her line readings with some actual
emotion
, she'll never be a star in American movies.
Vanilla Sky
dithers around until its merciful conclusion, at which point you're just confused all over again; it's incoherent works like this that make movie audiences afraid of anything outside the norm.

NOT ANOTHER TEEN MOVIE

The loopy metaphysics of *Vanilla Sky* can give you a headache, and they're currently being matched by those in the bizarre celluloid entity entitled *Not Another Teen Movie*, which intends to parody two decades' worth of youth flicks in the span of 80 minutes. But I'm not sure if "parody" is the right word, because *Teen Movie*'s filmmakers aren't satirizing a genre so much as they're *reproducing* the films they're sending up, sometimes word for word, sometimes even actor for actor. (Paul Gleason shows up, not merely riffing on his signature role, Dick Vernon from *The Breakfast Club*, but actually *playing* Dick Vernon again.) The five scribes behind *Teen Movie* include some of the screenwriters of the *Scary Movie*s, and their latest work proves that they're still clueless about what truly constitutes a parody. Instead of providing us with gags that play off the genre clichés we're all tired of – as the Zucker/Abrahams/Zucker team did with *Airplane!* and *The Naked Gun* – they simply present the clichés themselves, as if the mere sight of The Cocky Blond Guy, The Token Black Guy, or The Bitchy Cheerleader were enough to elicit peals of laughter. Once again, the screenwriters condescend to their teen audience with their film's ultra-obviousness – "You recognize this plot from *She's All That*? Good for you!" – and take all the sting out of satire, sending-up works like *American Pie* and *Bring It On*. What's the point of satirizing films that were never taken seriously in the first place?

Admittedly, *Not Another Teen Movie* is easier to sit through than either of the *Scary Movie*s. It shows traces of wit in the casting of ‘80s icons such as Molly Ringwald and Mr. T; the cast, while not filled with the strongest of comic performers, is certainly game; and you can’t hate a movie that’s at least film-savvy enough to have its football team play in Harry Dean Stadium. It is, though, an awkwardly handled and thoroughly redundant work,
especially
if you’ve seen the movies it’s “satirizing”; after you’ve sat through your 20th teen flick starring Freddie Prinze Jr. and some interchangeable brunette, is a film parody at all necessary?