

FAN THE FIRE

#18
MARCH 2009

M A G A Z I N E



WATCHMEN

AFTER THE HYPE, COURT CASES AND DEVELOPMENT DELAYS, THE MOST ANTICIPATED FILM OF 2009 HITS SCREENS AT LAST

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After a slow start to the year, things are at last really starting to kick into shape. We've just had the Oscars, and a huge congratulations to the all-conquering Slumdog Millionaire, then London Fashion Week strolled into town, with a slew of designers making a real name for themselves, and at the many after-parties, a ton of celebrities making a shame of themselves.

In the entertainment industry, the big news this month is our cover story. Arguably the most anticipated film of the whole year, and without doubt set to be a box office storm, graphic novel adaptation Watchmen hits the cinema, and we've got one of the very first full reviews for you to sink your teeth into. Elsewhere in film, we examine how the Oscars voting system is letting some fantastic filmmakers down, we preview alien capers Planet 51 and Monsters Vs. Aliens and review the fantastic American Teen, which at last gets a release in the UK, low-budget horror Hush and high-budget thriller The International. Continuing our monthly DVD giveaway trend, this month we're offering up Futurama: Into The Wild Green Yonder.

In our music section, the next great talent out of Long Beach, California, and recently chosen by Beck as his new touring guitarist, Jessica Dobson and her solo outfit Deep Sea Diver, take centre with the forthcoming release of their debut EP 'New Caves'. Elsewhere we review new records from Red Light Company, The Von Bondies and U2, plus live shows from The Cribs and Late Of The Pier.

Our art feature this issue comes from contributor of the month, Cale Atkinson. Producing fantastically imaginative designs, Cale is quickly garnering the reputation he deserves.

Stepping out of the cold and into the summer, Jaime Martinez's wonderful style spread lets you forget about the cold winter and start thinking about your summer trend.

Enjoy the issue.

Sam Bathe



CONTRIBUTOR OF THE MONTH



After working in animation for several years producing designs for the likes of Kellogg's, Leapfrog, Fisherprice and Tighe Publishing, Disney at last snapped up **Cale Atkinson** to work as part of their Club Penguin.

The talented animator, now based in Kelowna, Canada, boasts a stunning portfolio, with further talents running into writing and video projects, and contributes to various websites and blogs online. Don't be surprised if you see him soon scaling the ladder at Disney.

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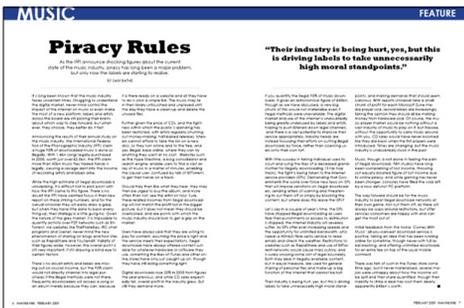
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RISING STARS

I managed to catch Delta Spirit while they were in the UK last month, and boy are they something special. Their show at 229 was mesmerising so hopefully it won't be too long before they're back. Sofia Mayson, via email

The inside word is that they'll be back in April.



WORRIES OVER?

Taken to court by the IFPI, the Pirate Bay might be no more in a matter of weeks, so the music industry's worries might be over. Or will they? I couldn't agree more with your article last month, of course piracy is harming the music industry, but never has 1m pirated albums meant 1m lost sales. And what the IFPI also need to realise, if they do shut down the Pirate Bay, it will be a matter of days before a replacement pops up, or a similar website becomes

the new dominant force. Chase Billingford, via email

The music industry have been misguided for a long time now and need to take a step back and realise piracy will never go away, instead they need improve their own services so music listeners don't feel the need to illegally download the latest album or past classics.



JAMES OF THE DEAD

I can't quite decide if I'm looking forward to Lesbian Vampire Killers, sure it looks like James Corden and Matthew Horne's carbon copy project of Shaun Of The Dead, but in a way the mock trailer looks like a lot of fun. I guess we'll just have to wait and see if it's any good. Sarah Highton, via email



OSCAR WINS

I liked The Curious Case Of Benjamin Button a lot, but I'm pleased Slum-

dog Millionaire went home with all the Oscars ahead of Brad Pitt's time-transcending adventure. The idea is brilliant, but I couldn't quite catch onto the narration and get-out advancement device of a diary. The special effects though were certainly remarkable, and I actually thought they had put make-up on Brad Pitt and somehow made him look shorter for the early and ending scenes. A remarkable achievement in CGI, and fully deserving of all the praise being thrown its way. Lucy Redbridge, via email

It's a pity Benjamin Button didn't quite come together because we could have had a true classic on our hands.



DEVILISH ART

I'm not sure how you keep finding the contributors for your art spreads, but last month's was one of the most breathtaking yet, and more so it's pleasing to see artists like Daniel Mumford being offered work by big companies such as the record labels he has worked with. The internet era provides an outlet for those who would previously find it difficult to promote their work, and that if anything, is one of the best things about the advancement of technology. If only I were as talented and could show off my work too. Tom Spheres, via email

OUR OTHER SITES...



Out from the ocean

Beck's new guitarist, Jessica Dobson, takes her solo project Deep Sea Diver onto high ground with hugely anticipated EP 'New Caves'

WORDS **SAM BATHE** PHOTOGRAPHY **ADRIENNE V.**

Deep Sea Diver first popped up a few years ago, back in 2004, quickly making in-roads into the California music scene with a selection of lo-fi, sparky pop before Jessica Dobson signed what she thought was the perfect deal with Atlantic Records. But then nothing. A handful of brilliant tracks lay on her MySpace page but an album never materialised, scrapped by Dobson as she was unhappy with her own output, with a second attempt hitting equal trouble.

News was few and far between, fans waited patiently for updates that never came and the initial buzz that surrounded the talented musician slowly died down, until May 12th 2008. Coincidentally also her birthday, Jessica's music career exploded in seconds at the sound of a phone call.

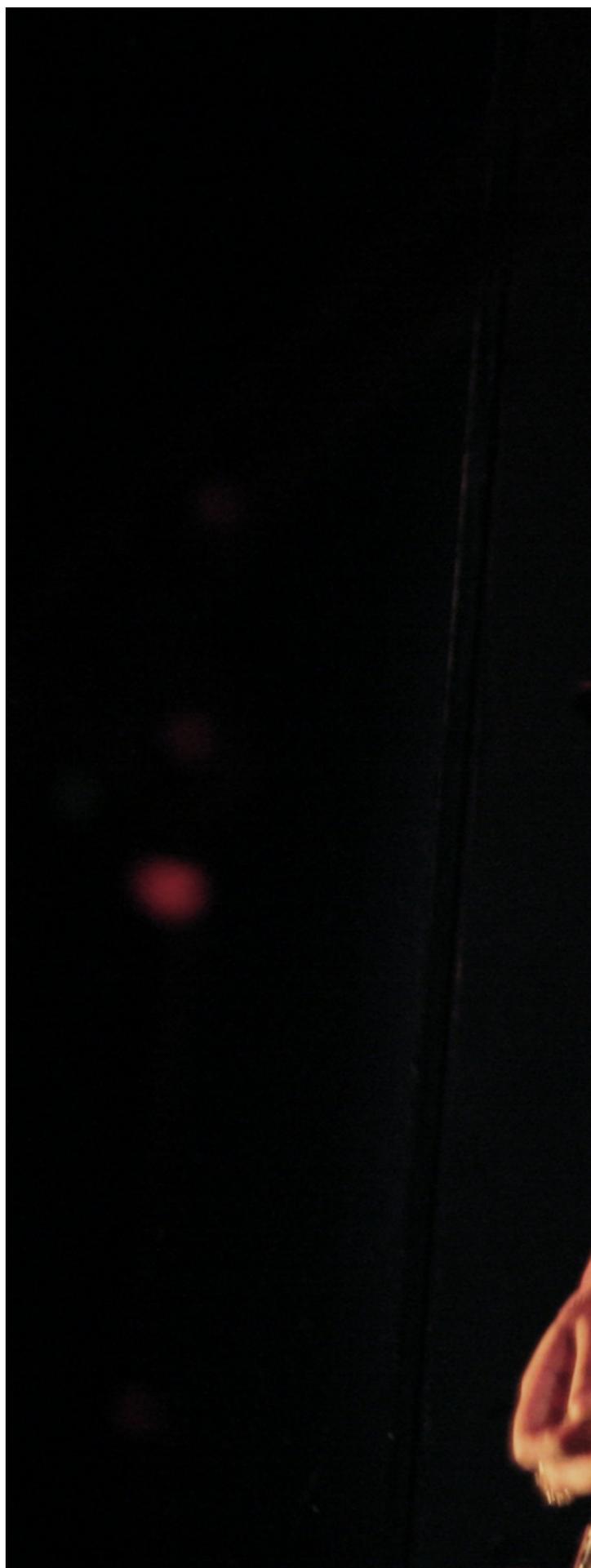
After applying to become Beck's new live guitarist, Jessica held little real hope of being selected but a few months down the line and she was side-by-side with the music legend, playing the Hollywood Bowl, and furthermore, released by Atlantic to regain her freedom.

With fantastic performances on the vast Beck tour, Jessica drew a great deal of praise herself, and interest in Deep Sea Diver again started to pick up. With a few new tracks to join some of her best from the last few years of writing and recording, and a sound now somewhere between Mystery Jets, Emily Haines And The Soft Skeleton and Cold War Kids, Deep Sea Diver's long overdue first proper release is at last a reality.

Finished with the Beck tour for now, Deep Sea Diver are eagerly readying their 'New Caves' EP and at last put a finished product in the hands of an ever-increasing fan base. Calling on friends from Cold War Kids, plus Marika and Two Guns, March 5th is a big day for Jessica and Deep Sea Diver, with the stage set for them to play The Art Theatre in hometown Long Beach, a record release show for their 'New Caves' EP.

What's next? Well, if Beck doesn't whisk her away again, hopefully Jessica will put her time towards Deep Sea Diver's tricky debut album and start some tours across America, and if not, at least there is something to tide fans over this time.

DEEP SEA DIVER PLAY AN EP RELEASE SHOW FOR 'NEW CAVES' ON MARCH 5TH AT THE ART THEATRE, LONG BEACH, CA.







HOWLING BELLS
'RADIO WARS'
(INDEPENDIENTE)

One of the class of 2006, Howling Bells' sophomore album feel grander in scale if lacking the signature tracks boasted by their self-titled debut. Singer Juanita Stein though proves stunning throughout and 'Radio Wars' is a definite step forward.

★★★★★



THE VON BONDIES
'LOVE, HATE AND THEN THERE'S YOU'
(MAJORDOMO)

Returning with a new line-up, The Von Bondies pick up right where they left off after breakthrough album 'Pawn Shoppe Heart' to produce arguably their finest album to date, never letting up on their rock sensibilities.

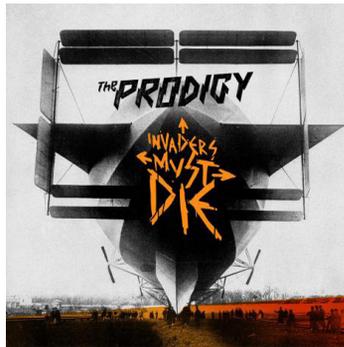
★★★★★



U2
'NO LINE ON THE HORIZON'
(MERCURY)

Despite earning more criticism than praise with his never-ending ego trip, and apparently money raising for the third world while he's at it, Bono and U2 churn out another album for the masses, more world music-influenced this time, but still the same old aging rock mentality.

★★★★★



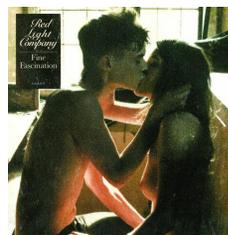
THE PRODIGY
'INVADERS MUST DIE'
(COOKING VINYL)

Since they stormed the scene over 10 years ago now, thrash-electronica has developed somewhat but sadly these rave legends can't quite keep up. 'Invaders Must Die' is hard on your ears, and not in the right way despite input from Dave Grohl and James Rushent.

★★★★★



RED LIGHT COMPANY
'FINE FASCINATION'
(LAVOLTA)



After posting an advert online for a bassist, frontman Richard Frenneaux might not have been expecting to find a new band mate across the pond.

After playing a track Frenneaux had written, Wyoming-based Shawn Day set his mind on joining the band, messaged that he was not messing around, and flew over to the UK for a show just three days later. If anything sums up Red Light Company's passion for music, that would be it.



Already compared to Editors, whom they supported on tour early last year, Arcade Fire and a thread of Kings Of Leon, Red Light Company produce rock with a lighter edge, a remarkably cultured sound for a band still so new.

Their music is multi-layered and never boring, though they do run a little wide of the scale a couple of times, as you'd expect from a debut album. Some of their songs, however, are already setting Red Light Company on the edge of a much larger calling.

With the instantly memorable euphoric choruses of 'With Lights Out', you can already picture the five-piece on

stage at festivals this summer, and not just as a tiny billing.

In 'Scheme Eugene' 'Arsts And Crafts' and 'Meccano', with Red Light Company's cultured hooks forever passing you by, you'll soon be lost in the music.

It wouldn't be a debut album without a couple of sticking points and some of the tracks are a little samey to say the least, or not composed with quite the success of the rest of the album, but no doubt Red Light Company boast real talent, real ambition and have a great future ahead.

★★★★★

THE CRIBS HEAVEN, LONDON 10/02/09

In an expectedly chaotic tiny London gig, The Cribs tested new material with now full-time member Johnny Marr.

Joking at one point, though on recent form with very good merit, that they are better than U2, the Jarman brothers plus Marr were never anything but brilliant on their live comeback.

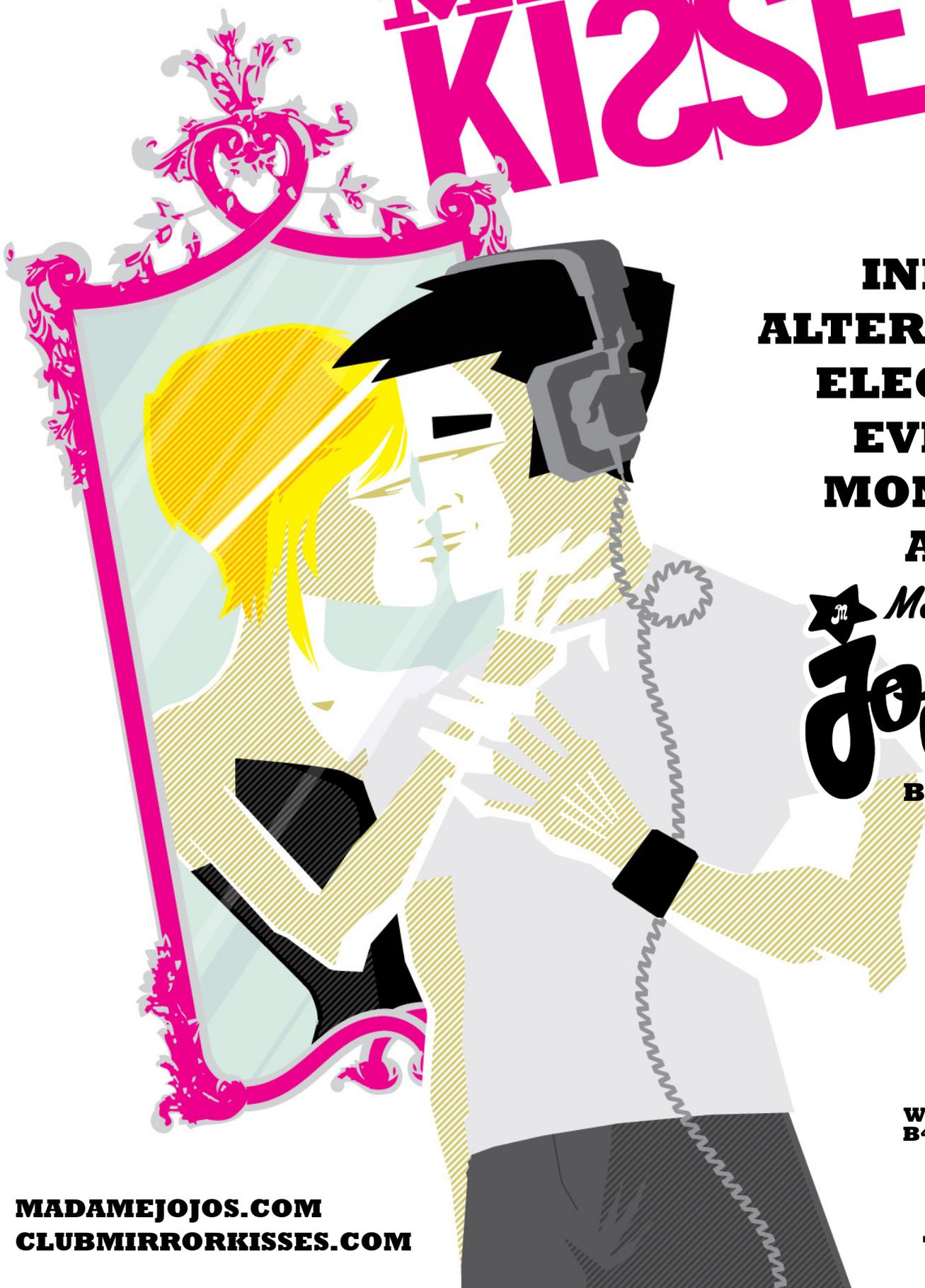
Pleasing fans with a wide variety of hits from their previous three albums, The Cribs proved once more why they're the most electrifying live act around, and only increased anticipation for their fourth LP, due for release later this year.

LATE OF THE PIER FORUM, LONDON 17/02/09

Before escaping the British isles for their first major American tour, Late Of The Pier, headlined their biggest show to date, proving dance-punk is equally as good live as on record.

Charging about on stage with the energy we've come to expect from the young Castle Donington four-piece, an enthusiastic crowd were happy to lap up tracks from their critically acclaimed debut album 'Fantasy Black Channel', including hits 'Space & The Woods', 'Focker' and 'Bathroom Gurgle', before rounding off the set with a euphoric finale.

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Best failure in a foreign language

As the IFPI announce shocking figures about the current state of the music industry, piracy has long been a major problem, but only now the labels are starting to realise.

BY CHANDNI SAHNI

The moment every actor, director, screenwriter waits for is undoubtedly the Oscars. Not just a night for the rich and famous to dress up and head to some of the most elaborate parties in the world; it is the one moment that makes all the stories written about them and all the trials and tribulations that come with fame, worth it. It's where they are recognised as 'serious actors'. But often we are all too quick to look at the glitz and glamour behind the little golden statues, and overlook an entire system riddled with flaws that leave many hardworking and talented actors, directors and screenwriters unappreciated and forgotten.

Talented filmmakers across the world are most frequently passed in the 'Best Foreign Language Film' category. Reserved for films made outside of the USA

The fact that such a imposing restriction had been put on the award took away the artistic licence and the freedom that we so often associate with film making, at least if the filmmakers were hoping to be rightly recognised for their great efforts.

Despite film industries growing across the world, and a vast selection of films pushing for nomination from their home industry, the Academy limits entry to only one film from each country, grossly unfair considering central organisations will likely favour production they were specifically involved.

Later accused of gross bias, the Indian committee once put forward a film made by someone who had a close personal relationship with those making the

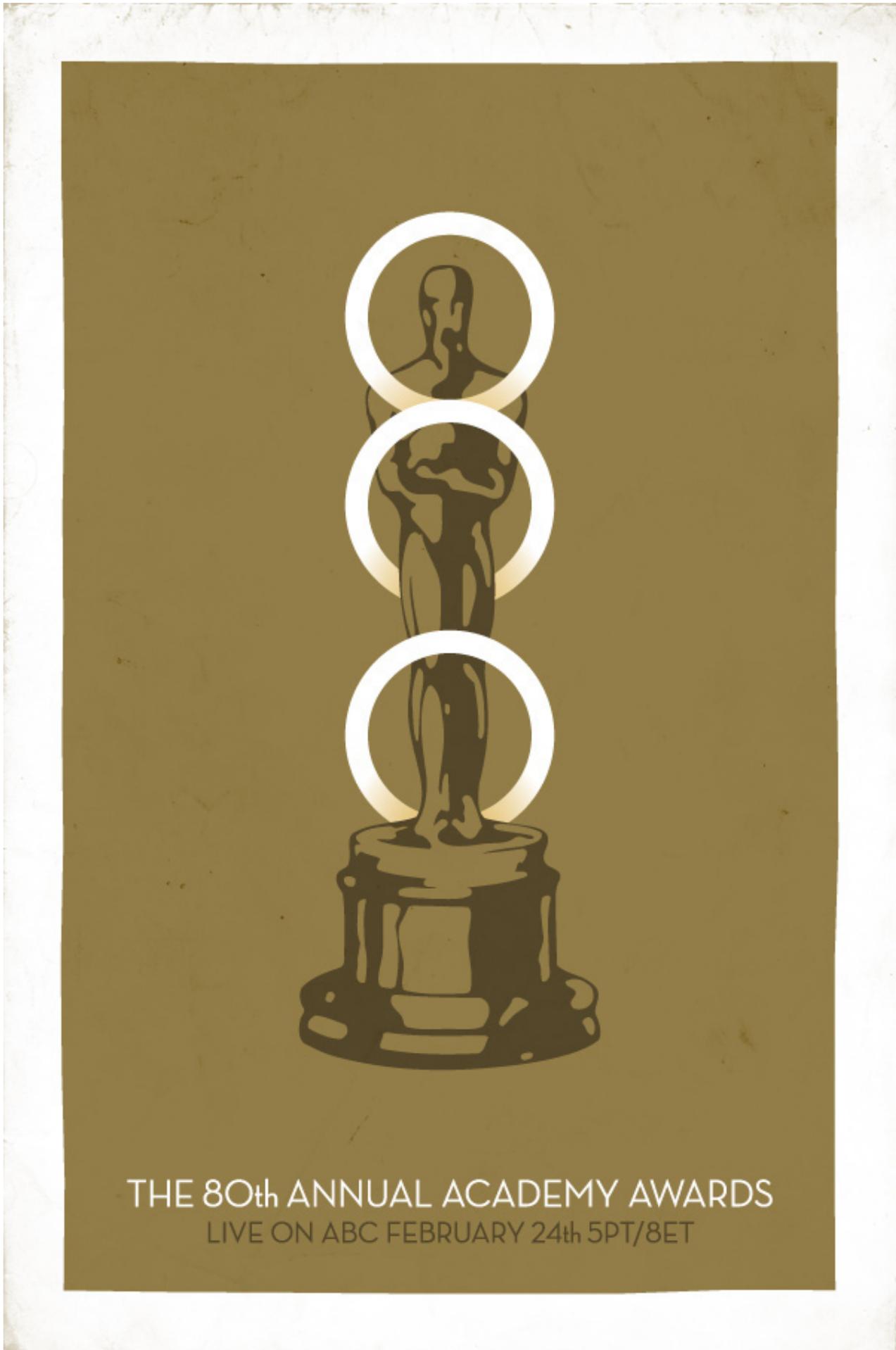
“...stunning Italian release Gomorrah was put forward for the Oscars but didn't even make the long-list of contenders, never mind the short-list and eventual nominations.”

with a non-English dialogue, this award has in fact only been around since 1956, a fair few years after the first Academy Awards ceremony in 1929, and the restrictions and conditions are all too over-bearing compared with the simplicity of the main gongs.

Rejecting submission of one of 2007's best received films, *Lust, Caution*, the Academy claimed a handful of key crew members were not locals and asked Taiwan to withdraw their entry. In the years previous, however, the farce has been even larger. Changed only in 2006, films that were previously submitted had to be in the first language of the submitting country, obstructing many amazing films, merely because their dialogue not in a language native to the country of production.

submission. However, even if your film does make it into the selection pot, making the shortlist is far from guaranteed, even for the dead certainties.

Nominated for a Golden Globe in a similar category, stunning Italian release *Gomorrah* was put forward for the Oscars but didn't even make the long-list of contenders, never mind the short-list or award nominations. While generally the Academy make good decisions in whom to honour from the film industry for their work in the year just past, just remember when every winner approaches the stage to make their speech, there are another handful of brilliant movies out there, overlooked by the Oscars, but often equally deserving of your time. ■



THE 80th ANNUAL ACADEMY AWARDS
LIVE ON ABC FEBRUARY 24th 5PT/8ET

PLANET 51

The first feature by new development house Ilion Animation Studios, Planet 51 is an ambitious project out to establish Ilion's early reputation. One thing it isn't lacking is an all-star cast. Featuring Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson and Jessica Biel in lead roles, it also sports Justin Long, Gary Oldman and John Cleese.

The plot is a carefully balanced seesaw that could come down either side of the quality mark but at least brings a great idea it is surprising we haven't seen many times before now. The narrative revolves around an usual role reversal in which the viewer is introduced to a peaceful, white-picket fenced alien civilisation (the titular planet) which is then discovered by human invaders, setting a scene brimming with potential for subversive gags and self-aware humour.

The trailer currently doing the rounds online gets a few laughs, particularly in the form of an homage to the Alien series and an amusing gravity walk gag. The visuals look sharp and full of character so we might just have the next pretender to Pixar's undoubted future crown Up on our hands.

PLANET 51 WILL BE RE-RELEASED ON NOVEMBER 20TH.





MONSTERS VS. ALIENS

When UFOs begin to attack earth, naturally the government decides the best answer is to let loose an array of monsters held captive in a secret military base, and leave the aliens and Earth's own irregular army fight it out. Starring Reese Witherspoon as Ginormica, a woman who grows almost fifty feet in size after she is exposed to a mysterious substance contained within a meteorite, and an eclectic assortment of other 'monsters',

Monsters vs. Aliens takes intergalactic warfare to the next level. Ridiculous premise aside, it has at least given the developers ample excuse to put together a delightful selection of imaginative characters, voiced by an exciting supporting cast including the aforementioned Reese Witherspoon, Hugh Laurie, Stephen Colbert and Paul Rudd. Developed with another new 3-D technology, Monsters vs. Aliens will be yet another crack at getting the extra cinematic dimension right, though here's hoping for a 2-D version for the purists and non-converts.

**MONSTERS VS. ALIENS
WILL BE RELEASED ON
MARCH 27TH IN AMERICA
AND APRIL 3RD IN
THE UK.**





WATCHMEN

Directed by: Zack Snyder Starring: Jackie Earle Haley, Jeffrey Dean Morgan, Patrick Wilson, Carla Gugino, Malin Akerman, Billy Crudup, Matthew Goode, Stephen McHattie, Matt Fewer & Laura Mennell
Studio: Warner Bros. Pictures Distributor: Paramount Pictures Release: March 6

Eagerly yearning to become 2009's Dark Knight, and once again break through into the public domain with an adult, and very powerful graphic novel adaptation, *Watchmen* is easily the year's most anticipated film to date.

Based on the hugely celebrated comic book series, now clumped together to produce one breathtaking graphic novel, *Watchmen* in its original form has won acclaim from around the World, picked, no less, as one of *Time* magazine's 100 greatest English language novels written since 1923. It is no surprise then that when producer Lawrence Gordon took on the project the very year it the novels were first published, way back in 1986, he wanted to get it right, but the film has hit a fair few hitches along the way.

Jumping from studio to studio, director to director, at one point the once attached-Terry Gilliam called the novel "unfilmable", with countless actors talked about for the lead roles, original writer denouncing any involvement with the project and just this year, a legal battle between Fox and production company Warner Bros. over who owns the rights to an adaptation, over 20 years on *Watchmen* has somehow made it to the screen, at first glance, unscathed.

Set in an alternate 1985 where Richard Nixon is still United States President and tensions between America and the Soviet Union have reached such heights, leaving a nuclear WWIII as an impending certainty, at least on the streets and a team of renegade, masked heroes had been cleaning up crime off the streets, at least before Nixon's Keene Act outlawed their public deeds.

Called the Minutemen, their existence lies under threat. After former hero the Comedian (Morgan), a bulky, all-action enforcer is murdered, vigilante Rorschach (Haley) takes up the trail to track down the killer. Bearing an ever changing inkblot mask, Rorschach couldn't care less that his actions are outlawed, warning his fellow heroes of a plot to kill them all, as slowly but surely, hits are attempted on the rest of the caped crusaders.

With the battle for inter-continental control brewing in the background, Rorschach's investigation throws up twists and turns as the heroes are once again required to don their masks to protect their own wellbeing and the future of our population.

Sticking closely to the tone of the graphic novel, *Watchmen* is a very dark, mysterious and brooding experience. With director Zack Snyder's storyboarding modelled closely on the comics and with key scenes translated near perfectly, fans can rest assured, *Watchmen* is faithful to their precious graphic novels, that does not, however, answer whether the film is just as good.

Similar to the output of *Sin City*, at times *Watchmen* feels like it follows the graphic novel a little too much. The film is gorgeously shot with a strong ethereal sense to it at times, but it becomes over-stylised and you feel disconnected from the film, with the narrative lacking emotion.

The complex and very dense story has though been translated well. Early scripts were re-written, re-thought and some scrapped altogether, but the final thing gives a deep, wide-ranging plot that crams as much as possible into the opportunities of a film. Across the board, the characters are portrayed with assurance and realism, from scouling Rorschach to picture perfect heroes Nite Owl (Wilson) and Silk Spectre (Akerman), the sickly sweet, and publicly declared hero Ozymandias (Goode) and the one Minuteman with genuine power, Doctor Manhattan (Crudup), a glowing blue, radiation altered scientist able to change his size, teleport and control any object.

Despite the great performances, slick direction and snappy script, *Watchmen* can prove slightly overbearing at times, even for those familiar with the graphic novel. Squeezed such a multilayered plot into a film was always going to be an enviable task, and keeping up for a very lengthy 163 minutes is not always a relaxing experience, especially given the very stylised narration.

Zack Snyder has done an excellent job, taking a well-renowned graphic novel and adapting a very accurate screen representation, and despite its on-going drawbacks, *Watchmen* is far from an awful film, going some way to matching the hype surrounding the project. While it lacks the energy and one electric performance found in *The Dark Knight*, the sheer grandeur of the film, vast plot and uncompromisingly dark action and fight sequences make *Watchmen* an experience you'd be wrong to miss on the big screen.

★★★★☆



REVIEWS





MARLEY & ME

Directed by: David Frankel Starring: Owen Wilson, Jennifer Aniston, Eric Dane, Clarke Peters, Alan Arkin, Nathan Gamble & Haley Bennett Studio: Regency Enterprises Distributor: 20th Century Fox Release: Out now (USA) March 13 (UK)

Breaking records in America for taking the biggest gross on Christmas Day in box office history, you'd expect *Marley & Me* to be the fun-loving family story suggested by the poster campaign. Moving to Florida to take up jobs at local newspapers, John (Wilson) and Jennifer (Aniston) are a burgeoning young couple with a fantastic life ahead of them. Crossing job and house off her wish list, Jennifer's next move is to start a family, but daunted by the possibility of fatherhood, John surprises his wife with a puppy, that unbeknown to him, will change their life forever.

Failing to ask why cute little Labrador Marley was a knock-off price, after taking him home they realise the little hell raiser has the energy

of a jackrabbit and the appetite to match. Tearing up the house in such an innocent way that the couple still fall in love with cute little face, but when the kids at last start popping along, his powerful impression in their home, doesn't always look so secure.

Certainly not the family movie you might have expected, *Marley & Me* gives an, at times, frank look at the life of a young married couple and their growth together, with a dog. Though the laughs steadily pop along, *Marley & Me* delivers an equal dose of moments to shock and force you to take a step back.

As ever, Owen Wilson fills the charming male lead working his way up

the journalism ladder taking inspiration from his never quiet dog. Jennifer Aniston is not quite as successful. Always feeling like there is something lacking from the performance, *Marley & Me* is another question mark over whether she'll ever feel quite as comfortable on the big screen as she did in *Friends*.

Despite the lack of rip-roaring laughs, *Marley & Me* is a very entertaining film, that will charm you before you know it. As the closing credits draw in, you'll feel a surprising pull towards the young family that if not generating classic, at least is nothing to be ashamed of as a box office record holder.

★★★★★



AMERICAN TEEN

Directed by: Nanette Burstein Starring: Hannah Bailey, Colin Clemens, Geoff Haase, Megan Krizmanich, Mitch Reinholt & Jake Tusing
 Studio: 57th & Irving Productions Distributor: Paramount Vantage Release: Out now (USA) March 6 (UK)

At a time when reality TV has somewhat burst its bubble, you might have been surprised to find Oscar-nominated Nanette Burstein's next project in following around five high school kids, documenting their final year of high school.

Seeking out the perfect school, Burstein chose Warsaw Community High School in Warsaw, Indiana, for her latest feature, examining how five seemingly stereotype students live and deal with the troubles of senior year. The rebel, Hannah, the jock, Colin, the popular girl, Megan, the heartthrob, Mitch and the nerd, Jake.

Starting off with just one camera crew, as the would-be stars slowly

grew more comfortable being filmed, Burstein brought in more crew with cameras following each of them every day. Though later in the film this can make the footage seem a little contrived with *The Hills*-esque cameras on each side of a phone call, it enabled Burstein to delve deeper into her central characters' emotions and motivations.

Following around a group of burgeoning young adults with the thirst for life, you'll find yourself really feeling for the characters by the end of the film, even Megan, the spoilt rich kid who thinks she is better than her peers, such is *American Teen*'s heartfelt, and very honest, pull.

The film feels very intimate with a

powerful conclusion as the graduates all head off their own way.

Cutting the film to an hour and a half without feeling like you missed a moment of the whole year, the 10-strong editorial team deserve special praise given that Burstein reportedly shot over 1,000 hours of footage, balancing hilarious quirks from the parents with childish behaviour of the students and a tearjerker ending.

Engrossing to watch, and enthralling throughout, you'll struggle to find a more involving and watchable documentary all year, or better documentary at all.

★★★★★

HUSH

Directed by: Mark Tonderai Starring: William Ash, Christine Bottomley, Andreas Wisniewski & Claire Keelan
 Studio: Warp X Distributor: Optimum Releasing
 Release: March 13 (UK) TBC (USA)

It is strange to think in this frequently money-orientated business that at times budget can be inversely proportional to quality. In both comedy and horror, often the crude, low budget, but well thought out productions are the most successful, and Hush shows no sign of bucking the trend.

Driving home on the motorway in dark, drab weather conditions, after a van swerves to avoid them, young couple Zakes (Ash) and Beth (Bottomley) are sure they see a caged woman inside as the tailgate lifts for a brief moment. Posed with the decision between driving on by or confronting the driver, Zakes calls the police and does his best to investigate the van, without alerting the driver to his suspicions. After a couple of close calls, he feels he has done all he can until Beth goes missing at a service centre and the task of stopping the driver is no-one else's but his own.

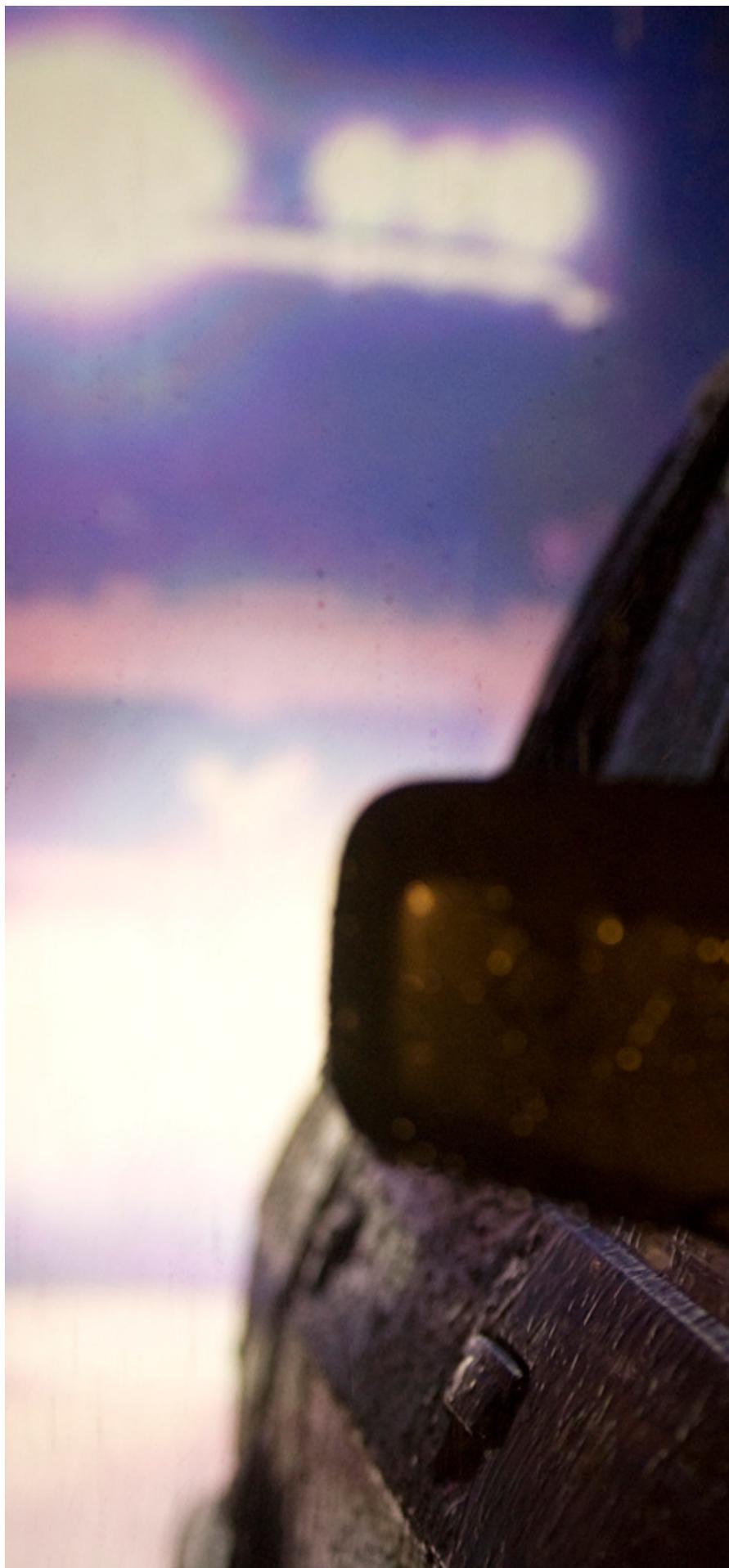
An excellent low-budget British horror, Hush is a remarkable achievement for director Mark Tonderai in his first feature film. The film is perfectly shot, making use of the unsurprisingly awful British weather to create an intimidating atmosphere and unrelenting tension. When Zakes fears Beth has been kidnapped, the fearsome nature of his task is wholly portrayed to the audience, and you'll feel every restrictive force of the lead pair.

Filed for 38 straight nights, the intensity of the production comes across in William Ash and Christine Bottomley's roles, each giving very unglamorous but thoroughly realistic performances.

Posing the question whether or not you should get involved in a stranger's moment of distress, Hush is a very apt take on society's pen chance to merely walk on by and makes for a compelling tale that you won't want to turn away from for a second.

With use of gore only when necessary, Hush puts to shame big-budget horror productions such as the recent Friday The 13th remake, proving a great script and great concept always trump the mega-bucks.

★★★★★







PUNISHER: WAR ZONE

Directed by: Lexi Alexander Starring: Ray Stevenson, Dominic West, Doug Hutchison, Wayne Knight, Dash Mihok & Julie Benz
 Studio: Lionsgate Distributor: Sony Pictures Entertainment Release: Out now

At last reaching screens over 4 years since *The Punisher* back in 2004, *Punisher: War Zone* had its fair share of difficulties on route to a cinematic release. With actor Thomas Jane pulling out of the project after losing faith with the production staff and writers, when an approved script at last dropped on Lionsgate's desk in 2007 and with a new actor cast in the lead role, principal photography began that October.

Billed as a second reboot, after the original 1989 film and more recent 2004 release, instead *War Zone* does little to re-imagine the comic book character. Re-telling the murder of Frank Castle's family through a couple of very brief flashbacks, *War Zone* largely glosses over the events that turned family man Castle into retribution-driven vigilante crime fighter the Punisher, meaning *War Zone* could easily be noted instead as a sequel to the 2004 film.

The film drops the audience into the life of Frank Castle (Stevenson) sometime after assuming the Punisher character, and pits our hero

against the rising mob bosses of his home city. Shutting down one arm of the Russoti family, he moves on to tackle the new leader, Billy Russofi (West), but after a brutal show-down, can't quite finish the job, and leaves Billy claspng for life, but wildly scarred. Now with a patchwork skin face, Billy takes on the mantle Jigsaw, hell-bent on his own revenge and seeks to putting the Punisher down once and for all.

Desperately trying to clone *The Dark Knight*, *Punisher: War Zone* sadly falls down countless times along the way. Lacking any real depth or emotion, the film packs in 100 kills per minute but doesn't ever feel like it really gets going. After Heath Ledger's magnificent portrayal of the Joker, Jigsaw seems only a poor attempt at a twisted, deformed villain and is badly performed by Dominic West, while the Punisher's grit and determination, never mind a powerful arsenal of weapons, never come close to the intensity and sheer might of Batman.

War Zone is worse than the first Pun-

isher, which though didn't set the world alight, showed a lot of promise, and this is down mainly to the man in the lead role and the writing behind him. In the 2004 film you felt for the Punisher and understood his actions were rightful retribution, in *War Zone*, Stevenson comes across as a man who is acting for good, yes, but going about it in a wholly arrogant and nonchalantly deadly way as Frank Castle feels remarkably shallow.

Though the kill rate is often ludicrous and the film is brutally violent throughout, the action is at least thrilling, and on the whole effectively shot, but *War Zone* still falls a long way short of the quality of the comic books and the more recent film adaptation.

The final damning verdict left by the American box office, whom far from raced out to see it, meaning takings of £8m leave *Punisher: War Zone* the lowest grossing Marvel adaptation to date.

★★★★★



THE INTERNATIONAL

Directed by: Tom Tykwer Starring: Clive Owen, Naomi Watts, Armin Mueller-Stahl, Ulrich Thomson, Brian F. O'Byrne & Patrick Baladi
 Studio: Rose Line Productions Distributor: Sony Pictures Releasing Release: Out now (USA) February 27 (UK)

Aptly released at a time when world banking is in meltdown, *The International* plots that the fictional International Bank of Business and Credit is involved with in underworld crime, arms trade, tactical murder and political coups, with insiders in governments and law enforcement around the world, it's a story that you wouldn't be too surprised to find 'based on a true story' in the opening line. And to some extent, it is. Inspired by Permindex, accused of funding the attempted murder and assassination of French President Charles De Gaulle and American President John F. Kennedy, respectively, and the Bank of Credit and Commerce International's fraudulent activity and arms trade.

After years of suspicion and failed attempts to out the IBBC, Interpol agent Louis Salinger (Owen) and Manhattan assistant DA Eleanor Whitman (Watts) at last start to

make real in-roads into the corrupt organisation. Finding a director willing to leak information, the pair send a colleague to make contact but before he can report the findings, he is swiftly poisoned and the director killed the next day. But as Salinger and Whitman have the IBBC on their toes they keep probing and soon get their chance again to expose their dealings.

Just about doing more than your average intelligent thriller, *The International* has got a strong air of *Bourne* about it, though isn't quite as good as Matt Damon's trilogy, lacking a certain spark.

The plot is strong and as the narrative takes Salinger and Whitman speedily across the continent, taking in stunning sights in Europe and America, *The International* is certainly not devoid of stunning scenery.

The central performances are solid enough, if not fantastic, and the direction is stylish, if not revolutionary, *The International's* star in the crown instead comes from a shoot-out in the New York Guggenheim museum.

Over 16 weeks, a life size replica set was built, torn up by the rampant bullet fire of the scene it was then used for, and the astronomical effort pays off.

You'll be slightly frustrated by the ending, and *The International* leaves itself open to future sequels and what could be a successful franchise. Though in future the bankers could be a lot more ruthless, the film does not have its head in the clouds, making *The International* thoroughly believable if not a mind-blowing experience.

★★★★★

CONFESSIONS OF A SHOPAHOLIC

Directed by: P.J. Hogan Starring: Isla Fisher, Hugh Dancy, Krysten Ritter, Joan Cusack, John Goodman, John Lithgow & Kristin Scott Thomas
Studio: Touchstone Pictures Distributor: Disney Release: Out now

For a long while now, 'chick-flicks' have struggled to push the envelope. From last year's phenomenally average *27 Dresses* to the more recent, and equally tactless *Bride Wars*, the genre is entirely devoid of imagination though still keeps its core following happy.

For those looking in the ever predictable story of girls meets boy, girl likes boy, girl and boy seem destined to be apart, girl and boy end up together, won't stand up time and time again, but there's something about the everlasting romance that has women clawing for more every time. Based on the hugely successful *Shopaholic* book series by Sophie Kinsella, *Confession Of A Shopaholic* chick-flick hoping not to be yet another bland rom-com to throw on the pile.

After her horticultural magazine falls on dire times, shopaholic-in-denial Rebecca Bloomwood (Fisher) might have a wardrobe full of gorgeous clothes but she's heavily in debt and without a pay packet to check at the end of the month.

Dreaming of working for fashion magazine *Alette*, she manages to secure an interview for an open position, but after the place is filled internally, finds herself instead in the office of financial magazine *Successful Savings* with the daunting prospect of selling her less than knowledgeable financial side.

Against all the odds, Rebecca somehow gets the job, and starts a new column, giving understandable financial advice, though despite its popularity, she never manages to sort out her own shopping triggered debt, and her new found success threatens to cave in on itself.

With the customary will-they-won't-they

love interest provided by magazine editor Luke Brandon (Dancy), *Confessions...* takes the usual steps down the chick-flick route, and you could predict the ending within the first 10 minutes, but this shouldn't necessarily put you off the film from the start.

To her credit, and in one of her first leading roles, Isla Fisher shows great charisma in a performance brimming with energy. Despite a script that lacks humour at some point, Fisher is a very watchable presence and keeps the film going during its slow points.

In minor roles Kristin Scott Thomas, Joan Cusack and John Goodman are a joy to behold, despite their characters only sharing a wisp of time in front of the camera. Perhaps a flaw equally in the source material as the film itself, one of the biggest aggravations, beyond the predictability, instead lies with some of the actions of Miss Bloomwood and her overly irrational spending habits. Despite maxing out numerous credit cards, our heroine still spends and spend and spends, leaving you wanting to shake some sense into the character, rather than ambling along with the film, and forgoing all sympathy from the audience when her financial troubles at last start to catch up with her.

At barely sub-two hours, the plot drifts along on auto-pilot for too long for *Confessions Of A Shopaholic* to ever really stand out.

If you are willing to turn your brain off, Fisher makes the film very watchable, but it's core message over materialism and financial stupidity are confused and the film lacks just that few more laughs to tip it above mediocrity.

★★★★★







THE PINK PANTHER 2

Directed by: Harald Zwart Starring: Steve Martin, Jean Reno, Emily Mortimer, Andy Garcia, Alfred Molina, John Cleese & Jeremy Irons
 Studio: Robert Simonds Productions Distributor: Columbia Pictures Release: Out now

Returning for a second in the refreshed film franchise, The Pink Panther reboot series was always due a sequel after the box office success, though critical disapproval, of the 2006 release.

Starring Steve Martin as bumbling French inspector Jacques Clouseau, when precious items go missing across the world, stolen by cat burglar The Tornado, Clouseau must team up with a crack team of detectives to track down the burglar and retrieve the lost treasures.

In a role made famous by Peter Sellers in the original 1960s series, Steve Martin fails to capture the magic he showed glimpses of in 2006. His performance is too stupid for his own good, offering nothing but an ineffective mock-French accent and predictable, and endless, slapstick routines.

As the film develops down the ever predictable path, the plot grows tiresome leaving the audience wishing for an instant conclusion to this flippant spoof spy comedy.

If there is one saving grace, enter Jean Reno. As Clouseau's assistant, Reno is as captivating as ever, giving an understated but always entertaining performance, though he is on screen for a mere flitter compared to the frustrating Martin.

It might just be time to lay the Pink Panther to rest, and not for another revival and a new iteration, it's time Hollywood came up with some new production ideas.

★★★★★



PUSH

Directed by: Paul McGuigan Starring: Chris Evans, Dakota Fanning, Djimon Hounsou, Camilla Belle, Neil Jackson & Corey Stoll
 Studio: Infinity Features Entertainment Distributor: Icon Release: Out now

After popular TV show *Heroes* so successfully captured the super-power idea, during season one at least, it seems like an odd time to release *Push*. Overseen by stylish director Paul McGuigan, last found helming *Lucky Number Slevin*, *Push* imagines a similar world in which a small number of humans boast special abilities.

Ranging from movers, able to move objects without touching them, pushers, able to control people's thoughts and actions, watchers, able to see into the future and bleeders, able to emit a high-pitched sonic vibration which can harm and kill living beings and inanimate objects, plus several others, those with powers are forever on the run from Division, a secret Government organisation testing augmentation drugs on the gifted.

After surviving the experiment, pusher Kira (Belle) escapes Division and stumbles upon mover Nick (Evans) and young watcher Cassie (Fanning), whom make it their duty to hide and protect her, but with Division only ever one step behind, and Kira's two saviours on the search for a case containing \$6m, safety lasts only for a brief moment.

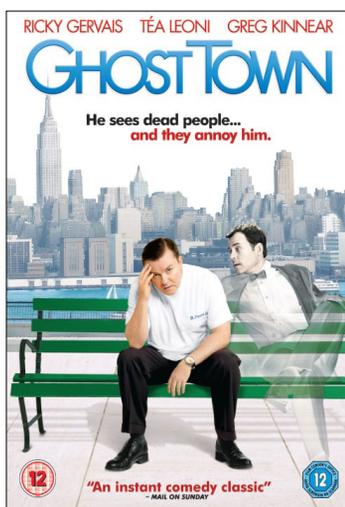
Despite the sorry state *Heroes* finds itself in at the current time, *Push* still can't match the TV show's efforts. McGuigan's picture feels like an art house feature film version of the TV series, following the abilities to a tee and lacking all imagination and creativity.

Though shot with great style and flair, the story lacks depth, *Push* fails to explain or explore the super-powers in any great detail.

The \$6m case plot device feels inadequate to get the film moving, and is thoroughly underwhelming considering those chasing after it have the ability to read people's minds, see into the future or pick up objects without touching them, though the most aggravating moments in *Push* come when the bleeders are on screen. Their high powered screams prove to be some of the most annoying scenes in cinema in recent memory, to the extent you'll contemplate leaving the screening.

Set and filmed on location in bustling Hong Kong, the tight urban street and winding alleyways suit the film perfectly, but this is not enough to save *Push* from the Oscar season garbage dump.

★★★★★



GHOST TOWN

Genuinely funny comedy starring Ricky Gervais as a dentist able to see the dead. The plot sticks at times, but the cast do enough to keep the movie rolling on for an entertaining finish.

Film ★★★★★
Extras ★★★★★



GET SMART

Spoof spy comedy that sees Steve Carell and Anne Hathaway take on the world's terrorists with their own arsenal of secret agent gadgets and gizmos. Sadly, not as good as the original TV show.

Film ★★★★★
Extras ★★★★★



THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT

All action thriller as an assassin turns down a job only to find himself then marked as a target, but the film struggles to move beyond the basics for this type of genre.

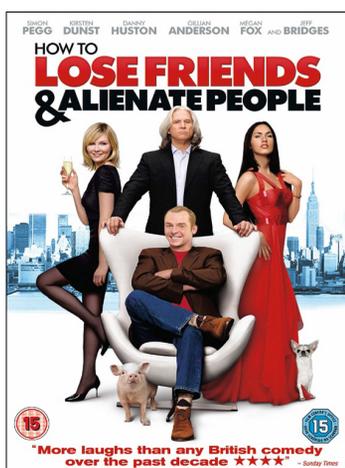
Film ★★★★★
Extras ★★★★★



EAGLE EYE

Technology inspired thriller as Shia LaBeouf is forced to follow instructions from an all-seeing character on the end of a phone. The action is explosive but Eagle Eye lacks any real passion or charm.

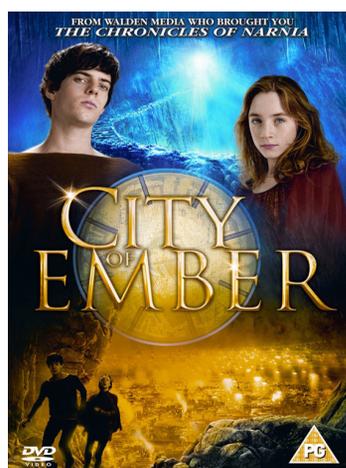
Film ★★★★★
Extras ★★★★★



HOW TO LOVE FRIENDS AND ALIENATE PEOPLE

Hit and miss comedy about a journalist who moves to New York to take up a job, only his slack manners don't go down well as he makes the wrong first impression.

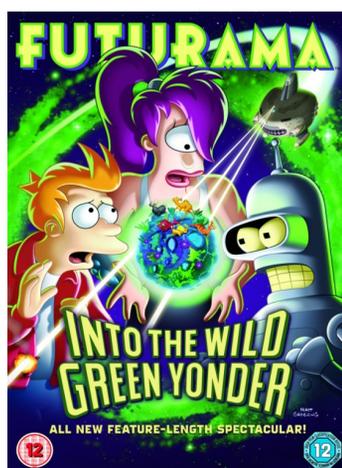
Film ★★★★★
Extras ★★★★★



CITY OF EMBER

Living in an underground city, two inquisitive teens search for a way to break out as Ember struggles from power and food shortages that will soon condemn its population to death.

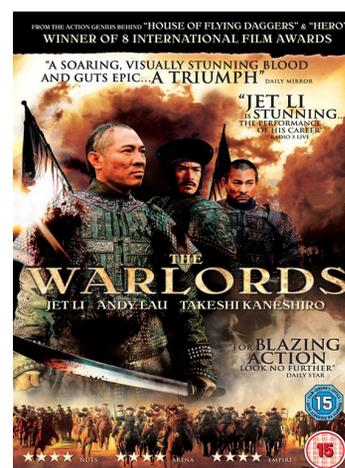
Film ★★★★★
Extras ★★★★★



FUTURAMA: INTO THE WILD GREEN YONDER

The last of the new Futurama straight-to-video films, ...Yonder might not boast all the laughs of the classic TV series but the story is entertaining enough to keep fans happy.

Film ★★★★★
Extras ★★★★★



THE WARLORDS

Starring the now almost legendary Jet Li, The Warlords sees three blood brothers turn against each other in the harsh reality of war and political unrest. At times a little slow, the plot is always engaging.

Film ★★★★★
Extras ★★★★★

COMPETITION



To celebrate the release of the Futurama: Into The Wild Green Yonder on DVD, we're giving you the chance to win one of 3 copies for yourself. To be in with a chance of winning, simply answer the following question:

How many eyes does Turanga Leela, captain of the Planet Express Ship, have?

A. 1 B. 2 C. 5

Email your answer to competitions@fanthefiremagazine.com. Deadline 13/03/09.

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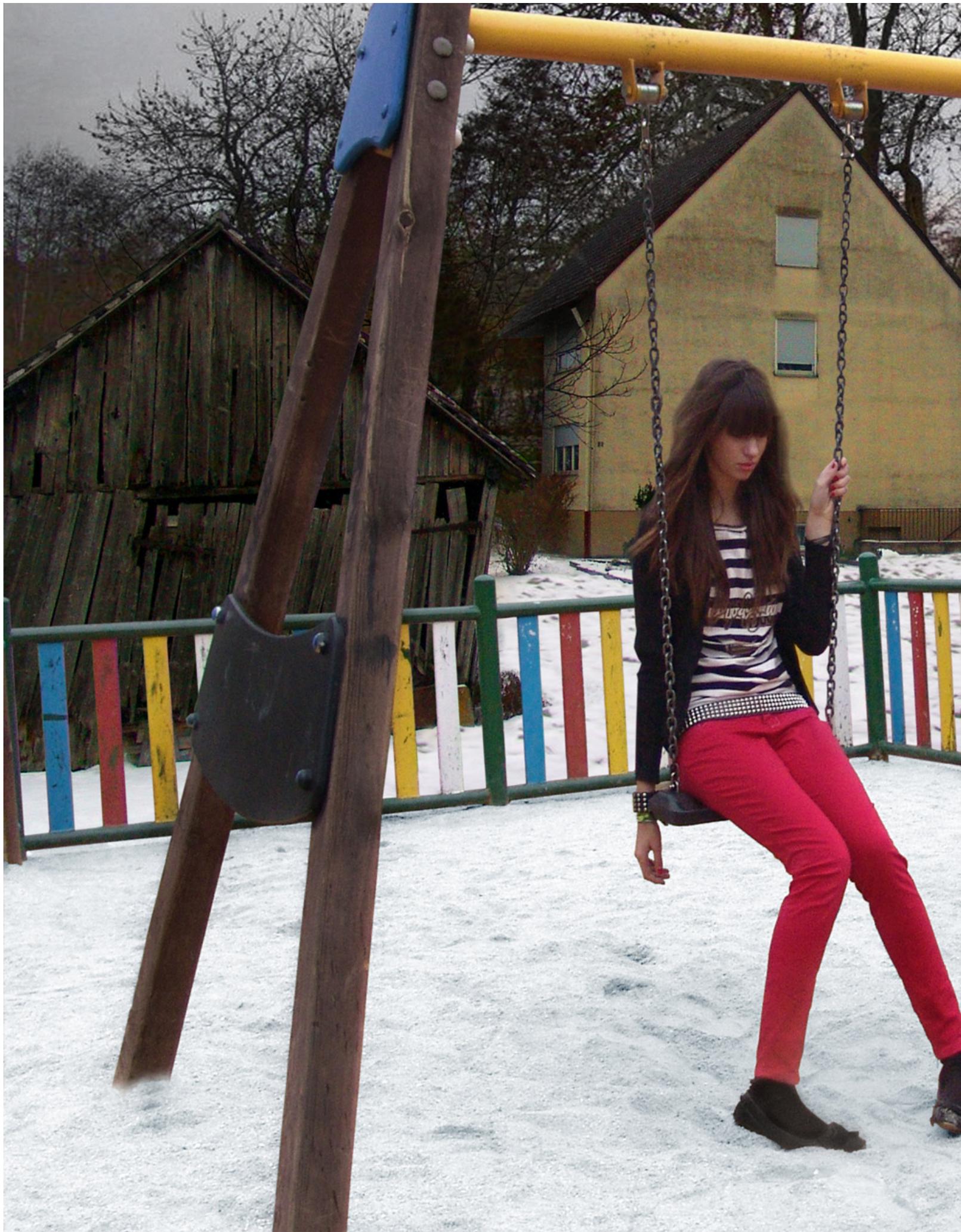
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