

*teen reviewers and critics

FILM TRaC*





REVIEWS

The Cruise

(1998, dir. Bennett Miller)

Bennett Miller's 1998 character study documentary *The Cruise* portrays the world's best NYC tour guide, Timothy "Speed" Levitch, and his perspective of the city's history.

A nonlinear story, the film depicts Levitch as poetic, erratic, and retrospective, through fragmented sequences on his bus tours, and through his uncut monologues, which come across as what it's like to interact with him in real time. The audience follows Levitch around the city as he interacts with architecture, tourists, and other NYC landmarks.

Levitch's dialogue—endless information he has stored in his cruising brain—may bore audiences that have little care for "mundane" documentaries that are aimless in storytelling. For those who appreciate the nuances of urban life and the quirks of human thought, however, the film offers a rich tapestry of ideas and visuals that captivate and provoke.

"By saying that everyone likes the grid plan," Levitch says, "you're saying, 'I'm going to relive all the mistakes my parents made. I'm going to identify and relive all the sorrows my mother ever lived through. I will propagate and create dysfunctional children in the same dysfunctional way that I was raised. I will spread neurosis throughout the landscape and do my best to recreate myself and the damages of my life for the next generation.'"

Levitch uses the Manhattan grid plan as a poetic representation of human suffering; the conformity or normalcy of

geometrically unchallenged architecture of Manhattan refuses fluidity and community. But NYC's history—the intertwined stories and communities within NYC—transcends expectations and defies the grid plan's concrete borders. Levitch can be approached as a NYC caricature, a characterization of the rapid urbanization and culture that has shaped neighborhoods in Manhattan into what they are now.

Besides the major philosophical ideas Levitch rants on about, throughout the film, its composition effectively portrays his caricature-like persona.

Notably, shots with Levitch atop the tour bus, filmed low, frame him among the buildings as a monument. The black-and-white cinematography, shot on digital but transferred to 35mm film for distribution, add a dated but ageless visual.

A strong-willed and thought-provoking film, *The Cruise* portrays the peculiarities of NYC life with an elevated view of urban living. A static and individualistic documentary of a neurodivergent man holds much more significance with further thought. Even though tour guides have an obnoxious and cash-grabbing attitude, they appreciate the mundane life city residents take advantage of. So yes,



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the next time you take a walk out in the city, pay attention to the block where a playwright killed himself, pay attention to terracotta architecture, the windows that hold glimpses into millions of other lives, because gratitude is the essence of cruising.

Erlinda Z.

■

A twenty-something-year-old man living in New York City, Timothy “Speed” Levitch is leading bus and trolley tours through the city. This really is the perfect career for him: Levitch, with his in-depth knowledge of New York City history and his never-ending dialogue, is funny, interesting, and eccentric, even bordering on bizarre at times.

The Cruise is a beautifully curated collection of clips that documents remarkably well the perspective, philosophy, and personality of this Manhattan legend.

Filmed in high-contrast black and white on a handheld camcorder with raw and flat audio by the director himself, Bennett Miller, as a one-man camera crew, *The Cruise*, focuses almost exclusively on our tour guide, with the very occasional

glimpse of the city, such as the Brooklyn Bridge or the Twin Towers. While made with a low budget and a little dated, this approach gives it a timeless and very personal aspect, almost like a home video recording.

Despite Levitch being the only one talking for almost the entire time, the film is funny, playful and personal: this film feels like a conversation. There isn't really a plot

or even much of a climax. While some of his rants are left uncut, which leans into the *this-is-what-it's-like-really-to-be-around-this-guy* feeling of it all, others are split up across the film, which keeps it from feeling like a collection of tangents and makes it feel intentionally put together. You don't find yourself wondering “How much longer?” at any point during the film, it keeps the attention very well.

Levitch is funny in a seemingly unintentional way. At times it's hard to tell if what he just said was philosophical or absurd to the point of comical. He describes the city as an organism, one that he's been in an on-and-off relationship with for years. He has this incredibly deep connection with the city and its history that very few have an understanding of.

There are countless “local characters” in New York City, folks you run into that are especially memorable. Levitch is a prime example of this, he's the type that everybody knows: the people at his local deli know his order, those who have been on his tours remember him, and he probably has a list of people whose couches he's crashed on. By the end of the film you really feel like you have a sense of what Levitch is like as a person. You've listened to his lengthy train of thought ramblings, watched him laugh, cry, visited his apartment, gone with him to work and been introduced to his best friend, the Brooklyn Bridge.

There's something special about a man who embodies the energy of our beloved New York City so well. This is a meaningful documentary for any New Yorker to watch.

Saskia W.

■

Timothy, a smart and funny man travels around Manhattan and admires the landmarks. He wanders around through the city and sometimes travels on a bus where other people hear him talking out loud. He goes to the Twin Towers and admires how they're brothers. He walks



on the Brooklyn Bridge and mentions other people who had walked on it. He looks at statues on a building and admires their positions and how they're sexy. He mentions real people and how they were related to New York City. He talks about how he had escaped from the law just like someone else that he knew of.

I liked Timothy and his personality, being smart and talking out loud to himself. It's fun to see him all over Manhattan looking around. It's nice when he's on a bus around other people and I liked hearing his voice. It was interesting the way he would look at the places in Manhattan and say lots of things about them and other people: his sentences would be super long and detailed and he would stop and talk again at certain points.

I would recommend *The Cruise*. Timothy was a great character and the movie was a fun documentary.

Evan C.

■

Leila and the Wolves
(1984, dir. Heiny Srour)

Leila and her boyfriend organize an exhibit of photographs of the Nakba.

While she points out that all the images he chose have no women, he dismisses her concern, stating that women's place in history at that time was not in politics. From this conversation, *Leila and the Wolves*, the 1984 hybrid docu-fiction by Lebanese director Heiny Srour takes off, launching viewers into pre-Nakba Palestine and inviting them on a journey through Palestinian history from then up to the 80s.

Leila walks viewers through the history of attacks on Palestine through a "Ghost of Christmas Past" format. In a flowy white dress, she is omnipresent. For most scenes, her presence is temporary—almost negligible—and happens only to move the story along to a new era.

The film has a dreamy quality: another person who viewed the film described it as "feeling like floating through the wind." Leila in her dress floating through the wind, and the viewer diligently following her scattered course through a non-linear story interspersed with conversation between families, violent battles, tragic losses, and a recurring dreamlike scene of a group of women draped in black niqabs seated in a circle on the beach.

Visually, *Leila* reflects the contents of its story. In the first act, depicting an earlier Palestine, the cinematography was more optimistic with brightly colored clothing and limestone architecture marking the time period. As the film goes on and as the war on Palestine persists, the images on screen feel more gray and worn, since what once was is now rubble. The clothing is more Western and the looks on the characters' faces are no longer looks of hope, but looks of exhaustion.

Leila successfully portrays how women were simultaneously integral and excluded from the liberation movement. A particular scene from the third act has remained with me: It is now the 70s or 80s and women are allowed, finally, to join the physical battle. They are wearing pants and wielding guns. A young woman, fresh out of training camp and newly discouraged by her family from joining the fight, is, with three other males, engaged in a shootout. The shootout is tense, but they end up winning it largely due to her. When the shootout ends, the three men turn to each other to congratulate themselves and share a cigarette. They physically turn their backs to the woman. The battle to be considered human is an absurd one.

The main goal of *Leila and the Wolves* was to debunk the erasure of women from the movement for Palestinian liberation through beauty; I think it succeeded greatly. Leila denies any notion that the normative state of the world is one with women at the sidelines of major events. It affirms, really, quite the opposite, reminding us that the

	Tess B.	Hana	Avery	Evan	Saskia	Javier	Tess N.	Gus	Erlinda	Avg.
<i>Leila and the Wolves</i> Heiny Srour	★★★★	★★	★★★★	★★	★★	★★★★	★★	★★	.	★★ ★★
<i>The Cruise</i> Bennett Miller	★★	★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★ ★★ ★★
<i>The Height of the Coconut Trees</i> Du Jie	★★★★	★★★★	★	★	★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★	.	★★ ★★
<i>Killer of Sheep</i> Charles Burnett	★★	.	★★★★	★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★★★	✓	★★ ★★
<i>Closely Watched Trains</i> Jiri Menzel	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★	★★★★	★★★★	.	★★★★	★★ ★★ ★★

MOVIE SUMMARIES

Blue is the Warmest Colour

(2013, dir. Abdellatif Kechiche)

While handling her own personal emotional turmoil and ever-evolving relationships with those around her Adèle, a senior in high school, falls for and has a passionate relationship with the mysterious and striking Emma. A controversial, intimate, and hypersexual deep-dive into the life of a French teenager, the running time of 3 hours gives it time to really examine the characters and their relationships. Winner of the Palme d'Or. -tn

Scott Pilgrim vs The World

(2010, dir. Edgar Wright)

To date a girl named Ramona Flowers, Scott Pilgrim must first defeat her seven evil exes. Based on a graphic novel, this quirky fever-dream-like movie is wacky and visually stunning, with strong actors that carry along a captivating story that seems odd but works together so well. Perfect comedic timing, along with the amazing transitions from scene to scene and even better music, this movie knows exactly what kind of movie it's trying to be. You notice more and more details hiding in the background on every re-watch. -cww



most important fight happens at home, not necessarily on the battlefield. It encapsulated the dichotomy that is living during war. While the men of the community are fighting physically, it is up to women to fight with their minds and spirits at home.

Avery S.

■

Unique, beautiful, confusing, and surreal, *Leila and the Wolves* was about the war in the Middle East, and, especially, how it affected women. It didn't follow a specific woman or group of women, rather, the details and conversations of how women had a big impact in the war over the period of the 1920s to the 1970s was contradicted with flashes of documentary-style footage, of the blood, violence, and torture going on in Palestine and Lebanon.

The film's style felt like a collage, like memories a person was trying to fish out of their brain. The dreamy style and

nonlinear (but historically rich) plot felt like it was intended to put the viewer in the shoes of Leila going back and observing bits of culture, however blurry they were.

Although the film lacked many common storytelling elements to create a clear narrative, the use of sound and inner monologue—letting in clips of a person's thoughts—felt very personal and authentic. Often, the sound didn't align with the events, lagging, or just being a bit off: this felt like an intentional creative choice that made each noise and word more impactful.

Similarly, the colors and brightness of the costumes were very intentional: the women wore bright dresses with white hijabs, creating a pleasing demonstration of the bright and colorful culture anyone will appreciate. Even amongst a horrible war, the tone of brightness and the contradictory black and white: this film had a look that could not be recreated.

Leila and the Wolves highlighted the reality of war—how it's not just one thing—but watching creates a confusing,

almost tiring experience. Sitting down in the theater watching for an hour and a half can leave you tired searching for a plot, searching for characters, and being more and more confused after each scene.

Tess B.

■

Moonstruck

(1987, dir. Normal Jewison)

Skeptical of finding love, 37-year-old Italian-American widow Loretta Castorini (the iconic Cher) accepts a proposal from Johnny, her airhead himbo boyfriend. All seems unfortunate until she meets his younger brother Ronny (a greasy and stubborn Nic Cage), with whom she begins a passionate affair. As the title suggests, a full moon can make people crazy.

The classic New York City rom-com *Moonstruck* is full of wonder. The setting—1980s New York—remains a capsule for new audiences. It portrays an atmosphere of intimate ethnic communities in an analog world that feels lost to time. Specifically, winter feels opulent and grand, which is shown through cozy New York interiors, like hospitable Italian restaurants, and the opera, contrasted by the blue-toned streets of Brooklyn. Costuming the infamous Cher is essential in any movie she stars in. The film's makeover sequence with big hair, a beautiful dress, and a black fur coat does not fail her standards.

The notable supporting cast includes Vincent Gardenia, who plays Loretta's father Cosmo, and the outstanding Olympia Dukakis as her mother, Rose Castorini. These characters play significant roles in Loretta's affair: Cosmo is a drunk whose sleazy attitude to the later years of his life has him seek out love in younger women, disregarding his loyal wife. Rose, conversely, a stoic figure burdened with her husband's disloyalty, grounds Loretta in the craziest moments of her life. As the film progresses, Cosmo and Rose's tumultuous

relationship is emotionally tested, and Loretta realizes she's not the odd one in her family with secret romantic affiliations.

The characters' unique personalities are reflected in their dialogue. The movie captivates the audience with one-liners and sequences that are comedic in tone but resolve in a bittersweet embrace. The film has an honest approach to romance that feels authentic to the passionate characters of the Castorini family.

Instead of a meet-cute that makes Cher look like a dumb damsel and Nic Cage a masculine hunk, *Moonstruck* takes the initiative to introduce relatable and long-lasting characters into the audience's hearts. It doesn't waste time with pretty montages and archetypal characters (besides Nic Cage's performance).

Overall, the film transcends the superficial romance-comedy genre by depicting a mature love story that appeals to all audiences, young and old. A sincere and humorous film with tones of realism and community that cannot be replicated, *Moonstruck* has a classic rom-com structure—quirky meet-cute, aimless obstacles, and resolution—enhanced by rich characters and compelling conflicts. Italian-American cinema has never known a film as captivating, heartfelt, funny, and romantic.

Why is *Moonstruck* the best film Italian-American cinema has to offer? Simply because it is, so... "Snap out of it!"

Erlinda Z.



■



dedication for a promotion that is sure to have Elliott and Ridley set for life.

On their way, Elliott accidentally hits and kills a unicorn with his car, but he refuses to let this stop him from getting the promotion. Later, after being introduced to the boss's eccentrically banal family, the murdered unicorn's parents return to seek vengeance.

The film's tone goes from *Knives Out* to *Aliens*, and the poorly executed and shallow family dynamic is ditched in favor of jarring chest-popping, head-squashing gore, all through the vehicle of unicorns.

The combination of a unique premise in tandem with A24's notorious production ability to craft campy flicks provided good reason for *Death of a Unicorn* to succeed. However, the film's groan-inducing cliché ending unnaturally warps the movie's tone from a kind of fun mythical slasher to an

unoriginal message on family values.

Death of a Unicorn struggles because it clearly does not know what to be or who to appeal to. The tone of the movie is constantly thrown around, not to the movie's strength. In some of A24's other productions, such as *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, *Midsommar*, and *Ex Machina*, the films change tonally throughout to give meta-commentary, shock value, or depth to the plot. *Death of a Unicorn* has little reason to change so drastically, leading to an overall feeling of disorganization.

Death of a Unicorn is a hollow shell of a movie with a hand-painted porcelain exterior. Endearing enough on the surface, *Death of a Unicorn* lacks some necessary theatricality and creativity.

Gus P.Z.

■



Nymphomaniac: Volume 1 (2013, dir. Lars von Trier)

Joe, a self-hating nymphomaniac, is in a murky alley, covered in blood. Seligman, a random man, kindly shelters Joe. As he questions Joe's current state, Joe begins to tell her life story, contesting that she is a truly bad human being.

Nymphomaniac: Volume 1 is a wildly philosophical, poetic, and pensive film filled to the brim with feeling, thanks to dimensionally profound performances from Charlotte Gainsbourg, Stellan Skarsgård, and Stacy Martin, and notably layered supporting performances from Shia LaBeouf and Uma Thurman.

In *Nymphomaniac*, Lars Von Trier looks at literary movements such as romanticism and naturalism and questions their relevance to a modern story involving sex addiction. Von Trier explores romanticism through Joe's engagement in nature and walking, calling

back to literary pieces like *Walking* by Henry David Thoreau. (Joe searches for closure through romantic actions like being present in nature, or the process of walking. She finds nothing but monotonous peace.)

Naturalism is present in *Nymphomaniac* through the argumentative dialogue held between Joe and Seligman. Seligman desperately tries to convince Joe that her kinky tendencies are a result of her heredity and environment, a common naturalist idea present in writings from Émile Zola

and Charles Darwin.

Joe, however, rejects that her depravity is natural and continues the idea that nymphomania makes her innately bad. This showcase of philosophical thought is just one of the reasons to love *Nymphomaniac*.

To accompany this deep thinking, *Nymphomaniac* boasts beautifully minimalist visuals and creative editing to expand on Joe and Seligman's metaphorical and allegorical discourse.

In one of my favorite moments, Joe describes three different lovers as the "polyphony of sex," or the three voices present in Bach's music. As Joe describes these lovers, they collage themselves onto the screen, interspersing clips of



wild animals, sexual acts, and musical instruments. This photomontage creates a visual symphony, encapsulating Joe's struggles with nymphomania and where she fits into the spectrum of primal sexuality and ordered pleasure.

Nymphomaniac is full of scenes like this, where the narrative of the film is creatively aided by visually poetic metaphor.

Ultimately, *Nymphomaniac* is not just a film that exists to be sexually grotesque. The film forces the viewer to be uncomfortable, all the while questioning the methodology behind human sexuality: how does love change the meaning of sex? Is sex without love worth anything? How long can frivolous intercourse disguise loneliness and mental illness?

In Joe's depravity, she is still deafeningly human, a real feat from writer and director Lars Von Trier.

Gus P.Z.

■

Saturday Night

(2024, dir. Jason Reitman)

If you're looking for a fast-paced, stressful comedy, this movie is for you. *Saturday Night* follows director Lorne Michaels on the night of October 11th, 1975, as the debut of his show airs for the first time at 11:30pm. Actors rebel, set pieces break, and everyone is under-prepared, but Lorne is determined to air that night, and stops at nothing to fulfill his dream.

The first thing you'll notice is cinematography that captures the tone of the movie so well, showing how rushed and last-minute the creation of this show is. Many directorial choices helped that. Almost the whole movie takes place in the same building, which emphasizes the claustrophobia the movie wants you to feel. A huge part of that is how little the camera jumped to a different scene. The camera is always following someone, and we are

introduced into every room as someone enters it, making it feel like you're really there.

Every scene felt busy and crowded with tons of different conversations going on at once. At times it may have felt a little too fast, and made it hard to follow completely, so, in the few scenes where that pattern broke, they felt important and meaningful.

The next thing you'll notice is upbeat music that always fits the scene, whether it's playing fast and chaotic, or slow and punctual. The comedy is entertaining enough and got some good laughs out of me, due to the enticing actors and their delivery.

You'll be obsessed with Tommy Dewey's hilarious performance playing the head writer of the show, Michael O'Donoghue, as everything he said was hilariously brilliant. I couldn't stop laughing when he was on screen.

Although this movie is based on real events, it is not realistic and many elements are dramatized, so if you are expecting a historically accurate documentary going into this movie, you will be disappointed. It gives no exposition or background to any characters and just throws you in the story expecting you already know everyone, which is a little annoying.

Besides those few issues, I deeply enjoyed this movie, I think it portrayed the stress of starting a new TV show so well,



they are. So although this was a surreal, gut wrenching, overwhelming portrait of childhood friendships and how they affect the process of growing up, it will be almost impossible for me to re-watch it, as it evoked so much emotion. So many movies can throw a heartbreaking plot at you and not make you feel anything. But through acting, camera work, imagery, and creative choices, *Close* is able to leave you in tears.

Tess B.

■

Fight Club

(1999, dir. David Fincher)

Fight Club starts at the climax of the movie and then rewinds to show us how the main character got there. We learn that the main character has insomnia, narcolepsy, and hasn't slept in 6 months leading to an extreme distortion of time and

reality. We see the morally ambiguous ways he copes, like attending support groups for problems he doesn't have. Our main character's apartment is blown up, destroying everything he had owned, and he decides to call Tyler Durden, an embodiment of repressed desires and reckless instincts, to meet at a bar, a decision that would completely uproot his life. The main character moves in with Tyler after fighting with him in the alley and a ritual is made where men fight with each other as a way to cope.

This movie is one of the best action movies I have ever seen. *Fight Club* has one of the most hooking and captivating introductions to a film ever. In the beginning thirty minutes, there is so much amazing exposition, we fully get immersed in this character's life. The plot



was intriguing throughout every turn. The acting was phenomenal, with stars such as Brad Pitt, Edward Norton, and Helena Bonham Carter. The dialogue was witty and clever, demanding attention every second: there wasn't a dull moment. The camera work and editing was endlessly creative, giving this film a gritty, dark, suspense-ridden ride that makes it hard to stop watching.

This movie has the perfect soundtrack, being done by The Dust Brothers with eerie tones that fit the vibe so well, adding an extra layer of immersion to it.

I loved this movie and I can't recommend it enough as there is so much thought and detail put into it. Even though

this film was made over 25 years ago, it still holds up better than most action movies today so if you haven't seen it already, make watching this movie a priority.

Carter W.W.

■

Death of a Unicorn

(2025, dir. Alex Scharfman)

Although *Death of a Unicorn's* grisly action struck me as sharply as the title's bloodthirsty monoceros, the lackluster plot is about as original as Jenna Ortega playing another moody and emotionally rebellious teen who detests American societal values.

Grumbly teen Ridley and her clumsy dad Elliot visit Elliot's boss on a trip to his elusive estate to prove his worthiness and

the animation shifts from anime to stop-motion of paper cut outs moving.

The film made a great impression. *Totto-Chan* achieved excellence in the genre. Anyone, regardless of their genre preference, can objectively enjoy this movie.

Hana J.



Close

(2022, dir. Lukas Dhont)

Lukas Dhont's *Close* stars two 13-year-old boys, and how their friendship raises speculation by their classmates, who believe they are something more. Embarrassed, Leo starts to push Remi, the other boy, away. The film follows the repercussions of this separation.

An important note about this movie is that the actors who played 13, were actually 13. This is rare to see in Hollywood, as in many movies we see 13 year olds being portrayed by 16 and 17 year olds. This added an element of authenticity to the film, and even though the actors were so young, they were able to capture the intense emotions in this film in such a raw and unique way. The acting in this movie feels very raw, and authentic. Each character's relationship with one another was so effortlessly displayed throughout

the entirety of the film. It draws in the viewer, and leaves the viewer heartbroken.

Although the plot is very specific, they

are able to make it university relatable to whoever is watching, making it even more emotion inducing.

The film relied heavily on imagery to portray emotion and further the plot. One important recurring image was the flower field which Leo's family owns. Dhont is able to use this as almost a sort of tracker for how Leo and Remi are feeling.

The scenes of Leo playing hockey—the jerseys were all black and white and the skating was loud—clearly symbolize Leo's longing for fitting in, and masculinity.

The imagery went hand-in-hand with the camera work and cinematography. This movie was very clear, and the viewer was able to see every crevice and mark on each character's face. In most scenes, the rest of the background behind them was out of focus, which highlighted the intensity of each moment.

The intensity of the movie sometimes felt unneeded. There were moments of pure heart and heartbreak. It can often be hard to sit down and watch a movie this emotion-inducing and intense, especially with characters as young as



especially how the cinematography made me so absorbed. If you watch this, you will feel so immersed and truly care about how the finished product, "Saturday Night Live", will turn out.

Carter W.W.

■

Silver Linings Playbook

(2012, dir. David O. Russell)

After being in the psych ward for 8 months, Pat, a bipolar man returns to his hometown with the intention to win back his wife, who split up with him after an extreme violent outbreak.

He meets a depressed young widow named Annie, who agrees to help him if he helps her win a dance competition.

Silver Linings Playbook, by David O. Russell, follows a standard 2010s rom-com formula, with its slow burn, absurd dancing, family drama, token Black comedic relief character, and misunderstood romantic interests. But the movie attempts to put a spin on this overdone trope and make it 'deeper' by making mental illness—something the two characters bond over—a main theme.

This film proves the necessity of researchers when developing a script, as the portrayal of these two mental illnesses was distorted and insensitive. The film portrays depression or bipolar disorder as the tendency to say whatever comes to your mind, no matter the situation, and to act irrationally without remorse, and that mental illness is something very visible

and obvious. Mental illness seems to be a ploy to make the movie deeper and more artsy.

Although the acting did not necessarily make up for the inaccuracies in the writing, Jennifer Lawrence and Bradley Cooper were both very impressive. Given characters so "far off from normal", they really needed to immerse themselves to make the film enjoyable and realistic. It was really interesting to watch both performances, as it was clear both spent



a lot of time getting into character and practicing micro movements and slight changes in facial expressions.

Overall this movie did not have a certain look to it. Certain scenes, like when Pat is on the block of his hometown and in his house, had a particular tint of yellow to them, giving it a homey look and feeling. The fast transitions and perspective switches in shots felt helpful to visually move the story along. But there was no consistent color grading, or overall aesthetic to the camera work, and there was so much more room for bold creative choices in the cinematography, considering the topic.

Mental illness in this film is almost amplified for comedic relief, and, although at some points this was inaccurate and slightly offensive, it also really was able to touch base on the idea that mental illness can sometimes be funny. But having it be funny, and also something that



romantically bonds two people together felt overwhelming to do all in one film.

Tess B.

■

The Shape of Water

(2017, dir. Guillermo Del Toro)

A dreamy and sweet surprise, Guillermo Del Toro's *The Shape of Water* follows Elisa, a woman in the 1960s who works at a secret government laboratory as a cleaner. Her two closest companions are Giles, a pre-Stonewall gay man who lives next to her, and Zelda, her firecracker coworker, masterfully portrayed by Octavia Spencer. Elisa lives in a kind of loop in her life, when suddenly the laboratory gets a hold of a human-like sea creature from the Amazon. Elisa lost her ability to talk when she was younger, and becomes infatuated with the creature, feeling that no one has ever understood her the way it does.

Guillermo Del Toro makes a point of having all of the main characters—Elisa is mute, Giles is a gay man, Zelda is a Black woman—be seen as “other” in the time period the film takes place in. These characters, the creature especially, are figures that represent society's fear of things it doesn't understand, ultimately leading to social hierarchy and oppression.

The visuals were beautiful, while also making the film feel intimate, as if the story is speaking to the viewer specifically. The use of water as a metaphor for identity and self-acceptance was beautiful, and complemented nicely Giles' narration, leaving the powerful ending a bit ambiguous in nature.

This film was a refreshing new take on the cliché love story, like

a modern fairytale, with two characters stopping at nothing to be together, despite the odds stacked against them. The sincere and authentic love between Elisa and the those around her, and Guillermo Del Toro's heartfelt storytelling are what make *The Shape of Water* so significant.

Tess N.

■

A Minecraft Movie

(2025, dir. Jared Hess)

A nerdy kid, Henry, and his sister move to a small town for her work. Henry runs into Garrett “the garbage man” Garrison, in his failing video game store. Looking around the store, Henry finds two cubes. When he puts them together, they lead him and Garrett to a portal to “Minecraft”.

Attacked by monsters after it turns night, they are saved by a human who has lived in “Minecraft” ever since he found the same portal exploring mines as a child—Steve.

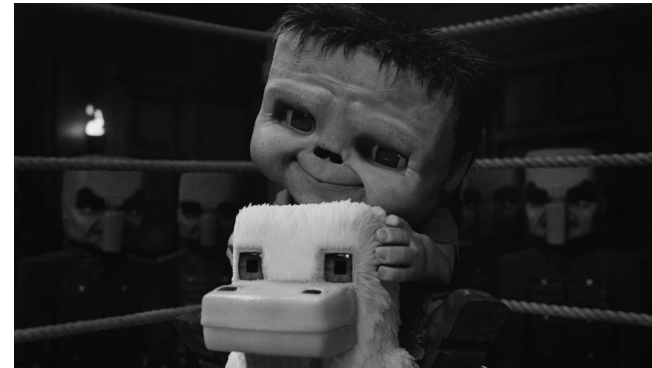
Steve is looking for the cubes to rescue his dog that was captured by humanoid pigs that live in the Nether—piglins—but Garrett broke one of the cubes. They all decide to embark on a quest to replace the broken cube.

The movie has a pretty cookie-cutter plot. There isn't a crazy introspective twist at the end, it's just meant to be a

lighthearted, easy-to-watch movie, but it fails to achieve this.

There's a lot of exposition that wouldn't be required in a normal universe, references that don't make sense to the layperson, painfully bad fourth wall breaks. In short, if you just want a lighthearted movie with Jack Black, just watch *School of Rock*.

There were some parts that were genuinely funny and some scenes that made me laugh, but I feel a little conflicted about this movie: “Minecraft” is a game made for kids and Microsoft is a



corporation that aims to make money, this movie was never going to be made for the greater “Minecraft” community.

But as a “Minecraft” fan, I feel let down. There was so much anticipation for this movie, and it just fell short: at best, it was meh. It's like Microsoft, who owns “Minecraft”, was just using the I.P., paired with some recognizable actors, to market “Minecraft” to kids.

For what it's worth, there *were* some parts that were genuinely funny, and some scenes that made me laugh. There were a lot of references to creators, players and the game that I really liked, and the whole community aspect was really fun.

9/20 hunger bars

Javier L.G.

■

Totto-Chan:

The Little Girl at the Window

(2023, dir. Yakuwa Shinnosuke)

Totto-Chan, a talkative young girl in 1940s Japan, enters a creative and different school after getting kicked out of her old elementary school. She's immediately intrigued when she notices that her class takes place inside a train. Based on the memoir of famous Japanese television personality Tetsuko Kuroyanagi, *Totto-Chan: The Little Girl at the Window* is an anime that was released in 2023 in

Japan. In the US, *Totto* premiered at the 2025 New York International Children's Film Festival, where it won the Grand Jury Prize for the best animated feature film.

Totto-Chan takes its time in the beginning to get you really familiarized with the unfamiliar surroundings of Japan in the 1940s.

The first half is getting to know Totto-Chan and this odd school, as well as her and a boy with polio becoming closer friends. The audience spends their time with these characters and we care about what happens to them. The introduction is long but that's what makes the audience more connected.

The second half of the movie is when Japan turns against America in World War II. There's a movement to act “less American” by being more old-fashioned and by expressing oneself in a less Western way.

The animation is stunning, it captures the personality of every individual character. The background and scenery are a beautiful portrayal of the Japanese setting. The animation style occasionally changes to represent the emotions, wants, and the imagination of the main characters. For example, when Totto-Chan is dreaming,

