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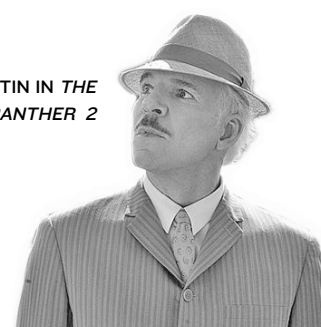
THE PINK PANTHER 2

"The Pink Panther 2 sorely lacks the energy and guile Peter Sellers brought to the franchise through his leading role in the 1960s and 1970s, and is little more than a mindless romp of stunt humor and emaciated narrative form." — Thomas Floyd

RATING: 1.5 stars out of 5

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STEVE MARTIN IN THE
PINK PANTHER 2



REVIEW | CORALINE

THE OTHER SIDE OF LIFE

Coraline's inspired visual head trip fuels a dazzling journey through the rabbit hole

By ZACHARY HERRMANN
Senior staff writer

There's something special about *Coraline*, although looks can be deceiving. Henry Selick's triumphant return to feature-length stop-motion animation could be easily dismissed as eye-candy for all its visual revelry. Take heed, though — it shouldn't be.

While not as iconic as the director's best-known and most-celebrated film, *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, *Coraline* contains an overwhelming amount of memorable images: button-eyed evil parents, a living, glowing garden and show-stopping circus mice, to name a few. It's the perfect marriage of directing and source material (a so-called children's book by reigning fantasy king, Neil Gaiman), as well as technology and imagination.

Coraline is not only an extremely entertaining flick, but also an affirmation of the practical artist, as the director does it all by hand without ever revealing the mechanization. Not to disparage all the wonderful things Pixar has been able to dream up with CGI, but there's a certain timeless quality to well-executed stop-motion animation that just can't be topped.

In eye-popping 3D (really, it's

the only way to see the film), *Coraline* may be one of the most visually impressive films to hit the big screen in recent memory. A few weak points in the storytelling keep it just short of classic status, but these issues do little to diminish the overall wonder and spirit of the piece.

Our little blue-haired heroine, Coraline Jones (Dakota Fanning, *The Secret Life of Bees*), takes a rainy-day escape from her dreary reality by entering a hidden world through a concealed door in her new apartment. Busy with preparation for an annual plant catalogue, Coraline's mother (Teri Hatcher, *Desperate Housewives*) and father (John Hodgman, *Baby Mama*) have little time for their daughter, and initially welcome any activity that will keep her occupied.

Through the strange, half-dream-world crawl space, Coraline discovers an alternate reality not so far removed from her waking life — the main difference being instant gratification. Her odd neighbors are extravagant rather than pitifully eccentric; dinner is a scrumptious feast as opposed to miserable vegetable goo; and everyone bends to Coraline's whims.

Of course, there's a catch. As we (and Coraline) immediately notice, her Other mother and

Other father — and all the Other inhabitants of this double-world — have sewed-buttons in the place of their eyes, supposedly a small price to pay for happiness. Either way, it sounds pretty painful and stops Coraline from completely giving in to her newfound world.

As the mystery unravels, Selick (who wrote the script, as well) connects the dots from hand-sewn voodoo dolls to missing child ghosts to the landlady's strange grandson, Wybie (Robert Bailey Jr., *The Happening*). We get a lot thrown at us pretty quickly, which actually works to the film's advantage.

Coraline is, after all, a snotty kid with fairly common predicaments, so it's not really her we're invested in so much as the strange world she enters in and out of. The real genius of the film comes in its tightly packed and colorfully rendered imagery.

The Other father — a genial, but grossly impotent, reflection of the real thing — first greets his daughter while sitting at his player piano. "This piano plays me," he exclaims gleefully as two large gloves sprout forth from the piano and take control.

Like *Peter Pan*, another tale of an "Other" world, *Coraline* melds the perfections and imperfections of reality, and invests them in the main character's fantasies. Her mother goes from dismissive to overly attentive, before completely undergoing another, darker transformation, as the separation between the dream- and reality-worlds starts to break down.

Though it is not quite as startling and adult as another overlapping film, *Pan's Labyrinth*, Selick's latest stays true to the tone of his other stop-motion features, *The Nightmare Before Christmas* and *James and the Giant Peach*. They're all children's stories, but Selick never panders to his audience.

With plenty-a-nod to *Alice in Wonderland* (the proverbial trip down the rabbit hole, a feline guide), Selick has created a film that earns your attention through two carefully constructed mirror universes. Maybe it's only the 3D technology popping the characters forward from their surroundings, but everything else in *Coraline* jumps out on pure, inspired merit.

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MOVIE: Coraline | VERDICT:



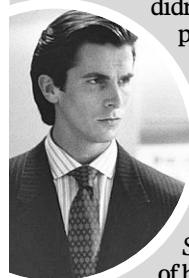
reel news

AN OSCAR MAKEOVER?

When Academy president Sid Ganis and Forest Whitaker announced the Oscar nominees, they sadly omitted *The Dark Knight* from the Best Picture shortlist, and without the presence of a box office darling like Christopher Nolan's grisly comic book thriller, another year of declining ratings for the Oscars seemed inevitable. *The Hollywood Reporter* revealed, though, that Ganis is not giving up so easily, as evidenced by this ambiguous announcement at the nominees' luncheon: "Your categories are being presented in a completely different way. Heads up: You're in for a big surprise." Sounds like desperation for a ratings bump, but still consider our interest peaked.

THE DARK TRUTH

Christian Bale has anger issues. If we didn't realize that after London police arrested Batman himself in July for allegedly assaulting his mother and sister, we definitely know it now that TMZ posted Bale's nearly four-minute long, profanity-laced tirade from the set of *Terminator Salvation*. Dipping in and out of his faux American accent, Bale rips on cinematographer Shane Hurlbut for walking through his sight-line during a scene. Maybe his role as an axe-wielding maniac in the aptly titled *American Psycho* wasn't such a stretch after all?



REVIEW | PUSH

When *Push* comes to shove

Sci-fi thriller suffers from familiarity of the superhero genre

By DAN BENAMOR
Senior staff writer

When a genre is as ubiquitous as the superhero film, it takes more than a simple facelift to add something new. And so it falls that *Push*, for all its grounded aesthetics and Hong Kong setting, is nothing new to anyone who's seen a few episodes of *X-Men: The Animated Series*.

The plot is practically archetypal to the genre: Mutants (in the film, they're called "special," but let's not kid ourselves) are hunted down by the government for nefarious purposes. Here the government division is idiotically called ... Division. It seems as though no one thought further than how cool it sounded to say lines such as, "Are you with Division?"

Division has been trying to augment the powers of captured mutants and, in the process, has killed hundreds of them (it would seem more practical to just use what they've got, but that's never discussed). When one mutant, Kira (Camilla Belle, *10,000 B.C.*), survives and escapes, this apparently means Division, Chinese mutant gangsters and a collection of expatriate mutants need to find her.

As outlandish as the plot may sound, director Paul McGuigan (*Lucky Number Slevin*) and scribe David Bourla

(*Larceny*) have made the unusual choice of keeping the world of the story very much grounded in a grimy reality. This isn't the future, and no one is wearing costumes. If anything, the repeated shots of crowded marketplaces and dirty tenements call to mind *Slumdog Millionaire*. It's a different approach, but ultimately only in a superficial way.

Despite the realism of the settings, McGuigan and longtime collaborator and cinematographer Peter Sova (*Lucky Number Slevin*) have maintained their trademark visual stylishness. In films such as *Gangster No. 1*, *Wicker Park* and *Lucky Number Slevin*, the duo have identified themselves with a unique stamp, using uncomfortably intimate close-ups, uneven framing and — in *Push*, at least — occasionally different film stocks. They are not afraid to make an audience uncomfortable, which is refreshingly unusual, but sometimes headache-inducing.

For all of McGuigan and Sova's efforts and the unique setting, interest quickly wanes while watching *Push*, largely because of deficiencies in the emotional lines of the story.

Push wants you to care that telepathic Nick (Chris Evans, *Street Kings*) watched his father die at the hands of Division leader Henry Car-

ver (Djimon Hounsou, *Never Back Down*). But we only see the father and son interact for about 30 seconds before the murder. We get even less of psychic Cassie (Dakota Fanning, *The Secret Life of Bees*) and her mother, apart from a lengthy scene of expository dialogue explaining their relationship. *Push* puts little effort into showing these crucial relationships while trying to use them as the emotional left behind the action. Even from the start, it's just not enough to make you care.

There are some aspects of *Push* that do connect, mostly in the inclusion of some superpowers audiences likely haven't seen before. In the film's vernacular, there are pushers (they manipulate your thoughts), sniffers (one sniff of your dirty sock and they can find you across town), shifters (they can make \$1 look like \$100) and many more distinctive mutants. When pusher Kira tricks a Division agent into killing his partner for murdering the brother he never had, it's a moment darker than most superhero films allow, and for a brief moment, *Push* hits the audience especially hard.

But then we're back to fairly routine on-the-run theatrics, not helped by

less-than-stellar action, characters and performances. Some fight scenes have unique touches (watch out for exploding fish!), but the final showdown between telepathic Nick and Carver's equally telepathic right-hand man, Victor (Neil Jackson, *Quantum of Solace*) devolves into a fistfight with graphics.

Evans is, as usual, largely getting by on quick wit and a handsome face. Fanning is miscast as the spunky Cassie, a rare occasion where her preternatural maturity and stillness work against her. Hounsou, playing the best-dressed villain in recent memory, has little character to exude apart from general menace, and he can only do so much with his role. If anything, the role really working is the one with nearly no lines: Victor.

Jackson has one look, a disturbingly intense stare, and it hits just the right note of psychotic furor. If you blink, you might mistake him for the master of playing lunatic killers, Ben Foster (most recently working his magic in *3:10 to Yuma*).

If only the film were as fun to watch as him.

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MOVIE: Push | VERDICT:

