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Beyond the Multiplex

Steve Buscemi and Sienna Miller team up for a trashy take on celebrity culture. Plus: Mind-blowing apocalyptic anime and Kim Ki-duk's fun with monsters.

BY ANDREW O'HEHIR



When you talk to people in the indie-film world these days, people who've been around the business their whole professional lives and have forgotten more about it than I'll ever know, you hear the same thing over and over again: Nobody knows what the hell is going on. When I spoke with Eamonn Bowles, the president of Magnolia Pictures, a few days ago, he described the current market for independent film as "a bit like the Wild West." Meyer Gottlieb, the president of Samuel Goldwyn Films, was more direct: "A lot of things are happening that no one has answers to."

If there's a specter that's haunting Indiewood and Hollywood alike, it's the shambling figure of some semi-shaved, post-collegiate 22-year-old watching movies on his cellphone. Now, I don't know anybody who has

actually watched a feature film on a telephone, and I'm not even sure it's feasible. (The iPhone's ads show people watching film trailers and YouTube videos, not entire movies.) But three different people in the film industry have mentioned the idea to me within the last week, and the question of its present-tense plausibility is clearly not relevant. What people are really saying is that a big, weird change is coming. They don't quite understand it and they can't do anything to stop it, but they're worried that the whole business of selling \$10 tickets to go sit in a dark room with some strangers and a movie projector is suddenly going to seem like Thomas Edison's windup gramophone and its wax cylinders.

But you know what? While the undammed weekly deluge of new movies isn't good either for art or business — I can't even guess how many good pictures get swept away unnoticed in the flood — the demise of theatrical moviegoing is much exaggerated. Michael Moore's "Sicko" is a huge hit, bigger than "An Inconvenient Truth" if not yet to "Fahrenheit 9/11" dimensions. "Waitress" has already claimed the summer's feel-good prize (along with \$17.4 million at the box office). "Once" and "La Vie en Rose" have piled up startlingly strong numbers, by indie standards, and "You Kill Me" is quietly building up to sleeper-hit status. Zoe Cassavetes' "Broken English" and Werner Herzog's "Rescue Dawn" have both opened strongly.

Even more encouraging to a cranky cinephile like me are numbers that sound less impressive, like the \$600,000 accumulated by Emanuele Crialese's "Golden Door" (terrific returns for an Italian art film), or the astonishing \$735,000 for the three-hour documentary "Into Great Silence," or even the \$30,000 collected so far for the re-release of Jean-Pierre Melville's "Le Doulos," in one week on one screen at New York's Film Forum. As outmoded as it may be, human beings are still going to the movies this summer.

Most of the films I just mentioned would be pointless on a 3-inch screen, with their cinematic qualities made microscopic. But that's not true of all movies, and I feel confident that the teeny personal screen is going to command its own forms of content, just like TV and the Internet did. At least two of the five movies I'm covering this week might be perfectly OK on your iPod or your wristwatch or your holographic postage stamp or whatever. (I'll leave you to guess which movies.) Is that meant as a profound dis? Not really. It's just a sign hammered to a pole on the unmarked roads of the Wild West.

“Interview”: Journalism, celebrity, dark night of the soul, blah blah blah

I’ve done a fair number of celebrity interviews in my time, and sure, once in a great while you wind up sharing a drink and a few moments of phony intimacy with your subject. (I dimly remember an episode with Nick Nolte — dressed in surgical scrubs, his eyeglasses held together with tape — at a hotel bar in Wrightsville Beach, N.C.) But I’m sorry to say I’ve never gotten anywhere near the juicily immoral territory explored by Pierre Peders, the burned-out, self-loathing journalist played by Steve Buscemi in “Interview,” which Buscemi also directed and co-wrote.

Pierre is a veteran political reporter who’s been assigned, for reasons that at first aren’t clear, to interview Katya (Sienna Miller), a one-named star of prime-time soaps and teen-oriented horror films. He barely knows who she is and claims he’s never seen her movies, but somehow or another their botched interview ends up going all night in Katya’s downtown Manhattan loft, where they booze heavily, bicker, make out, videotape each other’s true confessions and generally indulge in histrionic joint neurosis. Katya says Pierre reminds her of her dead father, and Pierre says Katya reminds *him* of his dead daughter, and it’s all very prickly and dark and unsavory.

There’s a certain compositional elegance to “Interview,” and both actors give composed performances as near-sociopathic personalities with bad boundary issues and no clear emotional bottom line. It quickly becomes exhausting trying to figure out when Katya or Pierre is being sincere; they don’t know themselves. This veneer of pseudo-adult psychological realism doesn’t stop the film from being trashy, awkward and implausible, something like a stage play that might have seemed challenging in 1976. If Eugene O’Neill had tried to write a play about celebrity culture and the decline of journalism, this would be it. (Come to think of it, Arthur Miller did write such a play; you might describe “Interview” as a lesser cousin of Miller’s “After the Fall.”)

Buscemi seems to have been playing damaged middle-aged guys since he was about 17, and can do this sort of thing with his eyes closed. (For some of the movie, they are closed.) Miller’s gotten a lot of ink for this role, and she’s pretty good, but in my book playing a young female celebrity as a conniving, cock-teasing manipulatrix does not qualify as groundbreaking drama. I suppose it’s pedantic to insist that no real-life Pierre would be given this assignment, and that no real-life Katya would be allowed to have a long unchaperoned visit with a reporter, nor would be so stupid as to do blow in front of him, lie to her boyfriend in his presence or stick her tongue down his throat.

“Interview” is adapted from a 2003 film of the same name by the late Dutch director Theo van Gogh, who became internationally famous as a symbol of Europe’s “Muslim problem” after he was murdered on the street by an Islamic fundamentalist. Van Gogh was a protean and prickly character, famous for his vulgar remarks about Muslims, Jews and liberal politicians of all faiths and ideologies. His legacy is complicated, and his films mostly make sense within the context of contemporary European social and political debates. Whatever we may make of van Gogh’s life and death, Buscemi’s talky, stagey “Interview” — the first of three van Gogh adaptations planned by American actor-directors — doesn’t make much of a case for him as an important or original artist.

“Interview” opens July 13 in New York, Los Angeles and other major cities, with wider release expected to follow.

“Tekkonkinkreet”: “Blade Runner” meets the Rust Belt in Constantinople, with cute superpowered kids

I don’t claim any expertise in anime; like a lot of art-film types, I’ve seen Hayao Miyazaki’s pictures and not a whole lot else. But “Tekkonkinkreet,” a new animated film by Michael Arias, an American who lives and works in Japan, is clearly something special. Based on an acclaimed manga, or graphic novel, it’s been many years in the making, and the wait was worth it. Arias’ blend of traditional cell animation and 3-D CGI effects is thoroughly mind-blowing, and the film’s visual sensibility is utterly distinctive.

At first glance, there’s nothing remarkable about the apocalyptic, futuristic yarn being told here, in which a couple of street orphans with unexplained superpowers must battle a variety of evildoers trying to take over their neighborhood. Nominally, Treasure Town is an old district in a rapidly modernizing Japanese city, but it’s really a fanciful mélange of cities real and imaginary, drawn from history, comic books and movies. Festooned with enormous 1930s-style billboards and crowded with rusting industrial structures, Treasure Town also features a huge mosque and innumerable statues of Ganesh, the Hindu elephant god. It’s a little bit prewar Los Angeles and a little bit postwar Tokyo, with a dash of Cleveland, a coating of Constantinople and a heavy dose of lysergic acid.

Against this hallucinatory backdrop, our hero kids, named Black and White, must battle rival gangs, old-school yakuza, alien ninja assassins and a mysterious, perhaps imaginary figure called the Minotaur, who may be worst of all. It's a fantasy action picture, but with a core of darkness that you can't imagine seeing in American animation. Teenage Black is ferociously protective of White, a near-autistic innocent prone to seizures and visions. But both kids are slightly sinister, even animalistic characters. Black has lived by violence for too long and seems to like it. When the Minotaur tempts him with visions of near-Satanic power — in an astonishing sequence that challenges the latter stages of Kubrick's "2001" for sheer, tripped-out intensity — Black's soul, and the future of Treasure Town, hangs in the balance.

Arias, who directed the immensely successful "Matrix" spinoff "The Animatrix." has also worked with Miyazaki and other anime pioneers. As overwhelming as the visual innovations of "Tekkonkinkreet" are, he's also learned that you need to tell an emotionally engaging story that moves beyond giant robots and exploding planets. His voice talent includes some of Japan's finest actors, and by the end of this phantasmagorical journey, I was as wrapped up in the precarious fate of these two wounded kids and the honorable yakuza warlords of Treasure Town as I've been in any film all year.

"Tekkonkinkreet" opens July 13 in New York and Los Angeles, with more cities, and DVD release, to follow.

"Time": How my girlfriend became a monster

There's pretty much no way to summarize the career of chameleonic Korean filmmaker Kim Ki-duk, except to say that every one of his films is different from every other, and that his concerns run the gamut of contemporary Asian cinema: He's made violent, glossy gangster movies, quiet films about spirituality, psychological thrillers and realistic social portraits. If he's made monster movies, I haven't seen them.

Kim's latest film, "Breath," premiered at Cannes in May. "Time," just now reaching United States release, is actually last year's Kim movie. And, hey, guess what? It's a monster movie! OK, I'm speaking metaphorically. There's no 40-foot creature with wings or fangs in the movie, just a woman and man driven to madness and self-mutilation by love. What could be more monstrous than that?

At first, and even most of the way through, "Time" seems like a social-realist relationship movie, full of poetic observations about the fallacies of love and the fragile nature of identity in contemporary life. Our central couple, the suave Ji-woo (Ha Jung-woo) and the leggy Seh-hee (Park Ji-yeon), seem like hip and fashionable Seoul-dwellers, exactly the kind of young Koreans who go see Kim Ki-duk movies. Sure, Seh-hee is a bit pathologically jealous, prone to starting an angry scene if Ji-woo sneaks a peek at a cute waitress.

But none of that conveys how dangerously insane this movie and its characters are. Jealous Seh-hee abruptly disappears from Ji-woo's life, and we know (though he doesn't) that she's gone to a plastic surgeon and asked to be rendered unrecognizable. But somebody, somehow, sabotages all Ji-woo's attempts to find a new girlfriend, until, of course, he meets a girl with almost the same name (Seong Hyeon-a) who recently began working at the same coffee shop where he and Seh-hee always hung out. She seems somehow familiar, but of course they can't have met before? Or can they?

I shouldn't tell you much more, except to say that much more plastic surgery, freakazoid stalking and bad dates follow. Kim uses a version of Stephen King's inverted suspense, in which throughout the story we know more than the characters do, and can guess what bad things will happen long before they arrive. Somehow this never robs "Time" of its extraordinary combination of wistful, love-struck loneliness and horror-movie creepout, and that's a rare blend indeed. I'm not sure yet if "Time" is a masterwork, a deranged folly or just a showman's highly persuasive trick. Whatever else it is, it's a clean, economical and handsome film, terrifically acted, with a heart full of treachery and mystery.

"Time" opens July 13 at Cinema Village in New York, with more cities to follow.

Fast forward: In search of "My Best Friend"; flesh, sun, sand and booze make "Drama/Mex"

Watching the great French actor Daniel Auteuil in Patrice Leconte's cheerful, inoffensive comedy "My Best Friend" reminded me of something I read a few years ago about the Italian actor Alberto Sordi. An Italian critic wrote that Sordi was so popular because he sympathetically captured many of the flaws Italians saw in themselves, like a willful laziness and an eagerness to pass the buck and look the other way.

Auteuil is something like that in the French context. Whether in heavier fare like Michael Haneke's "Caché" or light comedy like "My Best Friend," his characters tend to be bourgeois Parisians, self-important men bordering on pomposity whose pride is easily wounded. Beneath that, there's always the ghost of romance and sensuality in Auteuil's men; he embodies the eternal French conflict over whether they are fundamentally a northern European or a Mediterranean people.

I guess "My Best Friend" is just cannily crafted entertainment, but what in hell is wrong with that? Auteuil and cabbage-eared comedian Dany Boon make a terrific odd couple as an upper-crust antique dealer with no friends and the congenial Paris taxi driver who takes him under his wing. Leconte is a graceful cinematic stylist who challenges the audience only so far and no farther, in this case by clothing a clearly homoerotic love story in hetero drag, and that has made him one of France's most beloved filmmakers. "My Best Friend" is terrifically acted, reassuringly formulaic, and moderately amusing; I especially enjoyed seeing the French version of "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" The time passed, I giggled. In the end all was set right. Don't be surprised if this makes a lot of money. (Opens July 13 in New York, with national release to follow.)

Gerardo Naranjo's deliriously trashy "[Drama/Mex](#)" may not do much to burnish the international prestige of Mexican cinema, but it's an entertaining blend of obvious influences, from softcore cable-TV porn to Tarantino to "Less Than Zero" and "Leaving Las Vegas." Furthermore, if you've recently been to Acapulco, the one-time jet-set resort city where these interlinked sleaze-fables unfold, you may well accept the outrageousness of "Drama/Mex" at face value.

We begin with a long-legged rich girl, Fernanda (Diana Garcia), whose quasi-criminal ex-boyfriend Chano (Emilio Valdés) drops in for an unannounced visit. He rapes her, and she pretty much likes it. While she's choosing between this quintessential bad boy and her hapless boyfriend Gonzalo (Juan Pablo Castaneda), an embittered businessman in late middle age (Fernando Becerril) arrives at a downscale beach hotel intent on suicide. He meets Tigrillo (Miriana Moro), a chunky young hooker who's not all that good at her job but may be just the person to help convince him to keep on living.

All this is told in a narcotic, disorienting blend of hand-held tracking shots and sweaty, semi-sexy close-ups. I suppose Naranjo's farcical violence and amoral darkness are all in the service of some message about the economic divisions and soulless emptiness of contemporary Mexican life, and it's one most of us have heard before. I liked "Drama/Mex" not for its supposed conscience but for the intense, intimate, hell-for-leather drive of its storytelling, its broad, unabashed stripes of Eros and Thanatos, in the ripest B-movie tradition. There may be nothing moral or especially original about this movie, but it's got life in it. (Now playing at the [IFC Center](#) in New York, with more cities to follow. Also available on-demand via IFC In Theaters, on many cable TV systems.)

