

5/1 PETER RABBIT LIVE ACTION FAMILY
\$87 MILL BO 2543 SCREENS **PG** 95 MINUTES
DVD/COMBO DIGITAL COPY WITH COMBO

Will Gluck's *Peter Rabbit* opens as one might expect for an animated/live-action film based on the misadventures of Beatrix Potter's beloved fictional animal character: with a flock of birds gliding through the sky and singing a pretty little tune worthy of Julie Andrews.

Peter's right. This film is an unapologetic vulgarization of its source material, turning Potter's mischievous little scamp into a wise-cracking Poochie-style bad boy who can't help himself from dropping a carrot down Mr. McGregor's (Sam Neill) exposed butt crack. But taken on its own terms, the film actually manages to deliver 90 minutes of breezy, charming, and occasionally genuinely clever entertainment. With its mix of live-action and

hyper-real animal animation, *Peter Rabbit* plays like a country cousin to Paul King's *Paddington* films, similarly transcendently oddball sensibility.

Peter Rabbit is a fast-paced, gag-a-minute affair that at times recalls the films of Zucker-Abrahams-Zucker in its willingness to do anything for a laugh. Only Gluck is prone to desperately pausing for laughter—often cutting to a reaction shot to underline a gag.

This will rent as well as **PITCH PERFECT 3, DADDY'S HOME 2, COCO, THE STAR, and DESPICABLE ME 3.**





5/1 WINCHESTER DRAMA

\$27 MILL BO 2489 SCREENS PG-13 100 MINUTES

Helen Mirren (COLLATERAL BEAUTY, RED, RED 2, HITCHCOCK, THE DEBT, ARTHUR)

Was Sarah Lockwood Winchester, the widow of gun maker William Winchester, crazy? Does she actually see the ghosts of the many who died from the use of his rifles? And are they really directing her to build endless rooms onto her sprawling California mansion?

Interleaving just enough truth to leave us wondering if the unbelievable is believable, the movie *Winchester* takes us inside what is still one of San Jose, California's most visited tourist attractions. The 24 hour a day, 7 days a week construction of the rambling Winchester House, an architectural mess of dozens of bedrooms, with hallways and staircases leading to nowhere, began in the 1880s. By 1906, when the film begins its story, the domicile is seven stories high with about 90 rooms.

Helen Mirren plays Sarah, who still owns half of her husband's company. The heiress has the habit of chatting with the deceased while rambling through the corridors of her home and locking misbehaving entities into bedrooms barred shut with 13 nails. Meanwhile, back at the firing range, the directors of the Winchester Repeating Arms Company would like nothing more than to have the woman declared insane. After all, a major shareholder convinced her company's flagship product is evil, can't be good for business. Yet it will take just the right sort of disreputable doctor to make the judgement call – and the board is happy to supply a bribe.



Eric Price (Jason Clarke) may call himself a physician, but the San Francisco resident's favorite remedy is the highly-addictive laudanum. His own abuse of the drug provides recurring visions of his late wife who was a victim of a self-inflicted gunshot (yes, from a Winchester weapon). It doesn't take much persuasion for Eric to accept the offer to take a trip to the countryside and have Sarah committed.



The outcome of having a stoned shrink spend a few days with a haunted heiress in a dark and spooky mansion is the stuff classic Hollywood horror flicks are made of – and this script hits all the bases. Jump scenes are plentiful, along with glimpses of ghoulish faces. These metaphysical confrontations ramp up for a big finale (that just happens to coincide with an historical earthquake). The depictions become increasingly intense and include scenes of a mass shooting and others being taken down by Winchester's bullets. As well, there is the portrayal of a young boy, presumably possessed, who falls from a rooftop.

While lacking in creativity, *Winchester* still has enough blind corners to keep you wondering what's around the next one. Also, it is nearly clear of profanities and sexual content. Depending on parents' tolerance of the violent conclusion (an ironic ending for a movie that seems to be taking its own shot at lax gun laws), older teens may find this haunted house entertaining enough to be worth a visit. This will rent as well as **THE DISASTER ARTIST, LAST FLAG FLYING, THE MOUNTAIN BETWEEN US, BEFORE I FALL, and THE FOUNDER.**



5/1 12 STRONG ACTION
\$44 MILL BO 2987 SCREENS R 130 MINUTES
DVD/COMBO 28 DAYS BEFORE REDBOX
COMBO WITH THE DIGITAL CODE

Chris Hemsworth (THOR: RAGNORAK, GHOSTBUSTERS, RED DAWN, SNOW WHITE AND THE HUNTSMAN, CABIN IN THE WOODS)

In late 2001, the United States launched its military operations in Afghanistan with a covert mission to seize the key northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif. Flash forward 16 years and that event now serves as the basis for the starry-eyed *12 Strong*. Meanwhile, America is still fighting the same damn war. But you'd hardly know that from watching this rah-rah recruitment film for the U.S. Army, which endeavors to look away from all the horrors associated from the American occupation of Afghanistan in order to return us to those halcyon days just after 9/11, when everything seemed so simple: The U.S. was good, al-Qaeda was bad, and the invasion of an impoverished country most Americans couldn't even locate on a map was a purely just and righteous act.

And so, *12 Strong* begins with a montage of terror attacks set to gloomy drone music, which attempts to soothe the audience's potential pangs of conscience by reminding us that Osama bin-Laden started this thing. We then meet Mitch Nelson (Chris Hemsworth), a rugged, all-American Special Forces captain on leave from the military, moving into a new house with his wife (Elsa Pataky) and daughter (Marie Wagenman). After he witnesses the 9/11 attacks on TV, Mitch storms over to the local Army base and demands to be reinstated with his Green Berets unit, known as ODA 595. And soon enough, after a bit of bureaucratic tussling, the 12-man team is parachuting into Afghanistan, where they will lead local Northern Alliance forces to seize Mazar-i-Sharif from the Taliban, which would become the U.S.'s first major victory of the war.



It's worth noting that in a film chock-full of death, the murder of this one girl is the only truly memorable moment of violence. Depicted in tight close-ups, with a grisly fascination that borders on pornographic, the scene deviates sharply from the rote, video-game-like violence of the film's battle sequences, in which masses of faceless Taliban fighters drop to the ground like flies as tiny traces of CGI blood spurts into the air before quickly vanishing. Fuglsig particularly revels in the destruction caused by bombing raids, which he often captures in sweeping aerial shots that give us a bird's-eye view of the awesome might of the American empire. That the men who die in these battles might not be purely "evil," that they too might have families, friends, and lovers, is a nuance that *12 Strong* doesn't care to discern. The enemy here is just that, existing merely as foils for our American heroes.



As Fuglsig doesn't allow any complicated thoughts about war, colonization, and mortality to hover around his characters, *12 Strong* inevitably proceeds as a jaunty imperial adventure through the wilds of northern Afghanistan as Mitch and his men sleep in caves, ride horses through mountains, mock locals (before bonding with them, of course), and, in the film's money shot, charge their steeds into glorious battle like latter-day Lawrences of Arabia. Only Northern Alliance General Abdul Rashid Dostum (Navid Negahban) touches on some of the gloomier aspects of our military's designs on his country, making the obligatory observation that this land has long been "the graveyard of empires." But Fuglsig isn't interested in probing such matters. For *12 Strong*, Afghanistan isn't so much the graveyard of the U.S. empire as its playground.

This will rent as well as **ONLY THE BRAVE, AMERICAN MADE, THANK YOU FOR YOUR SERVICE, THE FOREIGNER and AMERICAN ASSASSIN.**



5/8 FIFTY SHADES FREED DRAMA
\$98 MILL BO 3768 SCREENS **R** 105 MINUTES
DVD/COMBO 28 DAYS BEFORE REDBOX
DIGITAL COPY WITH COMBO

Dakota Johnson (FIFTY SHADES OF GREY, HOW TO BE SINGLE, A BIGGER SPLASH, BLACK MASS, NEED FOR SPEED)

If Christian Grey was once a perfect specimen of unbridled wealth only marred by sexual predilections that were at once deeply conservative and nonsensically commitment-phobic, in *Fifty Shades Freed* he's just a man with an ever-expanding fleet of boats, airplanes, and seaside properties, perennially waiting for his new wife to get home from work. That the dynamics between Ana and Christian have changed fundamentally is evident from the film's opening sequence, a wedding montage that ends in a—for this franchise—uncommonly economical bit of visual messaging. Though Ana enters the ceremony in a lace dress and says her vows in front of a wall of white roses, she leaves her wedding in an off-white pantsuit.

It's an assertion of ambition and authority that's in some ways nominal; as we're reminded more than once, in Ana's new role as the fiction editor of a Seattle publishing house, Christian is her "boss's boss's boss." That said, this is very much her film, and *Fifty Shades Freed*—written, like the last installment, by James's husband, Niall Leonard—demonstrates a genuine self-awareness of the strange hypocrisies she's forced to submit to as she attempts to drag Christian out of the Victorian era and pull him into an age of nontraditional gender roles, just as she's also prodding him to what's posited as his ultimate relinquishment of power and dominance: fatherhood.



Even the most basic emotions and desires, when broken into their component parts, can become hopelessly confusing and convoluted, and the *Fifty Shades* films have always operated in this register. In



this outing, though, Foley and Leonard plow through various newlywed dilemmas with a blithe confidence that's as winning as it is wholly unearned. Christian's tedious, brooding defensiveness is treated like the punchline it is, and Ana's expressions of will are persistent and righteous, however minor her aims. When Christian discovers that Ana is still using her given surname at work, Ana turns the tables on him, demanding to know whether he'd ever change his name for her. After he preposterously claims he would, she becomes Anastasia Grey at work. Whose victory is this, anyway? Foley's film suggests that any semblance of capitulation on Christian's part is a win for Ana and women at large, even if that momentary triumph leads to a further sacrifice of Ana's independence.

This will rent as well as **A BAD MOM'S CHRISTMAS, GIRLS NIGHT OUT, HOME AGAIN, HOUSE** and **GIRLS TRIP**.



5/2 BLACK PANTHER ACTION/ADVENTURE/SCI/FI
\$ 605,400,528 BOX OFFICE **PG-13** 134 MINUTES
DVD/BLU RAY DIGITAL COPY WITH BLU RAY

**Michael B. Jordan (TV---FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS,
PARENTHOOD---FILM---CREED, FANTASTIC FOUR,
FRUITVALE STATION, RED TAILS)**

This is a Marvel Studios production first and foremost, and you're never going to forget it in light of the pro forma plotting, CG sturm und drang, and gratuitous Stan Lee cameo. Yet the external pressures surrounding the film—chiefly its status as the superhero flick involving and revolving around people of color—have kept the bean counters somewhat at bay. That, plus the fact that Coogler, who penned the screenplay with Joe Robert Cole, is able to give many things here that impassioned, obsessional tinge required of memorable, if not always masterful, art. This is apparent from scene one, a lovingly crafted animated prologue in which N'Jobu (Sterling K. Brown) narrates the history of the fictional, scientifically advanced African nation of Wakanda, in addition to explaining the origins of vibranium, the metal that has allowed his people to stay hidden in plain sight for generations. (It's also, as comics fans know, the base element of Captain America's whip-it-good! shield.)

Wakanda is an effective utopia, while the rest of the world is beset by war, famine, poverty, and other ills; the great sin of slavery is glancingly referenced by N'Jobu, yet its damning, deleterious effects linger and resonate in how the story plays out. It's clear that Coogler is more in charge than most Marvel hirelings when he smash-cuts from this fantastical opening to a basketball court in Oakland, California circa 1992. The sudden verisimilitude doesn't feel faux, but lived-in. (Coogler is himself Oakland born and raised.)

While a group of boys shoots some hoops, an otherworldly drama plays out in a nearby apartment complex. It turns out that N'Jobu is in self-exile because of his disgust at Wakanda's non-interventionist policies. Why should they harbor state-of-the-art technology while others (those with dark skin, especially) suffer at the hands of myriad oppressors? T'Chaka (Atandwa Kani), N'Jobu's brother and Wakanda's king, finds his alienated sibling, brands him a traitor, and, in a heated moment, kills him. In the present day, this sin of the father comes back to haunt both men's children: T'Chaka's son, T'Challa (Chadwick Boseman), the eponymous hero, who's next in line to rule Wakanda, and N'Jobu's offspring, Erik Killmonger (Michael B. Jordan), who's out for vengeance and his own chance at sovereignty.

There's a narrative lopsidedness to Black Panther that sharply undercuts Killmonger's emotional journey.

The first section of Black Panther traces T'Challa's ascent to the throne after the death of his father (who was murdered in Captain America: Civil War), as well as Killmonger's exploits in the company of the demented, mechanical-armed mercenary Ulysses Klaue (pronounced "Claw" and played by a non-motion-captured Andy Serkis). Coogler immerses us in the arcadian sights and sounds of Wakanda, which counts characters portrayed by a dream cast including Lupita Nyong'o, Daniel Kaluuya, Angela Bassett, Forest Whitaker, and Isaach de Bankolé among its many residents. And he has just as much fun with the James Bond-ian derring-do of the Klaue plotline, which culminates in a South Korea-set casino standoff/car chase. It's an imaginatively visualized sequence, featuring a splendid sight gag involving the remnants of a wrecked vehicle screeching to a halt. And it's a terrific showcase for two scene-stealers: the spear-wielding female bodyguard Okoye (Danai Gurira) and T'Challa's smart-ass, tech-savvy sister, Shuri (Letitia Wright).



"Don't scare me like that, colonizer!" says Shuri to white C.I.A. operative Everett Ross (Martin Freeman), whose hilariously befuddled reaction just about



encapsulates the centuries-long absurdities (and accompanying horrors) of subjugating others based on their skin color. It's evident that Coogler is attempting to use Marvel's galaxy-guarding template against itself, and not just to address the immoral disparities of race, but also the ruinous civil wars that can erupt within an exploited and persecuted community. The Wakandans' decision to hide from the world rather than work to better it is ultimately an act of cowardice. Killmonger is the flesh-and-blood result, a take-no-prisoners antagonist with a more-than-justifiable grievance against the society that quietly disavowed him. And Jordan—Coogler's muse between this, Creed, and Fruitvale Station—plays the character with such moving, occasionally gut-wrenching commitment, as in a scene in which he visits his deceased father on the ancestral plane, that it nearly mitigates the goofiness of his moniker and the superficiality of the film in toto.

The tension between commerce and craftsmanship is a key facet of American pop cinema. But as the budgets for blockbuster tentpoles have gotten larger and the projects more risk-averse (with Marvel Studios and its parent company, Walt Disney Pictures, as Exhibit A overlords of the trend) it's become much too easy to acclaim fleeting inspiration and shallow gesturing toward diversity and goodwill as some kind of apogee. There is no doubt that Coogler makes the most that he can out of this property. And it's more than certain that Black Panther will give audiences, especially underrepresented ones, a vision of themselves that Hollywood historically denies. And still the film seems, even at its best, like an apex of lowered expectations.

A conundrum though: What to do when there's obvious artistry in one of these vacuous behemoths? Say, Loki getting Hulk-smashed in The Avengers, or Wonder Woman rising toward the camera in all her Hans Zimmer/Junkie XL-scored glory during the climactic battle of Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice. Up to now, such moments have been diamonds in the rough, few and very far between. Let's acknowledge, too, that they're a low bar by which to judge real genius, cinematic or otherwise. Now we can take some small pleasure in what director Ryan Coogler achieves with **Black Panther**.

And just how huge a renter will this be? Just check your rentals on **JUSTICE LEAGUE, THOR, MAZE RUNNER, THE COMMUTER, STAR WARS: THE LAST JEDI, BLADE RUNNER 2049 and DUNKIRK.**



5/15 EVERY DAY DRAMA
\$9 MILL BO 1659 SCREENS **PG/13** 96 MINUTES
DVD/BLU RAY

Angourie Rice (SPIDERMAN: HOMECOMING, BEGUILLED, THESE FINAL HOURS, THE NICE GUYS)

Angourie Rice headlines Michael Sucsy's film as Rhiannon, a sad teenage girl with a rocky home life and a shitty boyfriend until, one day, he starts listening, asking questions, liking good music, and acting silly—giving her the best day she's had in years. The next, he's back to being the same old Justin (Justice Smith): distant and uncaring, with a fondness for getting wasted, fooling around, and tuning into sports radio. Lucky for Rhiannon, it seems like every day thereafter she meets one of a diverse series of new sympathetic strangers who're nice to her, tuck her hair

behind her ear, and criticize Justin. Turns out, they're all A., an incorporeal personality who has fallen for her.

Sucsy's film smartly opens without voiceover or exposition. The novel was narrated by A., but the film—like Levithan's 2015 follow-up companion, *Another Day*—focuses on Rhiannon. She's the audience surrogate, struggling to comprehend the mystery of A., who wakes up each morning in a different body, always around the same age but otherwise infinitely diverse: male or female; trans or cis; straight or gay; fit or fat; less abled or abled; a person of color or white.



Having walked countless miles in literally thousands of pairs of shoes, A. has generally adhered to a Hippocratic standard—to do no harm—until having spent a day as Justin and for the first time fallen in love.

Throughout, the film raises metaphysical issues of physical and psychological autonomy—for example, does A. morally have a right to kiss someone with someone else's body?—only to gloss over them, probably because addressing them could too quickly shut down the romance. More thematic potential, then, resides in the film's transcendence of sexuality. A. asks Rhiannon to love A., regardless of sex or gender or ability or appearance—which she does, suggesting there's a perfect self, reminiscent of a religious soul, that exists independent of the body and its hormones, biochemistry, and physiology.

This will rent as well as **FOREVER MY GIRL, LADY BIRD, ALL I SEE IS YOU, THE FLORIDA PROJECT** and **LET THERE BE LIGHT**.



5/15 SAMSON BIBLICAL EPIC/ACTION
\$6 MILL BO 1283 SCREENS **PG-13** 110 MINUTES
DVD/COMBO 28 DAYS BEFORE REDBOX

Jackson Rathbone (TV—THE LAST SHIP---FILM---JUSTICE, UNTIL WE MEET AGAIN, THE TWILIGHT SAGA)

Samson is an action packed, gripping biblical epic that really brings to life the story of Samson. It thoroughly captures the energy, strength, passion and calling of Samson and is a must see film. You should also see the original starring Victor Mature. Also

fantastic.

Based on the historical biblical account in the book of Judges, chapters 13-16. Samson, a man gifted with supernatural strength which strikes fear into the hearts of his enemies. He leads his oppressed tribe against the mighty Philistine empire. However his impulsive decisions lead him to be seduced by women leading to his capture, blindness and imprisonment. But he calls upon God for one final victory.



For those of you who know the biblical account, you will know how action packed and thrilling the story is, and this big screen adaption really brings this across. Sure there is a bit of artistic licence but it does stay true to the story right through to his victorious death. Bringing the action front and centre along with strong direction and visually solid cinematography, the energetic story pops to life and has you gripped and on the edge of your seat.



Some of the action packed highlights include Samson vanquishing 1,000 Philistines with a donkey's jaw-bone, this scene and others really exhibit the strength that he received from God.

We see the human side of Samson, his struggles, his temptations, his failings, which we can all relate to, do we really stop and listen to God, to hear his calling and to do his will, or do we get distracted by the world. The good news is that God can use us, even though we may have failed or don't feel useable, God is at work within us all.



5/22 EARLY MAN FAMILY
\$11 MILL BO 2126 SCREENS PG 89 MINUTES
DVD/COMBO

Set in a massive crater carved by a long-ago meteor blast, starry-eyed Dug (voiced by Eddie Redmayne) lives in idyllic splendor with the rest of his goofy but lovable caveman tribe. Park establishes their pleasantly crude way of life in the film's opening stretch via a sprightly rabbit-hunting sequence and some nifty *Flintstones*-style sight gags, such as a scarab that serves as an electric razor. But Dug isn't quite satisfied, as he wants to hunt mammoth. And just as he decides to make his dream a reality by leaving the crater, the tribe's sanctuary is invaded by bronze-armored invaders led by the greedy Lord Nooth (Tom Hiddleston, putting on an

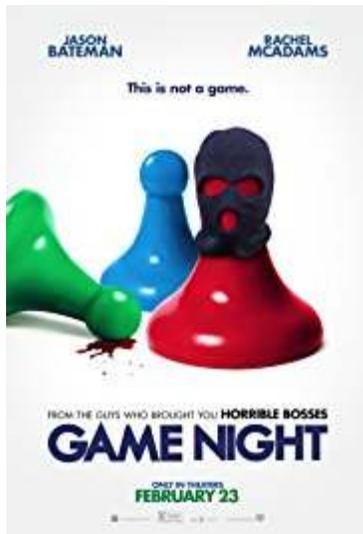
outlandish French accent), who boots out the cavemen to turn their home into a massive copper mine.

This clash between prehistoric pastoralism and technological progress is laden with potential for biting comedy, but Park flattens the conflict into a series of slob-versus-snobs clichés. No sooner have these Paleolithic putzes encountered an entirely new culture in the high-walled city-state where Nooth lives in bronze-gilded splendor than the film awkwardly shifts gears, indulging a rote sports-movie storyline that sees Dug and his hapless pals pitted against Nooth's hand-selected soccer pros in a match that will determine control of Dug's precious crater. And thus, as Dug attempts to whip his clan into shape for the big game, *Early Man* turns into a genial but bland series of sports-themed slapstick, inspiring speeches about teamwork, and numerous training montages set to obnoxiously perky pop-punk tunes.



Early Man perks to life when it indulges its weirder impulses, like a monstrous, man-eating mallard—introduced via an ingenious forced-perspective sight gag—or a “primordial soup” that resembles a bowl of green Gak spotted with eyeballs. And even when the film is at its most tepid—namely during its climactic football game—it's still a treat to watch real light hit actual modeling clay, without the cleansing interference of CGI to erase fingerprints and smooth out character movements. There's something charmingly modest about the way Park allows us to see the imperfections of his stop-motion animation, to remind us from time to time that what we're seeing is essentially just lumps of clay placed in front of miniature handmade sets. But while Park's craft remains impressive, here his talents often serve only to highlight the fundamental lack of inspiration at the film's core.

This is as fun as **PADDINGTON 2**, **FERDINAND**, **MY LITTLE PONY**, and **CARS 3** and will rent as well as they did.



5/22 GAME NIGHT COMEDY

\$67 MILL BO 3488 SCREENS R 100 MINUTES
DVD/COMBO DIGITAL COPY WITH THE COMBO
28 DAYS BEFORE REDBOX

Jason Bateman (TV—ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT—FILM—CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE, HORRIBLE BOSSES, HANGOVER, IDENTITY THIEF, UP IN THE AIR, JUNO)
Rachel McAdams (TV—TRUE DETECTIVE—FILM—SOUTHPAW, ALOHA, MIDNIGHT IN PARIS, THE VOW, WEDDING CRASHERS)

Rather than collecting a bunch of funny people together on a set and just letting them riff, the film establishes coherent characters and drops them into a twisty mystery plot that's tightly crafted enough to generate some real narrative momentum while never getting too bogged down in its own plot that it forgets to be funny. There may be nothing particularly revolutionary about any of that, but sometimes it's enough to simply nail the basics.

The film centers on Max (Jason Bateman) and Annie (Rachel McAdams), an über-competitive couple whose lives revolve around the weekly game nights they host at their house for a small group of friends, at which they drink Tecate® beers, eat Tostitos® Scoops!®, and play board games like Mad Gab®, Clue®, and Monopoly®. (The product placement here isn't exactly subtle.) After Max's brother, Brooks (Kyle Chandler), rolls into town for one of these weekly gatherings, he proposes a twist for the following week: a special game night to be hosted at his swanky rental home. When the usual crew arrives, they discover they won't be playing Pictionary® or charades, but rather participating in an interactive mystery game. When Brooks is violently kidnapped, they figure it's all part of the fun, but as they start to investigate, they soon discover that something deeper and darker may be afoot.



Game Night's characters aren't exactly complex, and some of them—such as the husband-and-wife duo played by Lamorne Morris and Kylie Bunbury—are wasted in one-joke subplots. But the actors are infectious in their approach to the material: McAdams brings a zesty exuberance even to the film's most grotesque gags (including a back-alley surgery scene), while Billy Magnusson plays the group's resident dimwit, Ryan, with shit-eating glee. But it's Jesse Plemons who truly steals the show, playing a creepy, broken-hearted policeman with a forlorn intensity that invites equal parts laughter and pity.



Mark Perez's screenplay offers up some surprisingly satisfying twists and turns, maintaining *just* enough plausibility to prevent the film from veering into sheer absurdity. Things escalate toward the inevitable action-packed finale, executed serviceably, if unremarkably. John Francis Daley and Jonathan Goldstein's true directorial talents lie in their ability to pull off simple visual gags with aplomb, as in a scene in which Ryan attempts to offer someone a paltry \$17 bribe by *slowly* sliding the bills, one by one, across a table. It's a straightforward joke that works like gangbusters thanks to the precise editing and camera placement, underlining each bill's agonizingly glacial crawl across the table. After the dust has settled from the film's requisite madcap climax, it's these smaller moments that stick with you, suggesting that the old saying is true: It's not whether you win or lose, it's how you play the game.

This will rent as well as **THE COMMUTER, DEN OF THIEVES, WIND RIVER, AMERICAN MADE, KINGSMEN: THE GOLDEN CIRCLE** and **BABY DRIVER**.



5/22 RED SPARROW ACTION/THRILLER
\$43 MILL BO 2498 SCREENS R 140 MINUTES
DVD/COMBO DIGITAL COPY WITH THE COMBO
28 DAYS BEFORE REDBOX

Jennifer Lawrence (MOTHER, AMERICAN HUSTLE, PASSENGERS, X-MEN: APOCALYPSE, JOY, THE HUNGER GAMES)

Francis Lawrence's *Red Sparrow* is at its most deliciously ludicrous across a series of scenes set inside the Sparrow School, where young men and women like Dominika Egorova (Jennifer Lawrence) are trained to seduce Mother Russia's enemies. The school's matron, played by Charlotte Rampling, is in the business of creating spies for the country's police state, and after bombarding her students with broadsides decrying the West for its "sentimental moralism," among other things, she gets to work. Any given day's lesson plan seems to be spontaneously inspired. Take the girl who reflexively refers to a prominent political figure in Russian society who was caught on camera in a compromising position with another man a "degenerate," which is the matron's cue to unbelievably drag the politico, now a prisoner, into the room and have the girl kneel before him and ready herself to go down on him.

Dominika is a ballerina whose career comes to a gruesome halt during a performance, after which her Uncle Vanya (Matthias Schoenaerts), a high-ranking S.V.R. official, provides her with evidence incriminating the peers who planned her injury. After approving of her revenge tactics, which involve Dominika turning her temporary cane into a bludgeon, Vanya sets out to test her mettle against the state's enemies. Soon she's sent to Miss Rampling's School for Sexual Enigmas, where *of course* she makes an incredible impression on S.V.R.'s higher-ups in spite of doing almost nothing according to script. In *Red Sparrow's* best scene, Dominika



is asked to give the classmate who tried to rape her the day before exactly "what he wants," at which point she proceeds to do the exact opposite. First she takes off her clothes, and after spreading her legs, Dominika figuratively cuts him down to size by obsessively fixating on his flaccid member—a power play that tells you everything you need to know about this fiercest of Red Sparrows.

Soon, Dominika is hopscotching back and forth between Russia and Budapest, put on the tail of a C.I.A. agent, Nathaniel Nash (Joel Edgerton), who was once stationed in Moscow and immediately senses that she purposely tipped him off to her real identity. But to what end? From Russia, Vanya and his cronies—the ever-somber Alexei (Ciarán Hinds) and part-time ushanka spokesman Korchnoi (Jeremy Irons)—keep tabs on Dominika's efforts to ingratiate herself with Nathaniel in order to apprehend a mole within the S.V.R., while the C.I.A. attempts to use the newly minted Sparrow to catch a traitor within the U.S. government's own ranks. There will be secret exchanges, break-ins, torture chambers, and slaps to the face, and there's a brisk efficiency with which *Red Sparrow* zig-zags from plot point to plot point, never giving fateful or conspicuous weight to all the breadcrumbs that point toward its long game.



The filmmakers may keep Dominika at arm's length from the audience, but Jennifer Lawrence makes hay of having to play a walking enigma. The way that Dominika is at once completely transparent and at the same time impossible to read is *Red Sparrow's* most intriguing through line, not least of which for the way that Lawrence makes you grasp the canny mental gymnastics that her character has to do in order for everything that she says to be at once truth and obfuscation.

The actress constantly operates in a less bludgeoning register than the film, which is only really concerned with the matter of Dominika's allegiances and how the mechanics of the twisty plot keeps that suspense percolating. Lawrence provocatively regards us as her only allies, tipping us off in the subtlest of ways to the reality that Dominika's only allegiance is to the blunt force of her avenging body.

This will rent as well as **THE COMMUTER**, **MOLLY'S GAME**, **ONLY THE BRAVE**, **DARKEST HOUR**, and **THREE BILLBOARDS OUTSIDE EBBING MO**.



5/15 ANNIHILATION THRILLER
\$29 MILL BO 2365 SCREENS R 115 MINUTES
DVD/COMBO

Natalie Portman (JACKIE, THE PROFESSIONALS, THOR, ZOOLANDER, BEAUTIFUL GIRLS, HEAT)
Jennifer Jason Leigh (LBJ, THE ROAD TO PERDITION, THE MACHINIST, GRANDVIEW USA, BACKDRAFT)

Natalie Portman stars as Lena, a Johns Hopkins University biology professor and Army vet mourning her covert-ops husband, Kane (Oscar Isaac), who disappeared a year ago while on a mission. Then he turns up at their home—confused, unaffectionate, and bleeding from the nose. The ambulance she calls for him is cut off by an armada of black SUVs, out of which pour armed men who remove Kane and sedate Lena. She's brought to Area X, a secretive government base observing a mysterious ecological, and perhaps divine or extraterrestrial, phenomenon they call the Shimmer—the place where Kane had been, and from where he and he alone has inexplicably returned.

What's happening in that tropical landscape—mostly contained within a national park, though its borders are expanding—is, well, weird, involving a possibly alien recalibration of all DNA and organic matter: plants are mimicking people, alligators are crossbreeding with sharks, and human consciousness is being imprinted onto hideous boar-bear hybrids. It's a realm of biological fluidity, as if all cells were being mixed together in a big pot and ladled back out into the world in all sorts of wacky combinations.



Alex Garland's film gets momentum from the deeper it pushes into the uncertainties of ecology and the self.

Geoff Barrow and Ben Salisbury's score gets at that unsteady natural imbalance, mixing acoustic, finger-pickin' folk with dissonant droning, respectively evoking the organic and the inhuman. Cinematographer Rob Hardy captures the Shimmer in hyper-surrealistic fashion: The film's images often look as though they were shot through melting glass, illuminated with all the colors of a pastel rainbow—and midday skies sparkle with rays of orange and purple. Early on, a striking close-up of Lena and Kane holding hands across a table is lensed through a glass of water, beautifully suggesting *Annihilation's* swirling impermanence of living and loving things.



On the page, VanderMeer drops readers into this unstable world, enveloping us into the enigmas of characters and setting. By contrast, Garland builds things up slowly, patiently establishing the characters, their realities, and the place they're heading into, structuring the film like a kaleidoscopic, psychedelic detective story. As Lena teams up with a squad of female scientists—led by Dr. Ventress (Jennifer Jason Leigh) and including Anya Thorensen (Gina Rodriguez), Cass Sheppard (Tuva Novotny), and Josie Radek (Tessa Thompson)—heading into the Shimmer to investigate it, *Annihilation* gets momentum from the deeper it pushes into the uncertainties of ecology and the self. The members of previous

expeditions have either been killed by whatever lies within, or gone mad and killed each other.

The things that the team find inside the Shimmer are frightening and bizarre, building up to a climax in which one character turns into a ball of light and another is trapped in a pas de deux with a mercury-skinned mimic. Another one had already wandered off willfully to become a tree, a rather lazy way of writing off a character who's no longer narratively necessary. Many of VanderMeer's most outlandish details, however, have been cut. There's no slug monster made of light transcribing apocalyptic sermons in fungus along the breathing walls of a submerged tower. In fact, the tower—the novel's most significant location—barely appears. But that's fine, as Garland should be free to do to the book what the Shimmer does to living things.

What's much more disappointing is that he's taken VanderMeer's cold, complex, powerful, and unnamed hero and not only given her a name, so as blandly to define her, but also reduced her to action-movie clichés: good with a gun and calm under pressure, but in love with her husband, and warm and friendly when she finally opens up. The scientists are strong women, for sure, which are always a welcome sight in a wide-release American film and would-be blockbuster. But most of them are also given basic backstories: one has lost a daughter; another cuts herself. Garland tries too hard to make these characters relatable in predictably “feminine” ways—as partners and caregivers, to themselves and others, which is to say, as specifically emotional beings—instead of just emphasizing through cinema their basic humanity.



5/29 15:17 PARIS ACTION/THRILLER
\$37 MILL BO 2376 SCREENS PG-13 94 MINUTES
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On August 21, 2015, three young American men—Airman First Class Spencer Stone, National Guard specialist Alek Skarlatos, and Anthony Sadler, their childhood friend—helped passengers to subdue a Moroccan terrorist named Ayoub El-Khazzani, who was carrying an AK-47 assault rifle on a high-speed train traveling from Amsterdam to Paris. Stone, Skarlatos, and Sadler became international heroes, winning the Legion of Honor and receiving personal congratulations from President Obama. With journalist Jeffrey E. Stern, they wrote a surprisingly visceral and nuanced book, and now they're starring as themselves in the film adaptation directed by Clint Eastwood.

The 15:17 to Paris has an odd intensity that springs from an aesthetic that's audacious, masterful, and shockingly inept all at once. The film's first act embarrassingly reduces the book's study of class, race, masculinity, and American gun worship down to a series of sketches in which bad actors and misplaced celebrities utter amateurishly presentational dialogue. Eastwood's devoted apologists will not doubt praise these sequences for something like their "bold alienation effects"—which isn't entirely nonsensical, at least when the film follows Stone, Skarlatos, and Sadler into young adulthood, allowing the men themselves to take center stage. They aren't professional actors, but their non-acting creates a resonant tension, as their misplacement in a Hollywood film, directed by a legend, comes to approximate the surreal sense of misplacement that they could have felt when finding themselves in the midst of a terrorist attack. The docudramatic, poetic otherness of these real heroes in a quasi-fictional film is the ace up Eastwood's sleeve.



However, when such a mixture of the found and simulated is weighed against, say, the similarly radical work of Abbas Kiarostami, this film looks shabby. So much is lost here from Eastwood's impatience—from his need to shoot nearly a film a year regardless of the state of the screenplay in question. One misses the prismatic structure of the *15:17 to Paris* book, which fuses multiple points of view—including El-Khazzani's—and which is reduced by Dorothy Blyskal's script to cut-and-pasted bromides. Though the men's trip through Europe has a few moments of mischievous salaciousness, especially an unexpectedly sensual sequence in an Amsterdam dance club, these scenes are often shackled by a detached, hermetic quality. Eastwood probably see this sketchiness as a sign of integrity—of a willingness to dispense with pretense and cut straight to the heart of the matter. But the film's evocative, perhaps purposeful awkwardness alternates with ordinary awfulness. Eastwood's *The 15:17 to Paris* could've used more conventional means of refinement, namely rewriting and a willingness to shoot more than a handful of takes. Balls, however glorious, must be tempered by brains.

This will rent as well as **THANK YOU FOR YOUR SERVICE, THE COMMUTER, ONLY THE BRAVE, AMERICAN MADE** and **HITMAN'S BODYGUARD**.