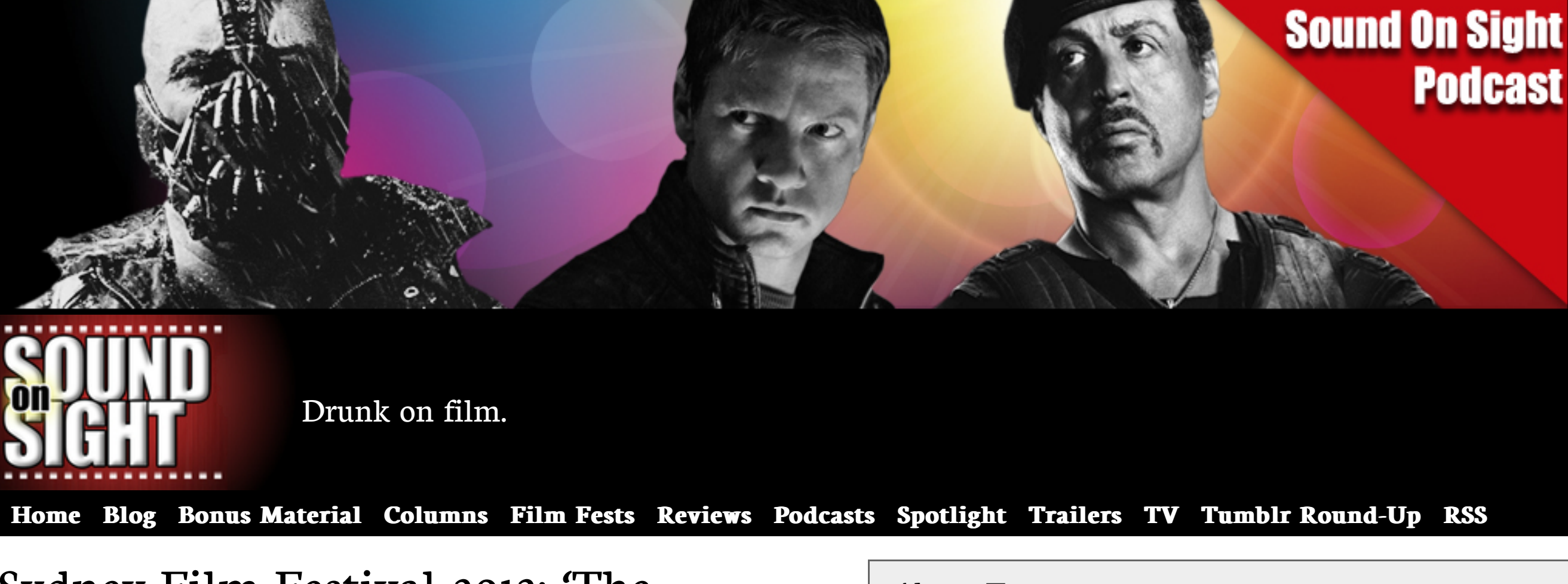




Sydney Film Festival 2012: ‘The Loneliest Planet’ traverses the sweeping green hills of estrangement

PUBLISHED ON JUNE 20, 2012 BY TOPE IN [REVIEWS](#)

TAGGED: [JULIA LOKTEV](#), [THE LONELIEST PLANET](#)

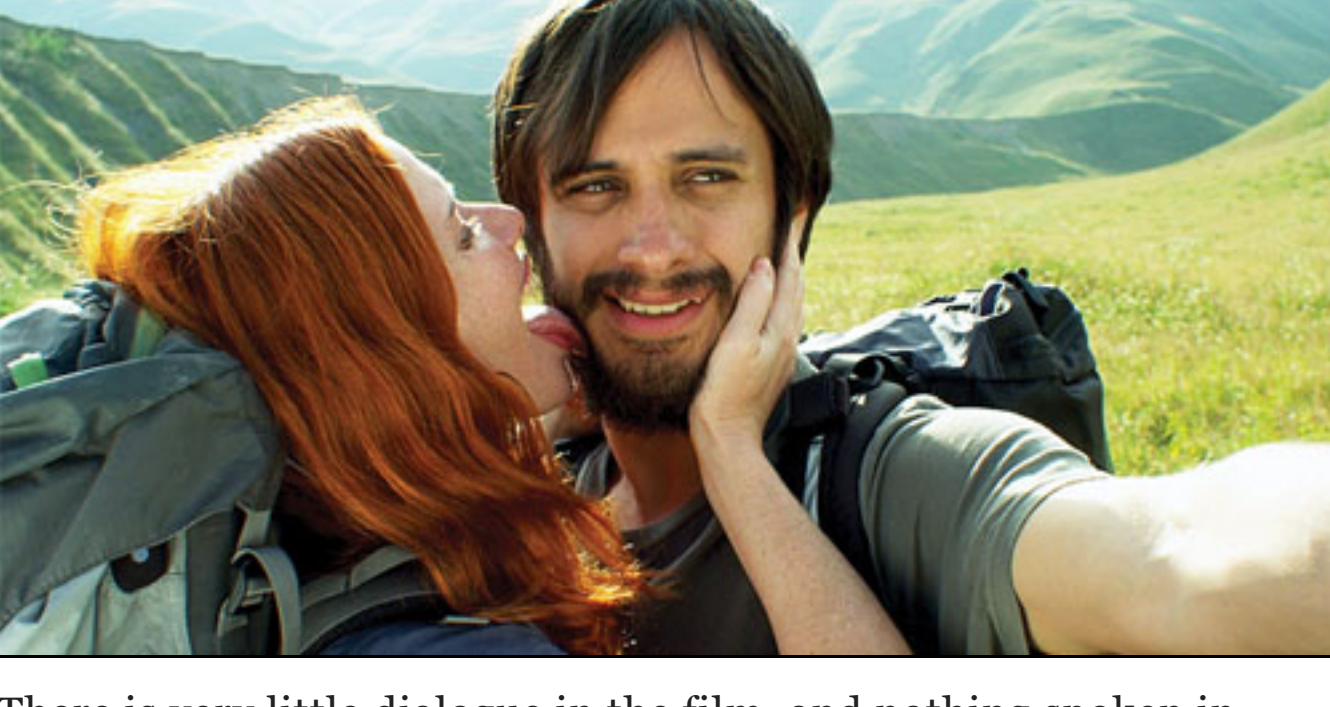


The Loneliest Planet
Directed by Julia Loktev
Written by Julia Loktev
2011, USA, Germany

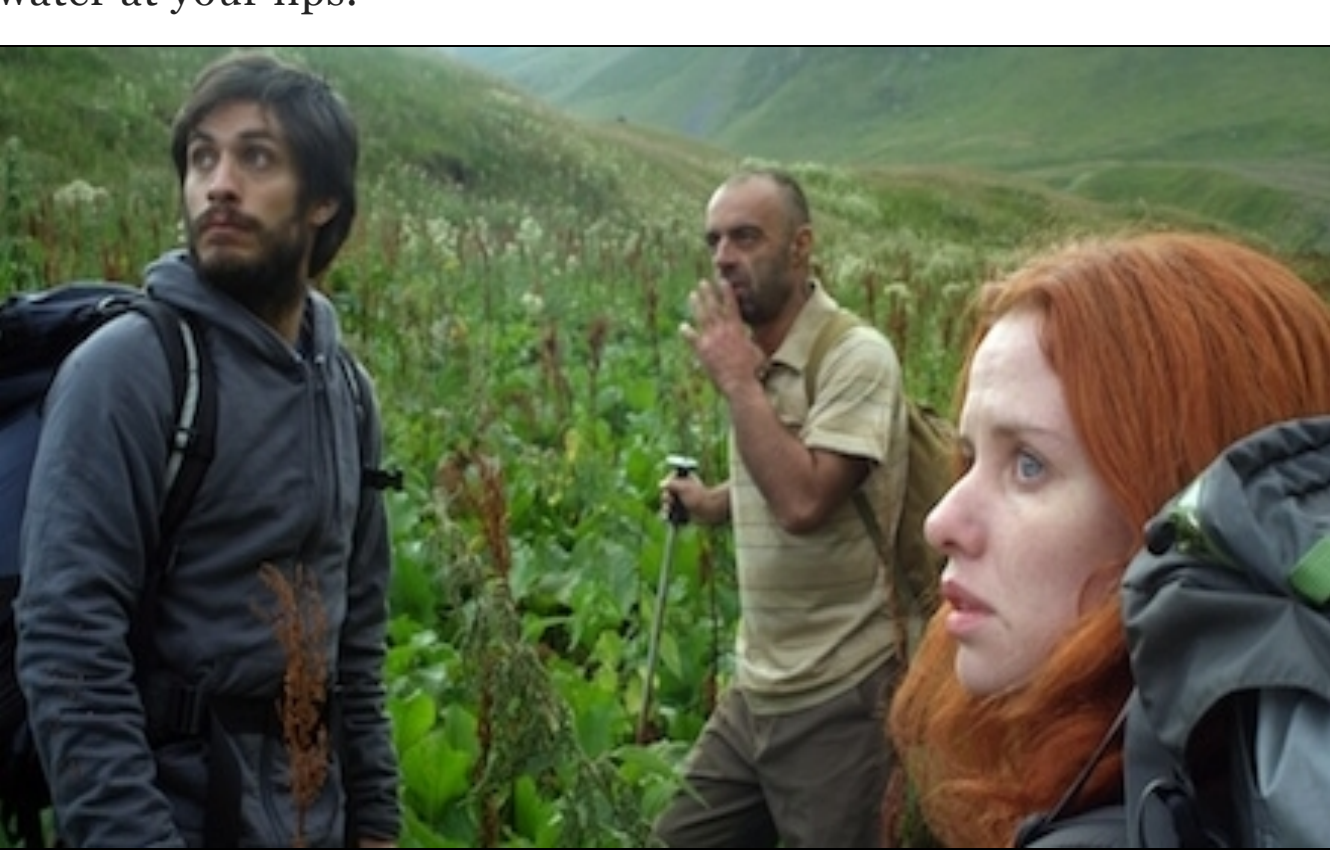
Music can’t quite do it. Paintings can try. Literature can and often does, but it ends up being unwieldy and obsessive. Theatre? Yes, theoretically, but unless all audience members are five feet from the performers, theatre must yield itself to *theatrics*, grand gestures or at least actions that can be seen from cheap seats in the furthestmost row. Sculpture...? No, cinema. Cinema stands as the definitive medium for

depicting behaviour; the complex subtlety of a gesture, an expression, over time, captured as intimately as one desires. The written word could barely approximate the enigmatic expression on the Mona Lisa’s face with any real brevity or economy. The painted image could not hope to capture that smile as it morphed and altered in response to Mona Lisa’s inner state, her thoughts, her emotions; a momentary provocation. So to summarise these last few haughty sentences: cinema has a pretty sweet niche, one which Julia Loktev, Hani Furstenberg, Gael Garcia Bernal and [Bidzina Gujabidze](#) absolutely monopolise with this film, *The Loneliest Planet*.

The very first shot, preceded by credits on black and an abrasive banging sound, positions this film as one unafraid to test, to provoke and exasperate. Hani Furstenberg’s soapy wet naked body bounces up and down in sync with the banging. Why? To weed out and send packing any audience members who would not be receptive or at least open to this film’s approach to cinema? Perhaps. Most likely, she is trying not to freeze to death as she waits for her fiancé to arrive with water of a tolerable temperature in jerry cans and plastic pans. Because they happen to be in the freezing rural fringes of Georgia, doing what only westerners can do with any real authenticity: journeying through a foreign land whose language they barely speak, with towering backpacks, hiking boots and a sense of entitlement buried beneath their open-mindedness and genuine fascination with the new. That sounded cruelly cynical, but there could hardly be a lovelier, more sincere couple to tag along, it seems. In a nutshell, that is the film: Nica and Alex, engaged and deeply in love, trekking through the Caucasus Mountains with their lovably bigoted guide Dota. An incident occurs midway, jabbing a stick through the spokes of the central couple’s relationship, and we are treated to (some would say burdened with) a depiction the resulting interpersonal crisis much in the same way that the potency and underlying fragility of their intimacy and emotional security was painted in earlier scenes: through painfully patient observation of behaviour, with time and physical space as the canvas.



There is very little dialogue in the film, and nothing spoken in Georgian is ever subtitled. Even more interesting: that the majority of spoken word is broken English from the mouth of Dota the Georgian guide. With the two travellers being more interested in absorbing their beautifully serene surroundings or perhaps being absorbed with their own contentedness-slash-niggling discontent, Dota chimes in with drawn-out jokes and anecdotes that are lost in translation but no less funny for their imprecision. [Bidzina Gujabidze](#) gives a compelling performance, depending on how much he is actually performing as this is his first known role. In contrast, Bernal’s Alex says precious little, easily the least. Mostly, we hear him testing Nica’s fledgling Spanish in several of the films many extended handheld takes. Arguably though, Hani Furstenberg’s is the central performance. The film’s key moment almost seems to highlight the fact that she is somewhat of a fulcrum for *The Loneliest Planet*’s curiously light-handed exploration of – as Loktev put it in an interview – masculinity and globalisation, amongst other things. Nica appears drawn to Dota’s simultaneous ruggedness and seeming placidity, and is certainly more inquisitive about him as a person than is Alex, especially in the latter half of the film following the central incident. Sure, Alex is nice and mellow, but he lacks a certain coarseness of manner that one can imagine Nica craving once given a taste. An earlier scene in a small town bar involving two friendly but vaguely menacing local men sets you on edge. As the bar’s patrons take to the dance floor, one of these men dances unerringly close to Nica, and you sense Alex’s unease as he perhaps doubts his own ability to defend his fiancée in this alien land against these rough-hewn alien men. We too feel a deep unease on his behalf, or maybe in spite of his manhood. This exploration of masculinity reaches its apex in one of the film’s final scenes. Something happens between Nica and Dota to which Alex is not privy. A question hangs over Nica’s response to this event, of whether it is allowed to progress the way it does because of some elusive fascination she has with Dota, or if it is due to frank reservations she has regarding Alex’s masculine sway. As for Alex’s behaviour after *the incident*, Bernal plays with subtlety and modesty a murmur of a man, psychologically speaking. Rather than engaging with Nica he reverts to skirting and avoiding. Out of guilt and embarrassment, he might say; you might reply, “that is no excuse”. In fact both Nica and Alex fail to exercise emotional maturity, which is easy to say in the comfort of a theatre seat with a bottle of sparkling water at your lips.



Heretofore, Nica might sound like little more than a thematic pawn which she certainly is not. Hani Furstenberg has a magnetic presence, and her night-time song and drink session with Dota reveals not just a character with a generosity of spirit, but an actor equally as generous, at ease in front of a camera and with herself. Her vibrant red hair stands out against the green backdrop of the hills and mountains, almost an unwitting expression of her awareness of and appreciation for difference, for contrast. She wants to speak a new language, she is interested in Dato, who he is and what his experience might be. It does not feel like fetishism or exoticism, just fascination. But when her value as a person and as a lover is thrown into question by the very person by whom she is supposed to be valued and loved, her bright blue eyes widen as she realises that the emotional anchorage she needs to facilitate her impulse to explore has been compromised, if it was ever robust to begin with. Not to draw too much on the title’s thematic subtext, but Nica looks like she’s been carried out to sea, lured into its vastness by a stray buoy. And so she gravitates to a rough rock jutting from the surface of the water called Dato, whose philosophy of life is simple and unambitious, a philosophy which turns out to be as much for the avoidance of disappointment as it is for simplicity.

This is of course simply speculation and analysis. The film itself is far too sparse and taciturn to provide talking points on a platter. It is not cold, but it chooses to keep whatever it has on its mind to itself, that is if you choose to believe it has much on its mind. Julia Loktev’s direction could be considered art-house minimalist without the hipster austerity of Jarmusch or formal stillness of Pedro Costa. Loktev utilizes cinema in a very purist sense, if cinema’s strength is indeed in capturing action, time and space. The camera watches the faces of these people eagerly, as interested in – for example – Nica when she is simply walking as it is when she is freaking out because it believes that there is no such thing as the mundane and inconsequential. Action and inaction, speech and silence, all speak volumes about a character. Alex’s tentative passivity might lack theatrical energy, but in Bernal’s skilful hands it wields emotive power as his inaction gains dramatic weight with time. Equally effective is Nica’s gradual emergence as the more emotionally resilient of the two, while Dato remains stoically unperturbed as though it never occurs to him that he had a part to play in the event. Only a patient documentation of behaviour over time could achieve a sense of narrative amidst the monotony of a largely silent hiking trip. Loktev understands this, her actors understand this; it is up to the audience to humour it. There is a recurring motif Loktev employs that might have been laughably heavy-handed were it not for its frank effectiveness. For minutes on end the trekkers traverse a wide establishing shot of the mountainous terrain, three tiny figures walking or climbing from one end of the frame to the other as a theme reminiscent of a B-side from the *There Will Be Blood* score hums in the background. Yes, it is a visual metaphor (guess who lags behind towards the end of the film) and it will make many viewers squirm in their seats. But kudos to Loktev for committing to the exercise however unnecessary it might seem. As for the images, there has probably never been a film with this much green in its palette. Much of the backdrop of *The Loneliest Planet* is sometimes lush, sometimes rocky, but often otherworldly in its spaciousness. It is quite evocative if only for the fact that it conjures a sense of peppermint cold and dewiness. So if the film functions as nothing more than an introverted travelogue, one can at least cross off the Caucasus Mountains from their list of dream armchair (read: theatre seat) destinations. For yours truly though, *The Loneliest Planet* was quite a transportive experience.

Temitope Ugundare



2 Comments

GREAT BIG GIANT JESUS says:
June 25, 2012 at 7:29 pm
I read this short story and I don’t understand it as a film. It’s pretentious and condescending. This movie must be for people that don’t like movies. A lot of talking and nothing else. Maybe it’s the sequel to “My Dinner with Andre.”

Reply

Tope says:
June 28, 2012 at 8:36 am
Not sure I agree that there’s a lot of talking at all, not even close to ‘My Dinner With Andre’. It’s pretty quiet until the end. If someone didn’t like movies, I think they’d hate this one something fierce. I mean, to like movies is to enjoy watching a series of images that follow each other to some purpose, right? And there’s plenty of that here.

I wouldn’t question anyone who called this movie pretentious (even if I take issue with the word) but to say it’s excessively talky...I’m not sure we saw the same film.

Reply

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Nigerian-Australian Sydney-based med student, film enthusiast and fledgling writer. Also a soccer fan and filmmaker in-utero.

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The Televerse #46- ComicCon 2012 TV Wrapup

PUBLISHED ON JULY 17, 2012 BY KATE KULZICK



Despite the premieres of Breaking Bad and Political Animals, and another strong episode of Louie, we’re spotlight-less this week on the Televerse. Instead, after talking through a slightly more filled week in TV including So You Think You Can Dance, ...

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The ten greatest scenes from the ‘Batman’ films

PUBLISHED ON JULY 17, 2012 BY SHANE RAMIREZ



With The Dark Knight Rises opening this week, it’s only appropriate to look back at the series’ first two entries as well as previous incarnations of the Batman. Compiling a top ten list of best scenes from a character that ...

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Fantasia 2012: Ricky D’s most anticipated films

PUBLISHED ON JULY 17, 2012 BY RICKY



I’ve been lucky enough to attend the Fantasia film Festival since the very first year and make no mistake about it, Fantasia has always been a highlight of every summer since. This year is no exception. With another impressive and ...

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Fantasia 2012: Justine’s Most Anticipated Films

PUBLISHED ON JULY 17, 2012 BY JUSTINE



For even the most seasoned festival goer, the Fantasia Film Festival presents a daunting challenge. With over 160 films playing, it is impossible to see everything and compromise is not an option but a necessity. For the cinematic adventurer, however, ...

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2012 ComicCon TV Recap: Sunday

PUBLISHED ON JULY 17, 2012 BY KATE KULZICK

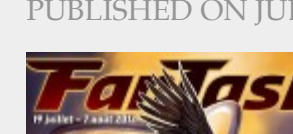


Traditionally, Sunday is the slowest day of ComicCon. Most of the major panels have already happened and many fans opt out of the festivities to head home and rest up a bit before the work week starts up on Monday. ...

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Fantasia 2012: Mike Ryan’s Checklist

PUBLISHED ON JULY 16, 2012 BY MICHAEL RYAN



Since I explained at ridiculous length how to make your Fantasia list, I thought it would only be fair to share mine. My general goal for Fantasia 2012 is to see 40 films and write about 20.

(The scary thing, ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

TIFF Cinematheque presents a Summer in France: ‘Belle de Jour’ is an erotic case study designed to gauge its causal effect

PUBLISHED ON JULY 16, 2012 BY JUSTIN LI



Belle de Jour Directed by Luis Buñuel
Written by Luis Buñuel and Jean-Claude Carrière
France, 1967
Sometimes, it’s pointless, even impossible, to try to understand our personal proclivities. It’s an unavailing form of discourse that attempts to rationalize something pre-ordained and ...

[\[Read the Rest\]](#)

Fantasia 2012: Edgar’s most anticipated films

PUBLISHED ON JULY 16, 2012 BY EDGAR CHAPUT



It is that time of year again. Mid-to-late July means two things if one is a film fan either living or visiting the city of Montréal. The blockbuster season is in full swing, although that can be applied to just ...

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Breaking Bad, Ep. 5.01: ‘Live Free Or Die’ ties up loose ends and teases Walt’s future

PUBLISHED ON JULY 15, 2012 BY SIMON HOWELL



Breaking Bad, Season 5, Episode 1: “Live Free or Die”
Written by Vince Gilligan
Directed by Michael Slovis
Airs Sundays at 10pm ET on AMC
And so the end begins. The most acclaimed drama around kicks off its last, bipartite ...

[\[Read the Rest\]](#)

Fantasia 2012: Mike Ryan’s Most Anticipated Films

PUBLISHED ON JULY 15, 2012 BY MICHAEL RYAN



For those that are confused (which would obviously include me) the column that has the url:

<http://www.soundsight.org/fantasia-2012-mike-ryans-five-most-anticipated-films/> is actually my column on the five films that I am most upset to be MISSING. This is my column on five seven ...

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