

daughter of his publisher who must trek through the "infected zone" of Mexico -- infected by aliens from outer space, which came to earth via a crashed probe we sent out to collect samples. Now scary gigantic creatures are wrecking havoc and the US has built a really big wall to keep them out. Yes, the parallels are obvious to illegal immigration, but aren't pounded home. The movie is mostly a smart calling card for writer-director Gareth Edwards, who creates tension and believable creatures on a tiny budget. Some eye-rolling moments abound, starting with the idea that the daughter of a publishing magnate and a savvy photo-journalist would ever CHOOSE to go into a zone infected with gigantic alien creatures in the first place. (Couldn't they have been stranded there or misled into going there? Any sane person would wait the six months they were going to be trapped or, I don't know, hire a plane? (If there was a reference to plane travel being unsafe, I missed it.) Even worse is a scene where our heroes are stripping soldiers of gas masks but leaving the weapons. I'm pretty sure a Quaker would be packing a gun if they were headed through alien monster territory. Then there's the scene where they're in a boat in the infected zone and some giant thing of some sort is knocking around a crashed jet plane, tentacles pulling it under the swampy water and then tossing it out again. And what do our heroes say? They say, repeatedly, "What IS that?" Uh, I'm gonna go out on a limb and guess it's one of the alien creatures that made this zone infected. What do you think? Generally, the movie is smarter than that by simply avoiding facts and keeping the focus on the budding friendship between the two. Action buffs will be sorely disappointed by a film that has very little action in it. Cloverfield isn't such a bad comparison after all, though Monsters is smarter. But while the monsters are mostly off camera a genuine if raw talent is visible.

Stake Land **

I'm sure *Stake Land* was conceived long before *Zombieland* but it's just gonna have to suck it up and realize that everyone is going to compare these road movies with a stern vampire/zombie killing mentor and a young eager acolyte. *Zombieland* happens to be loads of fun whereas *Stake Land* is deadly serious. You know what to expect: kid and older man of few words team up to survive as they head for New Eden, a perhaps mythical place somewhat free of the vampires that rule the night. They'll meet a few companions along the way, including a young comely gal for out teen hero Connor Paolo of *Gossip Girl* (who's pretty darn comely himself). And it won't be long before Bible thumpers prove just as much a threat as the vamps. Kelly McGillis is a welcome face as a nun. But her faith is more solid than this movie's. What exactly is its purpose? *Zombieland*'s reason for being was a goofy, satirical sense of humor built around a how-to way of tackling zombies. This movie has no story, really. The kid becomes skilled at killing, but he doesn't have to learn to respect the ruthless older man Mister, nor does he have to reject the guy, either. The kid Martin is an eager student at the beginning and at the end, albeit covered in more blood. They never have a falling out, they never uncover a secret or face a new danger (not really), they never clash, they never really do much of anything except survive. That's what they need to do to stay alive: just focus on killing and character development be damned.

Submarine ** 1/2

As is my wont, when I hear about the movies scheduled to open at Toronto or Cannes, I pick the most intriguing adaptations and read the source novel. In this case it's the precocious novel by teen author Joe Dunthorne. (I hate him already.) His book created a distinctive central character in Oliver but was pretty over-excited about using every trick in the world to tell his tale, from lists to dictionary definitions to you name it. Oliver (Craig Roberts) lives in Wales, lusting after the right girl and hyperactively role-playing a conversation with the girl or whisking her away or at least trying to. There's certainly an epidemic of knowingness (I'm looking at you, *Juno*) throughout pop culture. Happily, this movie downplays that with clever production design schemes and a plan to walk out the door and show this film on the side of a building if necessary. Oliver is self-critical and quite funny, callously taking part in the bullying of a heavy girl in school to curry favor with Jordana. As the calculating, manipulative but really just playful and fun Jordana, actress Yasmin Paige scores a real triumph. Roberts has the more difficult role of trying to make simple chores seem distinctive and new. Though the film has more tricks than *GoodFellas*, the movie is quite faithful to the book while avoiding the more arch moments for genuine emotion. It ends in a lovely manner and would have been even better if it wasn't so clear when characters were being "eccentric."

Three **

Director Tom Tykwer made the kinetic *Run Lola Run* and we've been waiting for him to seize the international stage again. *Three* may not be the way to theatrical success, though it certainly has a high concept. Like so many films these days, it begins with a surfeit of incident. A couple has been together for 20 years but things are rocky. His mother gets pancreatic cancer, tries to off herself, is saved and then finally is allowed to die with the sisters taking the body away at the end. Turns out the guy also has cancer, this time of the testicles. His business is failing, the wife will soon freeze up on camera and I haven't even reached the crime scene yet. Everything clicks into place when the guy and gal separately

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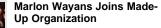
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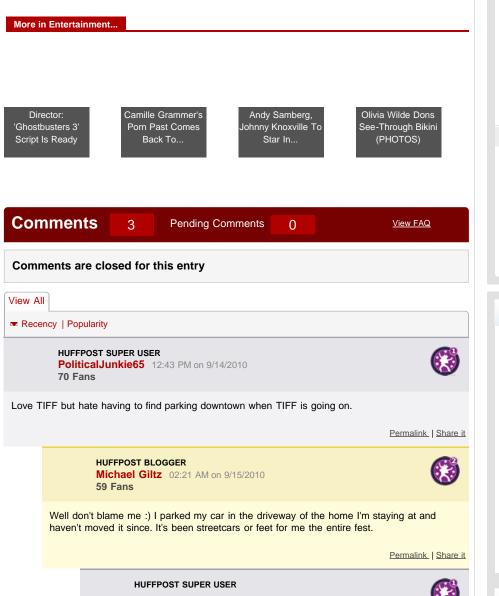
meet another man and begin dating him. The man they fall for is sort of a bisexual superman who does everything...and I do mean everything. He plays soccer on the weekends, has a high paying job in genetic engineering and the such, sings in a choir, captains a sail boat, and masters martial arts. No wonder they both fall hard. It takes far too long to get to the heart of the matter. But once they're all jumping in and out of bed, this quite serious film learns to loosen up a bit.

Blame *

I like a good-looking cast of young people taking revenge on an evil schoolteacher as much as the next guy. But cheekbones can't rescue an absurd scenario where the guys and gals storm the home of this teacher to set him on a faked suicide. Why? Because he slept with their best friend when she was sixteen and now she's killed herself and SOMEONE has to pay. Though their victim is agile and strong, they repeatedly leave him alone or assign just one person to care for him. Then he gets away and they truss him up again. The stupidity of these characters trying to clean the place up is staggering. Only Ashley Zukerman as Anthony manages both good looks and acting chops. Robberies or kidnappings or murders gone awry are always fun to watch. Or almost always, I should say.

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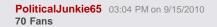


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