

Fantasia Day 9, Part Two: “DETENTION”

Written by Ariel Esteban Cayer
Tuesday, 02 August 2011 08:27



Let's talk about culture for a moment. While I could've figured this one out by myself, someone once told me that film doesn't exist in a vacuum. True: like any art, film is an amalgamation of cultural and personal influences, social conventions and the personal talent of any given craftsman or filmmaker able to turn that into his own piece of work. Every film is a cultural construct that speaks volumes about the society it hails from—which is exactly why film is worth looking at in the first place! But what happens when the culture at hand is so inward-looking and void that it cannibalizes itself into oblivion? Well...you get something like Joseph Kahn's DETENTION.

Employing a somewhat interesting and twisty storyline mixing teen-slasher tropes and time travel, DETENTION references Kahn's previous film TORQUE in its first five minutes, which pretty much sets the tone for the whole operation of hyper-referentiality that will drive the plot and cardboard-cutout characters (one of whom is portrayed by a admittedly endearing Dane Cook) forward into nothingness. A weak attempt at subverting genre tropes in ways the SCREAM series already tackled, the film finds itself perpetuating them, but mostly exposing something terrifying about the current state of the art's postmodern condition.



Accumulating references at a neck-breaking pace—read: uninterruptedly—DETENTION is a hyper-produced and mind-numbingly overwritten exercise in reflexivity, which manages to recklessly drive itself into a wall surprisingly quickly. Alienating in nature—and mind you, I'm 18 years old, was raised in the late '90s, am very pop-minded and enjoy postmodern cinema like nobody's business—DETENTION is the painful product of a particular time in entertainment culture as understood, exaggerated, masticated and regurgitated by hip adults whose major and deepest connection to life is called the Internet.

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If you thought Diablo Cody’s hyperactive banter was annoying or hated the pop-consumerist hipster youth of SCOTT PILGRIM VS. THE WORLD, stay as far away from DETENTION as possible. It will break your brain and then some. Perhaps one of the first films to be crippled entirely by a painfully forced ironic nostalgia for the 1990s (1992, to be exact), DETENTION’s fundamental flaw resides in its utter and complete lack of meaning past its succession of archetypes, stereotypes and references that constitute all of the film’s humor and substance.

DETENTION sadly evidences that current culture, in its worst, most bastardized and amalgamated form (which screenwriter Mark Palermo mind-bogglingly, almost mathematically, turned into its screenplay) has nothing new to contribute to art and would rather fixate on a “post-ironic” time and place rather try its hand at fresh ideas and concepts. Unlike Brian Lee O’Malley’s SCOTT PILGRIM comics and the subsequent film adaptation—which I know a lot of people hated for similar reasons, as well as for its celebration of consumerist youth culture—DETENTION isn’t *inspired* by certain visual and textual elements proper to video games, comic books, literature, film and music. It is piece-by-piece, from its foundation to its dysfunctional lightning rod, *built* with other, and most importantly currently popular, elements of media. In and of itself, DETENTION has no characters, no plot and no meaning, other than offering the wildest, most ridiculously overstimulating cocktail of pop-culture paraphernalia possible, devoid of all personality and resonance. Even the plot is riddled with currently hot and “geeky” elements such as time travel and alternate realities—only adding to the pervasive feeling that DETENTION is a manufactured “hit” and not a genuine celebration of the culture it manages to caricature.

If SCOTT PILGRIM evidenced youth’s all-encompassing capitalist slacker culture, DETENTION, in its circularity and seemingly wild success with the audience, showcases its inevitable demise. Luckily, there are still artists out there producing valid work and using their influences intelligently—but for how long? DETENTION is truly disquieting in that it poses the question: How long until originality vanishes entirely and entertainment becomes a rapid-fire succession of established songs, books and film franchises?

Kahn—coming from an impressive music-video background—gets credit for his inventive direction, which, while showing no mercy and being extremely exhausting, certainly has its moments. Although he manages to do incredible things with very little means, the praise for his direction can only be taken on its own. I’m of the somewhat disputable but strong belief that the inventiveness and rapidity inherent to the craft of mainstream music video and TV commercials needs to be recontextualized when transposed to the big screen, and that unlike countless contemporaries with similar backgrounds like ADAPTATION’S Spike Jonze, ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND’s Michel Gondry and NEVER LET ME GO’s Mark Romanek, Kahn doesn’t know any better, and instead ramps up the style to 11, accumulates skits straight out of MTV and, in his own way, manages to mirror perfectly the

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vapid nature of the script itself.

The cultural equivalent of George Orwell’s proverbial boot stomping on a human face—forever—DETENTION exhibits the kind of dishonest meta-referentiality that hurts culture more than it celebrates it, turning the medium into a textual and visual Ouroboros that doesn’t seem to understand that references, irony and formula (which, don’t get me wrong, all work as devices in crafting fiction) need to build upon and toward something in order to work. To say the least, DETENTION is a painful and confrontational experience that will have you re-evaluating the current state of entertainment, and is perhaps the most “current” film ever made—which, as a result, expectedly collapses in less time than it takes to say the word “hipster.”



Thankfully, the midnight screening—which I had initially planned to be HELLDRIVER—pieced my brain back together: a 35mm screening of the Nazi/sexploitation classic ILSA, SHE WOLF OF THE SS. I’ll that one tackle later as part of my roundup of the Maple Syrup Thrills tribute to producers John Dunning and André Link—of which, sadly, I only managed to see three films. Following the screening, I went out for drinks at the Irish Embassy—Fantasia’s official pub—for the first time since the fest’s beginning, and washed down DETENTION’s bitter taste with a tall glass of their cheap-ass knockoff soda...