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# The Single Take

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□ BOARDWALK EMPIRE, INTERSTELLAR, JEAN ARTHUR, JOHN WICK, KEANU REEVES, KEITH UHLICH, MATTHEW MCCONAUGHEY, ONLY ANGELS HAVEWINGS, STEVE BUSCEMI, THE SINGLE TAKE

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## *Only Angels Have Wings, Interstellar, John Wick, and Boardwalk Empire*

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Few passages in movies affect me as deeply as the lengthy opening of Howard Hawks's 1939 romance-adventure *Only Angels Have Wings* (currently making the repertory rounds in a new 4K restoration). I'm at a loss to explain exactly why, and I think that's key to its greatness—I can only ever talk around these ineffably mysterious thirty minutes and change. The précis: Jean Arthur's Bonnie Lee ("from Brooklyn") makes a brief stopover in the South American backwater port of Barranca. She's pursued by smitten pilots Les (Allyn Joslyn) and Joe (Noah Beery Jr), who work for a struggling air-freight company that delivers risky payloads throughout the Andes. Over the course of a very long night that includes a "real American steak dinner," copiously flowing alcohol, several musical interludes, a fateful coin toss, and the fiery death (by plane crash) of one of her admirers, she falls in love with this isolated society and Geoff Carter (Cary Grant), the outwardly irascible man at its center.

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At a casual glance, this sequence is entirely expositional, acclimating viewers to the exotic milieu while laying some necessary narrative groundwork about Geoff's need to land a contract that will make his piloting business profitable. But there's something in the approach that takes us deeper. Is it the patient rhythm—a Hawks staple—that makes story seem secondary? Is it the enveloping way the camera (Frank Capra's regular cinematographer Joseph Walker is the DP) captures the evening's hustle and bustle? Is it how the cast careens off of and complements each other, no one person (whatever their race, gender or onscreen billing) more important than another? All this and more.

Using Bonnie as the focal point, Hawks and screenwriter Jules Furthman give us the human experience in microcosm, a birth-death-rebirth cycle culminating in our in-limbo heroine's epiphany that Barranca is where she truly belongs. There are days when I would call this cinema's most powerful and perfect vision of community—a bewitching portrait of a culture in which mortality hangs thick in the air and grief is defiantly expressed through both celebration and cynicism. (A two-headed coin that reappears at several points is an open rebuke to chance and fate.) Once Bonnie makes her impulsive decision to miss her boat and join Geoff and company's orbit, the film becomes merely a masterpiece, the otherworldly genius of its opening section segueing into a machine-tooled Hollywood entertainment par excellence. Not a disappointment, exactly. Just a different register that adheres precisely to Hawks' oft-quoted filmmaking axiom: "Three great scenes, no bad ones."

I could talk about the flying sequences that make superb use of on-location aerial photography and gorgeously atmospheric miniatures. I could mention how the film movingly acts as both a career summation for one performer (D.W. Griffith collaborator Richard Barthelmess as a disgraced aviator trying to re-prove himself) and the launching pad for another (luminous up-and-comer Rita Hayworth as Grant's spirited old flame). I could focus on Grant himself, and the way he barks orders while swanning around in a straw hat and gaucho pants ensemble—a truly knotty vision of manhood further complicated by his tough and tender relationship with Thomas Mitchell's elder, sight-impaired copilot Kid Dabb. But really I'd rather just bask in the enigmatic glow of that half-hour prelude and delight in knowing that, try as I might, I'll never be able to pin it down.

## INTERSTELLAR

Let's quickly dispense with Christopher Nolan's latest bit of bombastic tedium, *Interstellar* (opens Wednesday, November 5th). I find much black humor in the fact that this über-pedestrian visual stylist is currently our greatest advocate for shooting on celluloid. I don't mean to suggest that his images lack for superficial size and scope. A large portion of this subpar space odyssey—about a ragtag group of astronauts searching for a new home for our ruined planet's populace (so...*Battlestar Galactica*, basically)—was filmed on IMAX cameras that fill the floor-to-ceiling frame with vistas earthly and celestial. Yet nearly every composition lacks that certain something (let's call it "magic," since Nolan has spent his entire career breaking down anything mysterious into easily digestible component parts) that makes you feel as if you're in the hands of a true visionary.

Of all the waste on display, nothing irritated me more than the Nolan house style's neutering of cinematographer Hoyte van Hoytema, subbing for the director's usual DP Wally Pfister who was off helming the inaptly named *Transcendence* (2014). Van Hoytema's done marvelous work for Tomas Alfredson on the modern-day vampire story *Let the Right One In* (2008) and the moody, measured John le Carré spy thriller *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (2011). He also created a memorable candy-color-and-grit palette for Spike Jonze's otherwise feeble-brained futurist romance *Her* (2013), though my favorite among his recent output is Mikael Marcimain's period prostitution drama *Call Girl* (2012) with its alluringly sleazy, snuff-film textures.

Here, only two shots resonate—the first (midway through) of Matthew McConaughey's good-ol'-boy space traveler weeping as he watches archived videos of his children aging into thirtysomethings, the other (nearer the end) of a boy hitting a baseball through a window in an anti-gravitational arc (an accidental Spielberg-ism). Other than that, Nolan relies on Hans Zimmer's score (heavy on the bleating pipe organ) to provide both narrative

reliance on Hans Zimmer's score (heavy on the beating pipe organ) to provide both narrative propulsion and insta-profundity as needed, in-between numerous poorly staged scenes of characters verbosely explaining complex scientific theories in blockbuster-friendly terms. (A perfectly-coiffed Anne Hathaway's monologue about the galaxy-spanning power of love is the nadir, and there's something borderline offensive about the way her character is ultimately pushed to the margins so she can leave the lights on for the human race.) For all the "fantastic" otherworlds—such as the tidal-wave planet where one hour is equivalent to seven earth years, or the topsy-turvy ice star where our heroes run into special guest cosmonaut Will Hunting—Nolan is loathe to let us take any of it in with genuine horror, wonder or awe. Not even a massive black hole nicknamed, in a very *unobtanium*-esque touch, "Gargantua" manages to put stars in the eyes. They sent a prosaic poseur to do a poet's job.

### JOHN WICK

I had a fun time with the kooky Keanu Reeves revenge thriller *John Wick* (opened October 24th), though less for the zen-constipated mugging of its star (he plays a widowed former hitman who takes on a gaggle of Russian mobsters after they kill his puppy) than with the vivid conspiratorial underworld the film creates—Jacques Rivette by way of Nevelndine/Taylor. Characters speak in ominous shorthand, hinting at their murderous pasts, and the New York locales increasingly take on the topsy-turvy qualities of a grisly Grimm's fairy tale. (Love the assassination carried out in front of Central Park's Bethesda Fountain.) There's also a terrific secondary cast, my favorite among whom is David Patrick Kelly of "Warriors come out to play!" fame as an especially efficient crime scene

Patrick Kelly or warriors come out to play! Fame as an especially efficient crime scene cleaner, though it's always a pleasure to see folks from the HBO stable (*Game of Thrones*' Alfie Allen, *Deadwood*'s Ian McShane, and *The Wire*'s Clarke Peters and Lance Reddick) representin' at the multiplex.

### BOARDWALK EMPIRE

Speaking of supporting players, I think it only right to mark the passing of *Boardwalk Empire* (ended October 26th), the HBO Prohibition-era series that often tried my patience with its consistent ability to be good but never great. Yet its ensemble kept me hooked. Steve Buscemi did excellent work as Atlantic City mobster Enoch "Nucky" Thompson (loosely based on actual AC racketeer "Nucky" Johnson), who ends up with a bullet to the face for his five-seasons-long transgressions. But he was outdone in the final episodes by British actor Marc Pickering, who played the younger Thompson in flashbacks with an uncanny precision that went beyond imitation. It was practically possession.

Easy to sing the praises of the sprawling cast assembled by creator Terence Winter (late of *The Sopranos*): Michael Shannon at his bug-eyed best as religious nut government agent Nelson van Alden. Michael Kenneth Williams as African-American mobster Chalky White, who has the series' best monologue (the "I ain't buildin' no bookcase" aria to a doomed Ku Klux Klan member). Almost all the real-world criminal figures were perfectly etched, the highlights being Michael Stuhlbarg's eerily menacing Arnold Rothstein and Stephen Graham's mostly psychotic, occasionally affectionate Al Capone. But best in show was Jack Huston's disfigured war vet/expert sniper Richard Harrow, who quickly

rose from gruesome sight gag to the series' open-wounded soul. (There's a degree to which *Boardwalk Empire* lost much of its emotional reverb after the character's exit at the end of Season four.)

You might notice I haven't mentioned any of the women, which points up the series' main limitation. Even at its best, it was a sausage-fest in the Scorsese-imitator vein, rarely examining its blunt-force machismo and almost always wallowing in it. Marty himself set the template with the hyperactive pilot—a Visconti epic scaled down to pay-cable dimensions. The rest was expert fan-fiction that occasionally touched on something deeper, as in “Erlkönig,” the gut-wrenching fourth season episode (helmed by one of the series' best directors, Tim Van Patten) in which Nucky's manservant, Eddie Kessler (Anthony Laciura), commits suicide after betraying his employer. Interestingly, *Boardwalk Empire's* profoundest scene is in its final episode, “Eldorado”: Nucky has a surreal encounter with an Art Deco-wardrobed gal who beckons him into a beachside tent. There he witnesses a strange new invention that broadcasts images via recording—television *in utero*. There's something truly potent about a fictional character captivated by the very mechanism that contains him.

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