

# New York film tackles death

BY FRANKLIN CLINE  
Reviewer

"Synecdoche, New York" is an odd bird, one with a phonetically bizarre title, one in which years subtly pass unannounced in minutes and Philip Seymour Hoffman has the most sex scenes of any movie I've ever seen him. Of course, we, the art-hungry, knowledgeable student-types, could expect nothing less from one of our favorite weirdo auteurs, Charlie Kaufman, the writer/director of "Being John Malkovich," "Adaptation" and "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind."

So what is this odd bird film about? Truthfully, I'm not too sure. Like any good English major, I can point out some motifs easily: death, patriarchy, fire, control and the way those four things interrelate. It's really difficult to give an accurate summary of the film because so much stuff goes unsaid — there's very little plot and a lot of (occasionally ostensible) thematic profundity. It's really sort of like a David Lynch film with its empty symbolism that borders on incoherence: A woman

lives in a house that is constantly on fire, has an impossible disease and cares for a 10-year-old child covered in tattoos as a German "art project." These things are not why Kaufman is so celebrated. Here's why: He's unapologetically weird, but it's couched in an accessible, albeit grandiose (for this film, at least), fashion. Remember Lynch's suburban classic "Blue Velvet?" This movie is like that, but, for the most part, less creepy and more down-to-earth, even if it is equally dark.

I'll reiterate that I really can't tell you what this film is about, but any stab I could take would begin and end with death. Really, the center of the film is excruciating inasmuch as it feels like nothing more than a series of funerals, and even if you have to expand that to include the metaphorical it must be true — in one way or another, almost everyone in this film dies.

In the center of the film, Hoffman's character, Caden Cotard, ruminates on the idea that despite our innermost and rarely vocalized wishes, death is inevitable — an old, tired concept but still one worth examining if only because of its gravity — in a speech delivered to



Photo courtesy of www.moviepicturedb.com

The new release of the film "Synecdoche, New York" stirs up questions about the inevitability of death but leaves the audience wondering what the movie was really about.

the cast of his impossibly large "play," which really just reflects either his desire to control the whole world because he thinks he has no control over what happens to him or an artist's response to the art of the mundane or some weird connection between those two things. It seems more like a monologue, as though nobody else was in the room and Cotard simply is voicing his thoughts as

they arrive. It's this sense of honesty and vulnerability upon which the movie's emotional sense hangs and upon which it ultimately succeeds — that and its wild grandiosity. The sheer scope of the film is one that still inspires awe long after one's initial viewing.

So "Synecdoche" might at first seem like the type of film you only want to rent if you're way hip and have seen

half of the Criterion Collection movies and can recite by heart Fellini's films in chronological order — you get the idea. However, if you think that, you'd be wrong. Although the film still is, on its surface, somewhat inaccessible, it's really only so because of a few silly surreal things that can be fairly easily dismissed, especially in light of the hugeness of Kaufman's scope. Rent this film.

# "12 Rounds" pursues action over quality

BY TYLER GEORGE  
Reviewer

Never in my life have I seen such a ridiculous display of improbable action as I did in this weekend's new box office release "12 Rounds."

The whole plot of the movie features beat cop Danny Fisher (John Cena), who gets in the way of international arms trader Miles Jackson's (Aiden Gillen) heist. While in pursuit, he causes a car accident that kills Jackson's romantic interest. Rage-ridden Jackson waits in prison until he can break out and seek revenge. Then he develops an evil plan to kidnap Fisher's girlfriend and put him through 12 rounds of city-wide challenges in order to get her back.

After directing cinematic flops such as "Deep Blue Sea" and "Die Hard: With a Vengeance," which maybe was not a flop, but easily the most forgettable of the Die Hard series, I really didn't know what to expect from director Renny Harlin. I suppose I should also mention Harlin's direction of "Cliffhanger" with Sylvester Stallone in 1993. Shortly after the movie began, I learned that I had set my standards, low as they were, much too high. Is Harlin capable of producing a decent action flick? I really hope so.

Like other World Wrestling Entertainment-produced films, the acting in this movie was nothing special. I mean, I really didn't expect much from wrestler-turned-actor Cena, but I was hoping that maybe he would surprise me. In short, he didn't. I don't follow wrestling, but I sincerely hope he fights well because that way at least he's good at something. I debated seeing another WWE-produced film, "The Marine," also featuring Cena, but after this I don't think I'm going to bother.

Along with Cena's poor performance was the role of his seemingly emotionless girlfriend, played by Ashley Scott. Scott is a no-name, unless you've seen halfway decent films such as "S.W.A.T." and "Into the Blue."

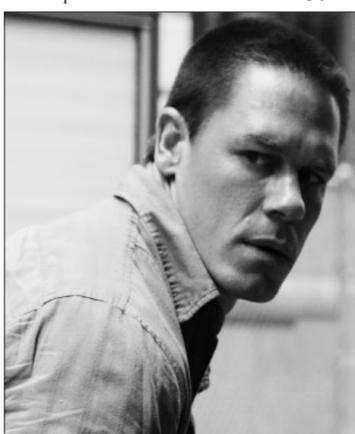


Photo courtesy of www.12rounds-movie.com "12 Rounds" trades quality acting and an interesting plot for an abundance of car chases and action.

Throughout the movie, her kidnapped character plays it relatively cool and manages to maintain herself under hazardous conditions. Come on — you're an actress, not a statue. At least pretend to be scared.

The rest of the film was full of terrible acting, which I don't even care to write about and really don't want to waste your time with. Because of such awful performances, I cannot bring myself to give an outstanding acting award this time around. The award is given for great acting, and since there is no great acting within this film, an award cannot be given.

Getting off the subject of the acting, let's move on to the action. If you like car chases, then this definitely is the film for you. I lost track counting them halfway through the movie. To most people, myself included, car chases are all good and fun in an action flick, but only in moderation. There also was a serious amount of far-fetched action sequences. By the end of the movie, I had eliminated all thoughts that a situation such as this could even potentially happen in real life.

The result is a 21st century version of what appears to be the movie's '90s counterpart, "Speed." It's almost as though the writer were sitting on his couch watching Keanu Reeves and Sandra Bullock dodge bullets while working on the screenplay.

I know I just demolished this movie, but overall, aside from the terrible acting and ridiculous action sequences, I suppose it wasn't that bad. If you decide to go see it, leave all logic, common sense and expectations of decent acting at the door because none will be found unless a couple of Truman theater majors decide to go.

# Disc features folk tales

BY HARRY BURSON  
Reviewer

Forsooth! The Decemberists hath hood-winked mine ears most dastardly!

I apologize. I couldn't resist a playful jab at frontman Colin Meloy's inclination for archaic English.

Anyway, I was fooled. Longtime readers will remember me praising the series of singles The Decemberists released last year, especially the undeniable "Valerie Plame." The single's inherent genre limitations forced Meloy to set aside his often-embarrassing literary pretensions in favor of relatively concise songcraft.

I interpreted these tunes as a new direction from a band best known for writing extended song cycles based on traditional folk tales. I thought 18-minute songs based on Irish mythology were a thing of the past. Boy, was I wrong.

Instead of retreating from his silliest tendencies, Meloy has embraced them fully, defiantly cementing The Decemberists' title as the dorkiest band in indie rock. Following those buoyant singles, he has crafted a 60-minute all-or-nothing rock opera, "The Hazards of Love."

Listening to the album, I couldn't follow the plot all that closely. Luckily I have the lyric booklet and Wikipedia. The story follows Margaret (voiced by Becky Stark) as she searches for her shape-shifting lover William, who somehow impregnated her (maybe rape? I'm not sure). The evil Queen (voiced by Shara Worden of My Brightest Diamond) and the murderous Rake impede her quest. Eventually she dies for some reason or another — I think.

The point is, like The Who's "Tommy" and virtually every other rock opera, the plot is obtuse. The focus is on the songs.

That's not to say this is not a cohesive set. It most definitely is. In the age of iTunes singles and ringtones, The Decemberists have crafted a good old-fashioned album — complete with recurring lyrical and musical motifs that give the proceedings a sense of cohesion even when you lose the narrative thread. In many ways the album's unapologetic pretentiousness works in its favor. For all of its traditional folk aspirations, the disc has its share of prog-rock moments (thanks to guitarist Chris Funk and keyboardist Jenny Conlee) that ensure a certain amount of levity as a counterpoint to Meloy's meticulous delivery. "Hazards of Love" is well constructed and works as a whole because of — not in spite of

— its silly concept. The only major problem is that none of the songs really stick. It's not that they only work in the context of the album — it's just that they aren't that catchy. Meloy should have focused a little more on the melodies instead of the overwrought lyrics. As a result, this album will not win over any new fans, unless they have a big appetite for camp.

Next in the Roundup, we have the third album by New York dance punk holdouts, the Yeah Yeah Yeahs.

The Yeah Yeah Yeahs emerged at an interesting time in the music industry's decline this decade. I remember them as the last buzz band before the Internet radically changed what that meant.

Obviously, the Internet existed before the group released its first album in 2003, but the blogosphere's ultra-efficient hype machine was not yet in place, so the band received coverage in print, even in Rolling Stone, before it recorded a proper debut. Without the blogosphere, the band was able to build a slow buzz over years.

Compare this to the Arctic Monkeys, who formed only a few years later. The nascent music blogs discovered, loved, heralded and disposed of those lads in the time it took the Yeah Yeah Yeahs to release their second album.

The Yeah Yeah Yeahs had good timing and as a result have a better shot at being a career band. Plus, it doesn't hurt that they have excellent taste and great songs.

On their third CD, "It's Blitz," the Yeah Yeah Yeahs mostly drop their signature noisy guitar sound in favor of more dance-oriented, synth-heavy production. Guitarist Nick Zinner switches to keyboards for some tracks and former jazz drummer Brian Chase keeps the beats simple for the dance floor.

It sounds like it could be a serious misstep, but the band pulls it off. Remember, they have excellent taste. The production maintains the band's gritty sound while skillfully updating it for a new context.

As always, their secret weapon is vocalist Karen O, who has enough expressive personality to make even the lesser tracks sound great. The album starts strong with the catchy "Zero" and never lets up until the ruminative closer "Little Shadow," which is as emotionally effective as "Maps."

Leaking problems forced the band to push forward the release date. Hopefully, it won't negatively affect the reception or sales of this disc. The Yeah Yeah Yeahs continue to live up to the hype.

More new music next week, but no more Jo Bros ever again.

# Mastodon's latest album leaves haunting tone

BY JOHN HITZEL  
Reviewer

Grab your body — otherwise, your soul might float away.

Mastodon's fifth album, "Crack the Sky," stamped its way into stores March 24. It roils with diverse subject matter ranging from Rasputin to astral travel and from Stephen Hawking's theories to the realm of the spiritual. Guitarist Bill Kelliher said the album is about an out-of-body experience. Apocalyptic lyrics in "The Last Baron," such as "I was staring at the world / and I still can't see it," disembodied suggestions in "Quintessence," such as "Holding my eyes to the future / hovering above myself" and album art all evidence this idea.

Mastodon is a four-piece metal band from Atlanta, Ga., that formed in 1999. You might have heard them in the "Aqua Teen Hunger Force" movie performing the song "Cut You Up with a Linoleum Knife" while Gumdrop, Box of Candy, Pretzel and Nachos played onscreen. Since their Moby Dick-themed album "Leviathan," they have won critical acclaim as one of the best and most inventive living American metal bands.

At first listen, the air/ether/sky-inspired "Crack the Sky" might seem insubstantial compared to Mastodon's prior three element-themed albums. Its first disc, 2003's "Remission," is the fire album and established the band as something special. Its breakthrough water album, 2004's "Leviathan," and 2006's "Blood Mountain," the earth album, are raucous while maintaining their elemental properties.

In contrast, "Crack the Sky" is smooth and clean where "Blood Mountain" was rough and craggy, echoing where "Leviathan" loosed bloated screams. Guitars alight and settle, voices draw long "Aahhs" and resound with reverb. A plethora of other non-canonical metal instruments appear: sand shakers, tambourines, chimes, organs, keyboards, acoustic guitars and banjos.

"Crack the Sky" shows Mastodon opening up its sound. The vocals sing and speak more than scream and grunt. The guitars are layered, often acoustic and electric simultaneously, haunting more than aggressive, drawn out more than chung-chung-chung — although both occur. Even their Animal-inspired drummer, Brann Dailor, whose job application probably said "must be able to fill constantly," is toned down, less frantic and more controlled.

Mastodon's compositional capabilities remind me of Tool (they toured together) in the way both bands have evolved to become more sophisticated and do not fear utilizing odd time signatures and rhythm changes that under the reins of many other bands would only upset the flow of the tune and appear forced. They also recall The Mars Volta in that they fit under the label "metal" but experiment with non-Western sounds and arrangements and that their drummers are awesome. Mastodon is like Tool with beards and a smaller ego, or The Mars Volta but with decipherable lyrics and less weirdness.

Mastodon recorded "Crack the Sky" before it went on tour for six weeks last summer. The members returned from the road with new ideas about the material: what to tweak, what

to expand and what to cut. Allowing the record to stew let the band maintain its characteristically progressive sound while moving into new territory, riding eight-legged, fire-breathing Sleipnirs through mythic borderlands of metal to burn fences and redraw boundary lines.

The album appears impish with only seven tracks, but it is a full set. All but one piece pass the five-minute mark and two are more than 10 minutes long. If you don't check to see when titles change, each song flows into the next, so the album is actually one long 50-minute composition. "The Czar," at 10 minutes 54 seconds, wails through four separate movements, and "The Last Baron" is a 13-minute prog maelstrom.

"Oblivion," which opens the album, is a blustery lament, filled with dreary guitars and wearied vocals. The piece begins with descending notes on both electric and acoustic, bass and choppy hi-hats coming in next, then a stomping floor-tom, kick and snare march, and then the rhythm guitar overlays an ascent as the drummer fills and thunders upon the crashes. The whole thing shifts to sixes and reverb-heavy singer one begins, followed by singer two, followed by dual harmony, then to the head, which is in fours, displaying a three-part vocal harmony, "Falling from grace 'cause I've been away too long / Leaving you behind with my lonesome song

/ Now I'm lost in Oblivion." It's probably the most radio-friendly tune on the disc.

"The Czar," summoning Rasputin, carries over from "Quintessence" via spacey keyboards reminiscent of the late Rick Wright of Pink Floyd.

Mastodon's lyrics are epic. The first line of the album is, "I flew beyond the sun before it was time / burning all the gold that held me inside my shell." "The Last Baron"

"Crack the Sky" shows Mastodon opening up its sound. The vocals sing and speak more than scream and grunt.

tells us that "All that I need is this wise man's staff / encased in crystal he leads the way / I guess they'd say we could set the world ablaze." All this stuff is great metal but a far cry from Bob Dylan or Beatles lyrics. Don't expect to have your principles thrown into disarray or to re-evaluate your most recent life-changing decision based on Mastodon lyrics. Expect to go on a dark ride inside a burning

carriage across ancient lands toward oracles that smell of sulfur beneath a swirling sky.

"Crack the Sky" fills the role of the air/ether/sky elemental album well. It's quality Mastodon, plus some appropriate zazz. Like the wind, it is gentle in places and wicked in others. The songs never really end — only move on. The vocals echo throughout, and the percussive, thrashy nature of its water and earth albums is replaced by a churning, building unity of movement through soundscapes. I give it 86 banana stickers.