

All about nothing and everything



Nigel Andrews
FILM

Frances Ha ★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Noah Baumbach

The Wolverine
★ ★ ☆ ☆ ☆
James Mangold

Dial M for Murder
★ ★ ★ ★ ☆
Alfred Hitchcock

Blackfish ★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆
Gabriela Cowperthwaite

Viramundo
★ ★ ☆ ☆ ☆
Pierre-Yves Borgeaud

Days of Grace
★ ★ ☆ ☆ ☆
Everardo Gout

I'm not sure what Noah Baumbach's **Frances Ha** is about, which is one reason I like it so much. (I offer only the time-honoured gagster's response: "It's about 86 minutes.") Aren't we becoming sick of cinema "about" things? Movies "about" single, saleable, bells-and-whistles themes or gimmicks? Movies "about" zombies (*World War Z*) or "about" superheroes (see film two in this column), even – worthier but not polar in difference – documentaries "about" good causes (see film four).

The only "about" – or rather "à bout" – I am put in mind of by this movie from the maker of *The Squid and the Whale* is Godard's *A bout de souffle*; also known as *Breathless*. *Frances Ha* is breathless too in a slo-mo way, a black-and-white, elusively plotted charmer about a 27-year-old (Greta Gerwig) looking for herself, though not very hard, like a time-travelled Jean Seberg, in New York and Paris.

Her only fixed compass point is her best friend Sophie and even that bond

is starting to wear. "We're like a lesbian couple that doesn't have sex any more," Frances says to the pretty-plain, dark-haired, owl-faced pal (Mickey Sumner, daughter of Sting) with whom she sometimes platonically sleeps. Frances studies and part-time-teaches ballet. She permutes boyfriends. She – well, it's almost enough to say she is played by Ms Gerwig, once the Garbo of mumblecore, now Baumbach's muse and co-writer, who can make inanity seem sexy, funny, explorative, human.

As vague as waves yet as solid as a rock (in patterning and personality), the film is so early-Godard you could call it *Two or Three Things I Know about Frances*. A dizzy, ditty race against time to a nocturnal ATM; a mishap-prone spell as a waitress; a date that goes wrong, a date that goes right: these *are* the plot. Even the bemused skitters of borrowed music on the soundtrack tell their tales. For Paris it's "Every 1's a Winner", here simultaneously a germane lie and a kooky truth. Who dares wins. Who dares to love life without achieving every foolish or overambitious dream will find transcendence. In a bad movie, Frances Ha (that initially annoying surname-pendant is wittily explained in the last shot) might have killed herself for failing to rise to the American dream. In a good movie she knows that collective ideals and aspirations are other people's trophy-hunting. If you keep kicking your own thoughts and wishes along life's streets, somehow and sometime you will score your personal goal.

I missed the first lupine superhero spin-off, *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*. A vacation must have lightened my load. Sadly, lightning doesn't strike twice. Reporting for duty to **The Wolverine**, sequel to the spin-off from the comic-book saga, I discover a movie that clots the brain and

paralyses the soul. Hugh Jackman is delivered for two hours in a short back and lycanthropic sideburns, battling Japanese actors so dead-thought-alive you would think them provided by Sony or Nintendo.

The 70-years-on tale of life after Nagasaki – the prelude features the Bomb going off (anything for a plot trigger) – goes on itself for what seems 70 years. Dynastic intrigue; dense but dull revenge plots; one-dimensional dialogue. For better vision I sometimes laid aside the 3D specs, which dim the screen as usual. The film, though, has only two points of light and interest. First: Jackman's increasingly eerie resemblance to the young Clint Eastwood as he plays the bushy-haired freelance-samurai hero. ("Ronin, Ronin, Ronin – *Rawhide!*" ... a colleague suggested for the theme song.) Second: Marco Beltrami's decibel-fearless score, whose ability to awaken the dead should prove useful at screenings worldwide.

For a mischievously authoritative use of 3D go back more than half a century, once again, to Hitchcock's **Dial M for Murder**. Released in 1954 in two dimensions – made stereoscopically in 1953, it was deemed to have missed the crest of a short-lived wave – it now returns, up-close and personal. Grace Kelly reaches out into the audience for murder scissors; foreground tea tables all but clonk your knees; a tell-tale door key – how many Hitchcock revelation moments feature those! – is brandished inches



from your nose. Based on a medium-fusty stage whodunnit by Frederick Knott, in Hitchcock's care and this restoration the film comes up as fresh as new scenery paint.

The "whales of August" arrive early this year, enabling the squeamish to run for cover. **Blackfish** is an acclaimed and chastening documentary about what happens to human beings – injury, mutilation, death – when they pen orcas in sea parks. Hide under your seat, if you need, during footage of trainers being maimed, munched or, in one case, dragged repeatedly and near-drowningly underwater.

Director Gabriela Cowperthwaite doesn't hide her agenda. She wants to whip SeaWorld's corporate ass. She declares war on the marine park moguls who subject captured killer whales to close confinement, dangerously, when the creatures' nature is to sport in boundless oceans. My one afternoon, a decade or three ago, of watching mega-mammals frolic in a Florida seaquarium now turns to ashes in my memory. My money evidently subsidised a culture that hands misery to sea giants and then lies about the results. No, it is *not* normal for a whale's dorsal fin to flop. No, it is *not* known, in the wild, for a whale to attack humans . . .

The worst incident cited here, the grisly death of trainer Dawn Brancheau in the summer of 2010, is the one span of recorded footage Cowperthwaite unaccountably cuts short. There was an argument from the corporation side that the animal went for Brancheau's provocative pony tail rather than a gratuitously sought foot or arm. By advancing her video-recorded evidence a few frames, the director could have established a "yea" or a "nay". I submit this as the one and only small item in SeaWorld's defence.

Latin harmony versus Latin anarchy. The first comes in the documentary **Viramundo**, a sweet-natured but soporific slab of positive musing – and positive music – featuring Gilberto Gil, Brazilian singer-songwriter and Lula-era minister of culture. He tours the world investigating the wounds of racism and the healing balm of music. He and we both needed a more *dirigiste* tour guide than director Pierre-Yves Borgeaud.

Days of Grace is a bang-bang thriller about drugs, murder, police corruption and the whole damn Mexican thing. Full of colour, carnage and dramatic overkill, the film drills through your brain, destroying neurons as it goes. It's like being your own guest at an aesthetic torture gig. But it is zappily made, no dispute. Given calming pills, debut director Everardo Gout might yet have promise.