



Mya (Anessa Ramsey)
in *The Signal*

Strange Transmissions

Bleak and brutal sci-fi horror flick falls flat

THE SIGNAL: Written, edited and directed by David Bruckner, Dan Bush and Jacob Gentry. Music, Ben Lovett. Starring Justin Welborn, A.J. Bowen, Anessa Ramsey, Scott Poythress, Sahr Ngaujah, Cheri Christian and Chad McKnight. Magnolia Pictures, 2008. R. 99 minutes. ★☆☆☆☆

In a city called Terminus (an old name for Atlanta), in an indistinct time, a strange, creepy transmission has taken over the airwaves. Those who see it on

TV, hear it over the radio or catch it on their cellphones are changed; their baser instincts take over, their darkest fears and issues rise to the surface, their perceptions shift. They get really pissed off. And then, mostly, they kill each other.

The Signal was written, directed, edited and otherwise created by David Bruckner, Dan Bush and Jacob Gentry, three Atlanta fellows whose feature film came out of

an experimental project in which each director would shoot part of a story, then hand it to another. Eventually their stories gelled into this film, which is arranged in three “transmissions,” one in the hands of each of the three directors. Running through all three segments of the film are the stories of Mya (Anessa Ramsey), her lover Ben (Justin Welborn) — with whom she wants to escape Terminus — and her jealous husband Lewis (A.J. Bowen), who gets “the crazy” pretty badly. In the second act, the film segues into black humor that, while it may be meant to let us see what it’s like to be “signalized,” feels like a weak, unfunny trip into *Shaun of the Dead* territory — albeit more drenched in fake blood. The more the characters are affected by the signal, the more their realities twist — and the nastier the violence gets. It’s both ugly and boring watching Lewis torture a woman his disjointed mind suspects knows something she’s not telling him. What no one knows (and almost no one seems to care about) is where the signal is coming from or why, though Clark (Scott Poythress) rambles a few theories now and then, and Ben is pretty sure he’s figured out how to get around its effects. Maybe.

But revealing the source of the signal would change the direction of *The*

Signal, which is mostly — and messily — interested in the breakdown that occurs when everyone’s reality is different, when people stop being (or knowing) who they are — and, of course, when the source of all this disconnection is electronic; add this film to the growing list of those involving the dangers of technology in one way or another. The film’s strength is its cast, particularly the intense Bowen and casually appealing Welborn. But gaps in logic, distracting visual continuity issues, too-familiar images (the empty cityscapes in the third act seem, most immediately, straight out of *28 Days Later*) and a reliance on endless scenes of the maddened folks going at each other make *The Signal* aggravating to watch. Some filmgoers may have more patience for films where characters walk obliviously into danger or get their heads bashed in (with baseball bats, with pesticide tanks) only to rise again. But by the time *The Signal* arrives at its conclusion — in a terminal to which Mya apparently walked alone, a tiny blonde in a city of murderers — the film can’t even evoke interest in Ben’s manipulation of the signal’s effects. Instead, it merely elicits indifference.

EW

The Signal opens Friday, March 7, at the Bijou.

movie clips

OPENING OR RETURNING:

American Blackout: Documentary studies the disenfranchisement of black voters through the story of Cynthia McKinney, a Congressional representative from Georgia (McKinney is also a speaker at the Public Interest Environmental Law Conference Friday, March 7; www.pielc.org). “An illuminating, infuriating document,” said L.A. Weekly. 7 pm March 11, 180 PLC, UO. Free.

Atonement: Joe Wright’s adaptation of Ian McEwan’s exceptional – and exceptionally difficult to summarize – novel takes place across years, as the actions of young Briony (Saoirse Ronan) have lengthy, unimagined consequences to the future of her sister Cecilia (Keira Knightley) and their housekeeper’s son, Robbie (James McAvoy). ACADEMY AWARD: BEST SCORE. R. 123 min. Bijou. ★★★★★ (1/10)

Bank Job, The: Jason Statham (*The Transporter*) and Saffron Burrows star in this film based on the 1971 robbery at Lloyds Bank in London. To the thieves’ surprise, the box they steal has more than just cash in it. “Shapes up as one of the liveliest entertainments of the year,” said Andrew Sarris in *The New York Observer*. R. 110 min. Cinemark. VRC Stadium 15.

Chronicles From the Zero Hour: The Punk Legacy: Film includes interviews with current and recent bands such as Strike Anywhere and The Epoxies, and live footage of the likes of TSOL and the Circle Jerks. Screens following a panel discussion on “Punk and DIY Culture: Then and Now,” 7 pm March 8, DIVA. Free.

College Road Trip: Martin Lawrence plays an overbearing father who insists on coming along on his daughter’s college-visiting road trip. I think quirky situations and wacky hijinks may ensue! G. Cinemark. VRC Stadium 15.

Kite Runner, The: Marc Forster (*Finding Neverland*) directs this adaptation of Khaled Hosseini’s novel about a writer who is drawn back to the Afghanistan of his youth in order to help an old friend’s son. In flashback, Forster draws wonderful performances from two young actors, but the adult Amir’s storyline hinges too heavily on coincidence. PG13. 127 min. Movies 12. ★★☆☆☆ (1/10)

Mad Money: The unexpected trio of Katie Holmes, Queen Latifah and Diane Keaton star as new friends who decide to rob their employer, a Federal Reserve bank, because the system is keeping them down, man. Directed by Callie Khouri, whom some of us will always love for writing *Thelma & Louise*. PG13. 104 min. Movies 12.

Meet the Spartans: Didn’t I just joke, a few weeks ago, that apparently everything must get its own send-up movie now? The latest addition to the bloated category spoofs 300, Britney Spears and, um, *You Got Served*. PG13. 84 min. Movies 12.

Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day: Frances McDormand is Miss Pettigrew, who (in 1939 London) finds herself a job as a “social secretary” after being dismissed from her governess position. Over 24 hours, Miss Pettigrew and Delysia Lafosse (the wonderful Amy Adams) change each others’ lives – and those of the three men circling Delysia (Lee Pace, Ciaran Hinds and Mark Strong). PG13. 92 min. VRC Stadium 15.

Signal, The: Three directors created the three “transmissions” that make up this film, which is about

a strange, distorted signal that comes through TVs, phones and radios, turning those who hear it into angry killers. It’s a neat enough idea, but the film wobbles in tone and consistency, failing to turn the kernel of a notion into something compelling. R. 99 min. Bijou. See review this issue.

Swedish Film Series: Bille August’s *Jerusalem* tells the story of turn-of-the-century lovers who are divided when a preacher comes to town; when the young man doubts the preacher, he loses everything, and his love follows the man to Jerusalem. 7 pm March 7, 177 Lawrence, UO. Free.

Ten Thousand B.C.: Director Roland Emmerich (*Independence Day*) directs a set-ages-ago story about a young hunter and the lovely woman he’ll stop at nothing to save from “mysterious warlords.” Other key phrases from the studio’s synopsis include “ultimate fate,” “tyrannical god” and “empire beyond imagination.” Did I mention our hero’s name is D’Leh? PG13. 109 min. Cinemark. VRC Stadium 15.

Videomaker’s Forum and Slam: Monthly event invites video artists to share knowledge and experience with fellow artists, and also submit short videos of up to 10 minutes for a competition that follows the format of the poetry slam. Forum 4 pm, Slam 5:30 pm March 9, DIVA. Free.

Films open the Friday following EW publication date unless otherwise noted. See archived reviews at www.eugeneweekly.com

CONTINUING:

Alvin and the Chipmunks: What’s next? A live-action Care Bears movie starring Jason Lee? (He’s in this and *Underdog*, for those not keeping track.) Those wacky little creatures with the high-pitched voices will surely cause him some trouble in this newest bit of family fare. With, um, David Cross. Now I’m confused. PG. Movies 12.

Be Kind Rewind: Michel Gondry’s (*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*) playful, creative new film looks like a total joy. Mos Def and Jack Black star as friends facing a dilemma when one of them becomes magnetized and erases all the tapes in the store where his friend works. Bingo! They’ll make new versions of the films. PG13. 101 min. Cinemark. ★★☆☆☆ (2/28)

Definitely, Maybe: Manhattan papa Will (Ryan Reynolds) answers his daughter’s (Abigail Breslin) questions about how her now-divorcing parents met and fell in love with a complicated story about growing up – but of course it’s the tot who helps him figure out how to grow even farther. PG13. Cinemark. VRC Stadium 15.

Enchanted: Beautiful princesses! Handsome princes! And ... midtown Manhattan? Amy Adams (*Junebug*), James Marsters (*X-Men*) and Patrick Dempsey (*Grey’s Anatomy*) star in this charming fairy tale in the real world, which follows Princess Giselle (Adams) after a wicked witch banishes her from her magical kingdom. PG. 107 min. Movies 12. ★★☆☆☆ (1/3)

Fool’s Gold: Fools’ choices? Kate Hudson and Matthew McConaughey play a divorced couple who reteam to bicker endlessly – and search for a sunken treasure. Totally sure they stay divorced in the end, too. PG13. Cinemark. VRC Stadium 15.

Golden Compass, The: An only slightly above average

film based on Philip Pullman’s utterly brilliant novel. In a world much like our own, everyone has an animal companion who’s part of themselves, and one little girl (Dakota Blue Richards) is the key to saving not just her own world, but countless others as well. With Daniel Craig, Nicole Kidman and Sam Elliott. ACADEMY AWARD: VISUAL EFFECTS. PG13. 113 min. Movies 12. ★★☆☆☆ (12/13)

I Am Legend: Will Smith does the all-by-his-lonesome thing in a New York City left not exactly empty after a manmade virus devastates the globe. During the day, he tries to find other survivors; at night, he tries to survive the creatures that are what’s left of humanity. PG13. 100 min. Movies 12. ★★☆☆☆ (12/20)

In Bruges: Colin Farrell and Brendan Gleeson star in playwright Martin McDonagh’s directorial debut, a slightly sweet, somewhat philosophical, totally sailor-mouthed tale of two hitmen sent to hide out in the Belgian town of Bruges. A mixup of genre and tone, it’s nonetheless diverting and amusing, and Farrell, as the more distressed of the pair, is surprisingly sympathetic. R. 107 min. Bijou. ★★☆☆☆ (2/28)

Into the Wild: Star Emile Hirsch bears a reasonable resemblance to Christopher McCandless, a bright, privileged young man who took off into Alaska in the early 1990s, but Sean Penn’s adaptation of Jon Krakauer’s novel doesn’t create an entirely satisfying portrait of the man whose story has been captivating readers for a decade. R. 140 min. Movies 12. ★★☆☆☆ (10/18)

Jumper: Adapted from a novel by Steven Gould, this film follows “jumpers” who can leap through space and time. Among these lucky few are Hayden Christensen and Jamie Bell; Samuel L. Jackson provides the tension as a fella who doesn’t approve of these crazy hijinks. Directed by Doug Liman (*The Bourne Identity*). PG13. 88 min. Cinemark. VRC Stadium 15.

Juno: Director Jason Reitman’s turned out another buzzworthy movie, this time with a screenplay by newcomer Diablo Cody. Ellen Page (who was outstanding in *Hard Candy*) plays a pregnant teenager dealing with herself, her future, her parents, the best friend who fathered the kid and the couple who wants to adopt it. “Hilarious and sweet-tempered, perceptive and surprisingly grounded,” said the *Los Angeles Times*. ACADEMY AWARD: BEST ORIGINAL SCREENPLAY. PG13. 96 min. Cinemark. VRC Stadium 15. ★★☆☆☆ (1/10)

National Treasure: Book of Secrets: Nicolas Cage returns for more adventure and hijinks – something to do with the president’s secret book (hey, this sounds like *Crooked Little Vein!*) and clearing his family’s name; did great-great grandpa have something to do with Lincoln’s assassination? With Helen Mirren. PG. Cinemark.

No Country for Old Men: The latest from the Coen brothers is a near-masterpiece, an adaptation of Cormac McCarthy’s acclaimed novel, and it’s earning plenty of acclaim itself. The story involves a small-town sheriff, a deadly drug deal and a psychopathic killer (Javier Bardem). The reviewers say “intense,” “searing,” “an evil delight.” ACADEMY AWARDS: BEST SUPPORTING ACTOR (JAVIER BARDEM), BEST DIRECTOR, BEST ADAPTED SCREENPLAY, BEST PICTURE. R. 122 min. Movies 12. ★★☆☆☆ (11/29)

Other Boleyn Girl, The: In this film, based on Philippa Gregory’s novel, Anne (Natalie Portman) and Mary

(Scarlett Johansson) Boleyn are sent by their family to lure the attentions of the king of England (Eric Bana). Court intrigue, family drama and other period-piece standards fill out the sisters’ stories as they fight for love and power. PG13. 115 min. VRC Stadium 15.

Penelope: Christina Ricci stars as the title character of this modern-day sorta fairytale, a girl cursed with a pig’s snout instead of a nose. Her family tries to lure suitors (true love will break the curse, of course), but they all run screaming – until the always-charming James McAvoy happens along. With Catherine O’Hara and Reese Witherspoon. PG. 102 min. Cinemark. VRC Stadium 15.

Semi-Pro: Will Farrell continues to make millions playing idiots; here he’s the coach-player-owner of the Flint Tropics, an American Basketball Association team dreaming of joining the NBA. Thing is, they suck, and wrestling bears isn’t going to make them any better. With Andre Benjamin and Woody Harrelson. R. Cinemark. VRC Stadium 15.

Spiderwick Chronicles, The: Adaptation of Holly Black and Tony DiTerlizzi’s books about a young boy (Freddie Highmore, playing twins) who finds that there’s much more than meets the eye to an old family estate. Black has a knack for a different kind of fairy tale; let’s hope the movie can translate that to the screen. With Mary-Louise Parker. PG. Cinemark. VRC Stadium 15.

Step Up 2: The Streets: Apparently, 2006’s *Step Up* was a phenomenon, despite the fact that the RottenTomatoes.com critical consensus is “Not enough dancing.” This time around, street dancer Andie (Briana Evigan) struggles to fit in at an elite arts school, where she – naturally – meets the school’s hottest dancer. PG13. Cinemark. VRC Stadium 15.

Teeth: Mitchell Lichtenstein’s (son of Ray) debut as writer and director is a sort of horror comedy about Dawn (Jess Weixler), a young woman who lectures her peers about saving themselves for marriage. But when she begins to get close to another member of her chastity group, she (and he) find that Dawn, who lives near a nuclear reactor, has something of a mutation: more than one set of teeth. R. 94 min. Bijou.

There Will Be Blood: Oscar-nominated Daniel Day-Lewis stars in Paul Thomas Anderson’s (*Magnolia*) dark film about an evil oilman who heads to a California town, where a preacher (Paul Dano) accepts his presence on the condition that the oilman will help fund a church. “A force beyond categories,” said Roger Ebert. ACADEMY AWARDS: BEST ACTOR (DANIEL DAY-LEWIS), BEST CINEMATOGRAPHY. R. 158 min. VRC Stadium 15. ★★☆☆☆ (1/31)

Vantage Point: Dennis Quaid, Matthew Fox, Forest Whitaker and Sigourney Weaver are just half the people – and perspectives – in this thriller about an assassination attempt made on the American president (William Hurt) as he gives a speech about the war on terror. I think the real story might be, uh, complicated? PG13. 90 min. Cinemark. VRC Stadium 15.

Water Horse: Legend of the Deep: It’s nice to see Ben Chaplin (*The Truth About Cats and Dogs*) again, even if it’s in this too-cute-but-still-charming children’s film about a boy who finds a mysterious eggs that turns into a mythical creature. Directed by Jay Russell (*My Dog Skip*). PG. 111 min. Movies 12.