

Films

Monte Carlo

USA/Luxembourg/Hungary/
France/Monaco 2011
Director: Thomas Bezucha
Certificate PG 108m 36s

Monte Carlo began as British playwright/director Jez Butterworth's follow-up to 2001's *Birthday Girl*. Based on Jules Bass's novel *Headhunters*, its plot then turned on four New Jersey women pretending to be wealthy abroad, landing four equally mercenary gigolos. All such unwholesome elements have been excised from the final product, designed as tween-girl-friendly entertainment. The protagonists are younger and more naive: earnest Grace (Selena Gomez) has just graduated from high school, while her stepsister Meg (Leighton Meester) is an uptight college student. Grace's vaguely slutty friend Emma (Katie Cassidy) rounds out the trio. Stuck in a small Texas town, Grace has been saving for a graduation trip to Paris for years, but once there the three girls find themselves in predictably dingy lodgings and embark on a joyless package sightseeing expedition. Just as the sense of disillusionment is kicking in, Grace is mistaken for Cordelia Winthrop-Scott (Gomez again), a bratty socialite doppelganger. A few plot mechanics later, Grace and friends are in Monte Carlo (actually mostly Budapest)



A frock and a hard place: Leighton Meester, Selena Gomez, Katie Cassidy

with Cordelia's designer wardrobe. Early on, Meg snaps that she doesn't want to get sucked into "the sisterhood of the travelling to France" – and with its trio of female journeys of self-discovery, *Monte Carlo* plays like an anodyne version of the relatively tough-

minded *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (2005). Here, there's no crisis that expensive clothing and make-up can't solve, though the real message is that all three girls are already perfect: all they needed for men to worship them was the external trappings. As Gomez's end-credits song 'Who Says' unambivalently asserts, "I'm sure you got some things you'd like to change about yourself, but when it comes to me, I wouldn't want to be anybody else" – an empowerment message not that far removed from unappealing solipsism.

Attentively, each woman receives the man she deserves. For Grace, it's Theo (Pierre Boulanger), a wispy French boy who admires her cowboy boots (worn to a formal charity ball), while Meg gets laidback Aussie Riley (Luke Bracey), who's roaming Europe after recovering from a rugby injury. As for Emma, she leaves boyfriend Owen (Cory Monteith) behind in Texas: he proposes marriage the night before she leaves, clearly concerned she'll sleep around abroad, and she exits in an understandable huff, angry that the one time something big happens, her boyfriend has to be possessive and spoil it. But a woman's destiny is marriage, so Emma realises that Owen's her dreamboat and all she wants is to stay in Texas and get married. The movie possesses roughly zero sense of irony or scepticism about any of this.

Co-writer/director Tom Bezucha is mostly unobtrusive, aside from sporadic, inexplicable violent zooms that threaten to make the film interesting. There's one good joke towards the end, when an exasperated French concierge exclaims in his native tongue, "But why am I speaking English?" – a neat acknowledgement of the usual Hollywood practice of making the rest of the world speak its language. Otherwise, it's all girl power via dresses – a dubious but standard message.

◆ **Vadim Rizov**

Newsreel 1

United Kingdom 2011
Director: Alex Reuben

Legend has it that when the first reel of *Battleship Potemkin* unspooled at its world premiere, the final reel was still being assembled. According to Sergei Eisenstein, they ran out of glue at a crucial moment and had to substitute saliva, which thankfully proved up to the task. Modern digital technology means that DJ-filmmaker Alex Reuben shouldn't have the same problem, but the marketing hook of his ongoing *Newsreel* project is that each piece will also be shot and edited as close to the release date as possible. (Old-fashioned print deadlines dictated that the version under review was watched online a fortnight before the premiere, so some details may change.)

Newsreel 1 consists of impressions of London, stressing its arts, music and dance, its architecture, its multicultural vibrancy and its public protest. While the content is often surprisingly close to the reportage traditions first set up by early British newsreels such as the *Gaumont Graphic*, *Pathé's Animated Gazette* or *Topical Budget*, the absence of any spoken or written commentary establishes it as closer kin to Anthony Simmonds's music-hall-scored *Sunday by the Sea* (1953) and *Bow Bells* (1954). Ken Russell's short BBC item *London Moods* (1961) or Phil Munnoch's *Captain Zip* studies of London punks (1978-81).

Reuben made his reputation with the documentary *Routes: Dancing to New Orleans* (2008), and *Newsreel 1* shows further evidence of a lively eye and ear for visual and sonic juxtaposition (which he calls 'choreogeography' – "like psychogeography, but in movement"). Extreme close-ups turn coloured and patterned cloth, green Thameside algae and patterns in brickwork into abstract studies of colour and texture. A shot of people walking beside the river is inverted, emphasising form and movement. Scaffolding and glass-and-steel architecture are juxtaposed, revealing more in common than otherwise. Some shots recall Patrick Keiller's wry visual commentary: a BP sunflower logo can be glimpsed peeking over a wall beside an otherwise tranquil river scene.

The most eerily beautiful sequence features William Forsythe's 'Scattered Crowd' installation at King's Cross, featuring thousands of white and translucent balloons suspended from a ceiling at various heights, swaying gently before being burst off screen, strewn the floor with useless pieces of torn rubber. A more dangerous kind of artistic fragility is marked by a demonstration held in protest at the jailing of dissident Ai Weiwei, his absence symbolised by an empty chair admonishingly facing the Chinese Embassy.

Indeed, protest is the most frequently recurring theme, whether it's the pub-singalong mutation of 'Knees Up Mother Brown' into an anti-Blair and Bush polemic or anti-government demonstrations in front of Parliament



Hot off the streets: 'Newsreel 1'

and in Oxford Circus. The latter setting offers surprising scope for surreally incongruous images, whether lines of drummers clad in lime green or a burning effigy of a larger-than-life-size horse which causes plumes of black smoke to drift over the top of Oxford Street shopfronts, inescapably bringing to mind the August 2011 riots a few months later.

Television critics often complain that they're expected to assess the lasting worth of a series on the basis of its first episode. What the *Newsreel* project will look like in a year's time is anyone's guess, and clearly strongly dependent on whether Reuben can reinvent the choreogeographic formula with sufficient freshness each time. But from this native Londoner's perspective (which probably also affects appreciation), it's a very promising start.

◆ **Michael Brooke**

CREDITS

Produced by Alex Reuben
Camera Alex Reuben
Sound Alex Reuben
through Arts Council England
Executive Producer for Sadler's Wells: Emma Gladstone
In Colour [L78:1]
Distributor A Reuben Film
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Production Companies Commissioned by Sadler's Wells and supported by the National Lottery

SYNOPSIS London, 2009-11. A series of impressions of life in the capital, including an Eritrean wedding and subsequent dance, a riverside banquet, a Thameside walk, a contemporary music concert, a political pub singalong, tranquil family strolls and t'ai chi in a park, the Swap and Share Picnic at Shoreditch's Arnold Circus, William Forsythe's 'Scattered Crowd' installation involving thousands of white balloons in a disused railway shed, and anti-government protests outside Parliament, in Oxford Circus (where an effigy of a horse is burned) and in front of the Chinese Embassy (the latter demanding the release of jailed artist Ai Weiwei).



Out of his depth: Colm Meaney

Parked

Ireland/Finland 2010
Director: Darragh Byrne

This low-key Irish drama certainly warrants its title, for once the story has established middle-aged singleton Colm Meaney living out of his Mazda saloon in a Dublin Bay municipal car park, it remains dismayingly static for what seems like a very long time, until events resolve themselves in a final act of stultifying predictability. With Meaney's shy fiftysomething drifter, Colin Morgan's troubled junkie and Milka Ahlroth's kindly Scandinavian widow as its main characters, Darragh Byrne's film certainly doesn't lack sympathy for the lost, lonely and frankly befuddled – but providing a sustained dramatic through-line for this seemingly ill-matched trio proves a challenging task for Ciaran Creagh's script.

The film's strongest notion is that it takes a character at a crossroads in his life and puts him in the curious position of being neither one place nor another: since he's 'of no fixed abode', Meaney can't get welfare assistance – no fixed address, no job, no cheques. What's a sometime jeweller, whose life has fallen apart for reasons we never quite discover, to do in such circumstances? Wait, it turns out, for the contrivances of the storyline to throw up solutions. Morgan, living in the car park in his yellow hatchback just a few spaces along, never convinces as a real junkie. He's merely a plot device with his own ready-made crises (estranged from his widower dad, owing money to a semi-sinister dealer) so that his tribulations can help Meaney put his life in perspective, while also adding a dash of youthful spirit to cajole the older man out of his ongoing funk.

Midlife stasis is a demanding subject for celluloid, one that risks wearing out our patience: we can't help feeling that this set-in-his-ways moocher simply needs to make more of an effort to embrace life. Moreover, the film's underplayed romance is merely another layer of cliché, since it's hard to

understand what a seemingly well-adjusted woman like Ahlroth would see in the tongue-tied and reserved Meaney. One imagines the filmmakers expected that the casting of a Finnish actress would provide some unexpected tang, but after Iben Hjejle in Conor McPherson's *The Eclipse* (2009) and Paprika Steen in Nick Whitfield's *Skeletons* (2010), it's fair to say this notion isn't as fresh as it once was – and Ahlroth's character is easily the sketchiest of the central trio.

Since the film's second act pretty much amounts to a delaying strategy, moving the characters around on walks and chance encounters to put off the confrontations we know are needed to move everyone on, the sluggish pace does little to revive our flagging interest. Hardly the performers' fault, since Meaney is impeccable as ever, suggesting glints of life just under the

surface of a man seemingly locked in a cycle of lowered expectations, while Morgan is mercurial enough in a barely playable role and Ahlroth warm and probably way too wise for these two muddlers. Still, the characters never really strike sparks off one another with the intensity required to give the drama any significant charge – a shame, since in principle it's good to see a story that isn't for once fixated on the problems of the young. Perhaps in reaction to the lo-fi grit of successful Irish exports such as *Adam & Paul* (2004) and *Kisses* (2008), director Byrne has gone for a more sculpted, expressive approach, all artful framing and colour filters, but the effect is self-conscious and distracting, while Niall Byrne's soggy sub-Rachel Portman score signally fails to supply the emotional uplift required. Parked indeed.

◆ **Trevor Johnston**

CREDITS

Producers Jacqueline Kerrin Dominic Wright
Screenplay Ciaran Creagh
Screen Story Darragh Byrne Ciaran Creagh
Director of Photography John Conroy
Edited by Guy Montgomery
Production Designer Owen Power
Composer Niall Byrne
Sound Design Krika Sainio
Costume Designer Susan Scott
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Production Companies Ripple World Pictures presents a Ripple World production with the participation of Bord Scannán na hÉireann/The Irish Film Board, The Finnish Film Foundation in association with RTÉ
Produced with the support of investment incentives for the Irish

CAST

Colm Meaney
Fred Daly
Colin Morgan
Cathal O'Regan
Milka Ahlroth
Juliana
Stuart Graham
George O'Regan
Michael McElhatton
Frank
Film Industry provided by the Government of Ireland
Made under the European Convention on Cinematographic Co-Production
David Wilmot
Peter
Tatiana Ouliankina
aquia aerobics instructor
Diarmuid Noyes
Cathal's brother
Mark Butler
Clippo
Dolby Digital in Colour [2.35:1]
Distributor Element Pictures

SYNOPSIS Dublin, present day. Fred arrives on the ferry from England and starts living out of his car in a car park on the coast road. He is refused welfare assistance because he has no fixed abode. He is joined in the car park by Cathal, a young drug addict living in his yellow hatchback. Fred encounters Juliana at a local swimming pool and has another chance to talk to her at a rehearsal of the church choir, where she's playing piano. He hesitates to ask her out since he's living in his car, but after fixing a clock belonging to her late husband, he plucks up the courage to invite her to the car park. Cathal, whose spirited attitude is an inspiration to Fred, is attacked by the drug dealer to whom he owes money. Fred returns to find both cars trashed and Cathal gone, so he searches for him, missing Juliana in the process. Cathal has returned to his father's house, but the latter is still bitter at his son for driving his mother to an early grave. Cathal steals some cash and takes a fatal overdose. Fred attends the wake and lets Cathal's father know that his son was a good friend. Fred's damaged car is removed, and Juliana decides to return to her native Helsinki – leaving Fred a piece of music she wrote for him.

Now rehoused, Fred faces the future with renewed resolve.

CREDITS
Produced by Arnon Milchan Denise Di Novi Alison Greenspan Nicole Kidman
Screenplay Thomas Bezucha April Blair Maria Maggenti
Screen Story Kelly Bowe
Based on the novel *Headhunters* by Jules Bass
Director of Photography Jonathan Brown
Film Editor Jeffrey Ford
Production Designer Hugo Luczyc-Wyhowski
Music Composed by Michael Giacchino
Sound Mixer John Rodda
Costume Designer Shay Culliffe
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Production Companies Fox 2000 Pictures and Regency Enterprises present a Di Novi Pictures production Made in association with Dune Entertainment
Filmed with the assistance of the French Tax Rebate for International Productions
Executive Producers Stan Wlodkowski Deborah Schindler Forest Whitaker Per Saari
Film Extracts *To Catch a Thief* (1954)
CAST
Selena Gomez
Grace Bennett/Cordelia Winthrop-Scott
Leighton Meester
Meg
Katie Cassidy
Emma
Cory Monteith
Owen
Andie MacDowell
Pam
Catherine Tate
Alicia Winthrop-Scott
Pierre Boulanger
Theo
Luke Bracey
Riley
Brett Cullen
Robert
Valérie Lemercier
Madame Valerie
Dolby Digital in Colour
Prints by DeLuxe [1.85:1]
Distributor 20th Century Fox International (UK)
9,774 ft +0 frames

SYNOPSIS Texas, the present. After saving up for a trip to Paris following her graduation from high school, Grace Bennett is unhappy when her mother and stepfather announce that stepsister Meg will be accompanying her and best friend Emma.
In Paris, the girls join a package tour and find themselves lodged in a dingy hotel. When they shelter in an expensive hotel during a rainstorm, Grace is mistaken for spoiled socialite Cordelia Winthrop-Scott. The girls take advantage of the misunderstanding to spend the night in the hotel, and later decide to prolong the ruse while Cordelia is away and travel in her place to a charity event in Monte Carlo. There Meg finds romance with Theo, son of the founder of an educational charity, while Grace falls for Australian hitchhiker Riley. Emma misses her boyfriend Owen, who worries that he will lose her and flies to Paris to find them. Cordelia returns to Paris and, thinking her jewellery is missing, calls the police. Grace confesses the girls' deception at a charity auction, causing Theo to walk out in disgust. Emma and Owen are reconciled and return home. Meg decides to go travelling with Riley.
A few months later, working for a charitable school in Romania, Grace sees Theo; they kiss.