

FILM

REVIEW | By John Anderson

Fine 'Cosmopolis': Limo on a Slow Road to Hell

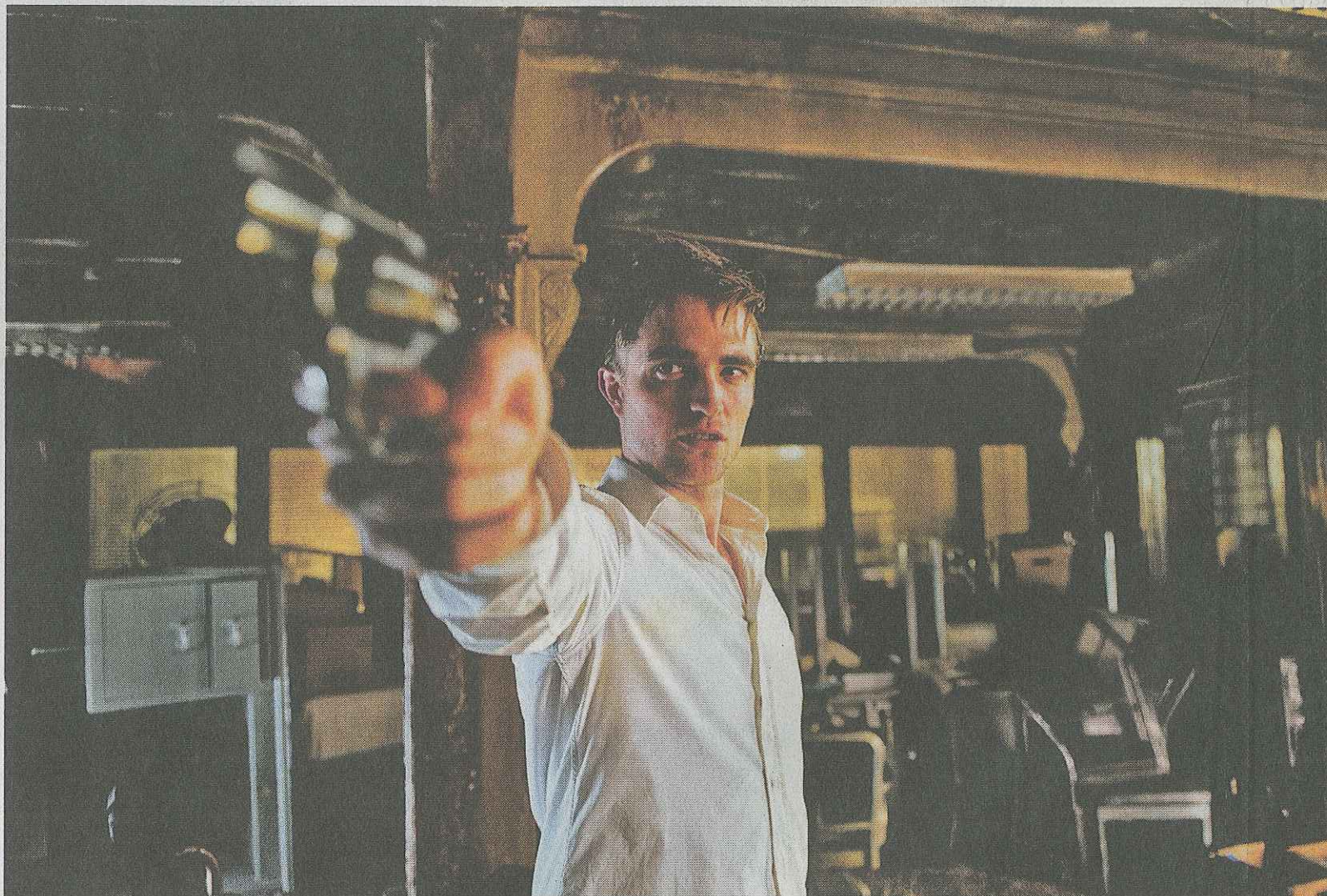
Ghosts, war mix well in 'Awakening'; action dinosaurs reunite in 'Expendables 2', but mammals beware

AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART in New York right now, there's a smallish gallery upstairs set up to provide a crash course in Abstract Expressionism. It might also serve as a DVD extra to director David Cronenberg's elliptical new feature, "Cosmopolis." At each end are works by Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock, artists directly referenced in the film. Between them are paintings with an emotional kinship to Mr. Cronenberg's coolly absurdist and disturbing drama: a stark, staring woman by de Kooning, and a violently kinetic Clyfford Still in which a jagged shriek of color rips across a funereal black backdrop.

"Cosmopolis," from the novel by Don DeLillo, is not about art, per se. But it uses art as a counterweight to money, and to a fundamentalist belief in financial "systems" that has led its "hero" down a path to destruction. Like the novel, Mr. Cronenberg's screen adaptation is keyed to the off-kilter economics of a present-day Manhattan, even if the story is set a few moments in the future. In addition, it marks Mr. Cronenberg's return, following three very successful and accessible entertainments—"A History of Violence," "Eastern Promises" and "A Dangerous Method"—to a more characteristic weirdness. Conventional it is not. Engrossing it is.

"Twilight" heartthrob Robert Pattinson portrays the insufferable Eric Packer, a ridiculously wealthy young trader who has gambled heavily on the yuan and is about to lose his Brunello Cucinelli shirt. Swaddled in his custom-elongated limousine (which has also been lined with cork, a la Proust's bedroom), Eric decides he needs a haircut; the only acceptable barber is on the other side of the city. The president is in town. "Just to be clear," Eric asks his security man (Kevin Durand), "which president are we talking about?" As his vehicle proceeds to make its excruciating way from east to west, a simple trip across town becomes a Joseph Campbell-evoking, mytho-heroic vision quest in which the protagonist's life will be reviewed and found wanting, and a luxury limo will morph into a metaphorical hearse.

Along the way, the New York painters of the '40s are referenced in ways that are pointed, and even a bit self-serving: My film, Mr. Cronenberg is saying, will provoke much of the same general bewilderment that greeted Pollock (a very Pollocklike



Robert Pattinson, above, takes aim in 'Cosmopolis'; right, Rebecca Hall in 'The Awakening'; below right, some of the cast of 'The Expendables 2.'

bly in "eXistenZ"). "Cosmopolis," with its echoes of Beckett and Sisyphus, carries a rather banal message—that absolute wealth corrupts absolutely. But it's not pushing any Occupy bandwagon, despite the surreal street scenes Mr. Cronenberg provides, of rioting, the adoption of the rat as a unit of currency, and the attack on Packer by a prankster "pastry assassin" played by Mathieu Amalric ("I am the action painter of the cream pie!"). Mr. DeLillo wrote the book in 2003, which is when producer Paulo Branco brought it to Mr. Cronenberg. In marketing terms, its arrival today is just



ways that are pointed, and even a bit self-serving: My film, Mr. Cronenberg is saying, will provoke much of the same general bewilderment that greeted Pollock (a very Pollocklike creation is "dripped" behind the opening credits). Nevertheless, great art is great art. And money—the underlying evil of the film—is just money. The Canadian director no doubt hopes to make some money, although, like Rothko, his primary motivation seems to be existential dread, rather than a new swimming pool in Toronto. Otherwise, he would make conventional movies.

Those kinds of movies have likable heroes, and no one is supposed to like Eric Packer. Not his icy wife (Sarah Gordon), an heiress and bad poet who refuses to have sex with him. Not the various subordinates who pass through the womblimo, itself an exercise in expressionism (it seems to shape-shift, but that may be the angles). It's hard to warm to the guy: After he has backseat sex with his art dealer, Didi Fanher (a mischievous Juliette Binoche), she tells him about a Rothko that's suddenly become available. Didi recommends a buy. Eric decides, instead, that he wants to purchase the entire Rothko Chapel in Houston. "It belongs to the world," Didi protests. "It's mine if I buy it," Eric replies, at which point the rear window of the limo suddenly becomes awash in daylight. Either that, or the wrath of God.

"Cosmopolis" is a bumper-to-bumper road movie. There are moments of very abrupt violence, and much that's going to push conventionally minded audiences away. Mr. Pattinson, who no doubt wants to escape the ghoulish goldmine that has made him a star, isn't quite in step with the film's agenda: He's a bit too likable, as well as constricted, although those qualities are used by Mr. Cronenberg to the film's advantage.

The director, whose films have often been pigeonholed as "horror," has never been interested in monsters, even if Eric Packer is one. Like many sci-fi visionaries, he has watched where the culture was going and pursued its logical ends, including virtual realities and body modification (nota-

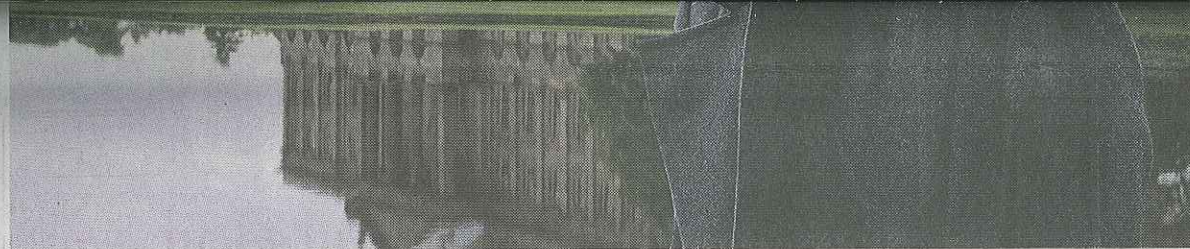
action center of the Great DeLillo wrote the book in 2003, which is when producer Paulo Branco brought it to Mr. Cronenberg. In marketing terms, its arrival today is just good timing—something that, for Eric Packer, has just about run out.

'The Awakening'

The centenary of World War I is virtually around the corner, and the closer it gets, the more the war will invade pop culture. Foreshadowing what is sure to be anniversary-manifesto two summers from now is "The Awakening," a supernatural thriller set in the immediate aftermath of that war—"a time for ghosts," as an opening title warns. The film benefits enormously from having the luminous Rebecca Hall as its lead. It also gains an ominous gravity from the haunted, wounded and wobbly England in which it's set.

There, a professional nonbeliever named Florence Cathcart (Ms. Hall) spends her time debunking the so-called mediums who have sprung up like toadstools to exploit the grief-stricken. Leading her anti-spiritualist vice squad, Florence breaks up a phony séance, getting a slap in the face for her trouble. "Did you ever have a child?" the slapper demands, clearly preferring belief to the truth. But what is the truth? When Florence is hired by a boys school to explain the ghost sightings that have paralyzed the student body, reality becomes enshrouded in mist. Having set up Florence and his audience as cynics, director Nick Murphy sets the bar rather high for the kind of eeriness to follow. But both he and his cast are up to the challenge.

Whether "The Awakening" holds together logically, or lives up to the standards it sets for itself, is a question, but the atmosphere is seductive. The performances by Imelda Staunton, as a Mrs. Danvers-esque caretaker, and Dominic West, as a teacher and war vet with survivor guilt, are very fine. The star, however, is Ms. Hall, whose plucky Florence displays doubt, intelligence, dignity and tolerance, mixed with just a whiff of condescension, for those who save their mourning hearts with the balm of



blind belief. So much virtue might have been trite. Here, it's enchanting.

The Expendables 2

"This is embarrassing," says Arnold Schwarzenegger. "Sure is," grunts Sylvester Stallone. They're not really talking about the lumbering vehicle they've found themselves aboard, but as with much of "The Expendables 2," the jokes are there to be mined. The movie's chief gag is that all these dinosaurs are in the same place at the same time, in an old-timers' game of '80s action heroes who include Mr. Stallone, Mr. Schwarzenegger, Bruce Willis, Dolph Lundgren, Chuck Norris and a villainous Jean-Claude Van Damme, who treat their legacies with undignified disdain. Also in the cast are the younger Jason Statham, Jet Li and Terry Crews, as well as the boyish Liam Hemsworth, whose might as well have "marked for death" tattooed on his forehead, he's so nice and polite.

Cut on the old "Seven Samurai" template, "E2" features a group of mercenaries, each of whom has a specialty by which he extinguishes enemies with decapitations and arterial explosions. Much of the movie's action was very obviously enhanced during the film's post-production process, to achieve maximum arc and volume—which is, excuse the term, overkill. It may be a bit late in the game to bemoan the kind of hyper-violence that makes up so much of "The Expendables 2," given that its cast has been practicing movie mayhem for these many years. But does it all have to be so tedious? To the movie's credit, many of the inside jokes are pretty funny, and Mr. Lundgren is close to hilarious as a dissi-



(t-b) Entertainment One/Everett Collection; Origin Pictures; Lionsgate

pated Swede named Gunner. But as Joe Morgenstern likes to note, this movie—like so many—is barely for Americans at all. It's mostly for those vast overseas audiences who eat this stuff up, made global stars of Mr. Stallone and Mr. Schwarzenegger in the first place, and helped turn grunting into the Esperanto of the action movie. Fewer words, fewer subtitles. It's always been about economics.

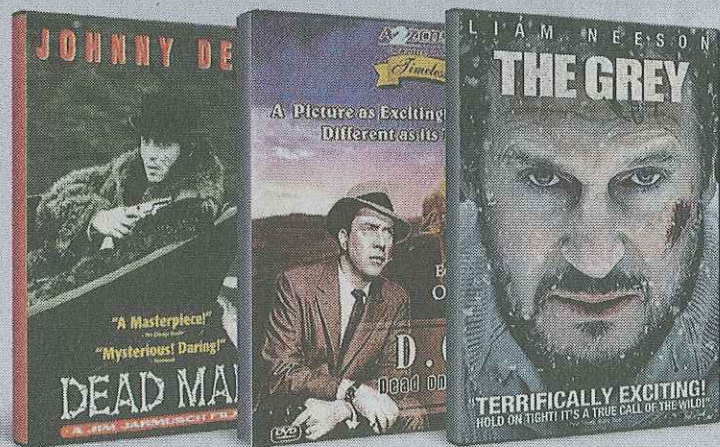
'Side by Side'

That what we call "film" often isn't film anymore may be of interest only to a small percentage of cinemagoers. But those with a serious interest in the future of the form will be well-served by "Side by Side," a knowing look at the transition from celluloid to digital capture, development and projection. Hosted with depth and charm by one of its pro-

ducers, Keanu Reeves, this Christopher Kenneally-directed documentary includes interviews with many of the most prominent directors of our time, who fall on either side of the argument: the digital champions (James Cameron, predictably) and those not-quite-Luddites who don't think digital has achieved the texture or artistic qualities of film. The latter include "Dark Knight Rises" director Christopher Nolan. "No one has said it actually looks better," Mr. Nolan says, of the medium that's taking over the medium. All agree that the outcome is inevitable, including Martin Scorsese, David Lynch and David Fincher. The situation is fascinating, and given an illuminating investigation here.

► See clips from these films and read past reviews at WSJ.com/FilmReview. Joe Morgenstern is on vacation.

DVD FOCUS



'Dead Man' (1995)

Its director, Jim Jarmusch, called it a "psychedelic western"; critics called it one of the finer films of 1995, a droll, cerebral, post-modern, hipster social-critique masked as a frontier adventure, in which an accountant named William Blake (Johnny Depp)—fatally wounded by a prostitute's jealous ex-boyfriend (Gabriel Byrne)—takes a long walk to his own demise. Shot in glorious black-and-white by the celebrated Robby Muller, "Dead Man" features the Native-American actor Gary Farmer as the mystical Nobody, and a guitar-saturated score by Neil Young, who apparently improvised the soundtrack while watching footage of the film.

'D.O.A.' (1950)

Film noir was defined by the darkness of its plots, and few were darker than this unnerving effort by director Rudolph Mate, about a man searching for his own murderer. Frank Bigelow—played by Edmund O'Brien at his most palatable—has been poisoned with a "luminous toxin" and is given a week to live. He spends the time trying to find out who killed him, at one point going to the police to file a report (Cop: "Who was murdered?" Bigelow: "I was.") The frenzied pace and the role of a lifetime for journeyman O'Brien made this a minor classic of the genre.

'The Grey' (2011)

Something of a surprise hit for director Joe ("Smokin' Aces") Carnahan, this adventure in the far north stars Liam Neeson as the stoic and lethal John Ottway, a man who is severely depressed over the woman he's lost and works as a sharp-shooting wolf exterminator at a gas refinery in northernmost Alaska. When their plane goes down in uncharted territory, Ottway and his fellow roughnecks make an arduous trek across wolf-infested snow pack, a journey that develops into Ottway's own spiritual odyssey. A thrilling film, one that's far more profound than the advertisements might have let on.