

Feature: The Top 9 Films of Director Danny Boyle

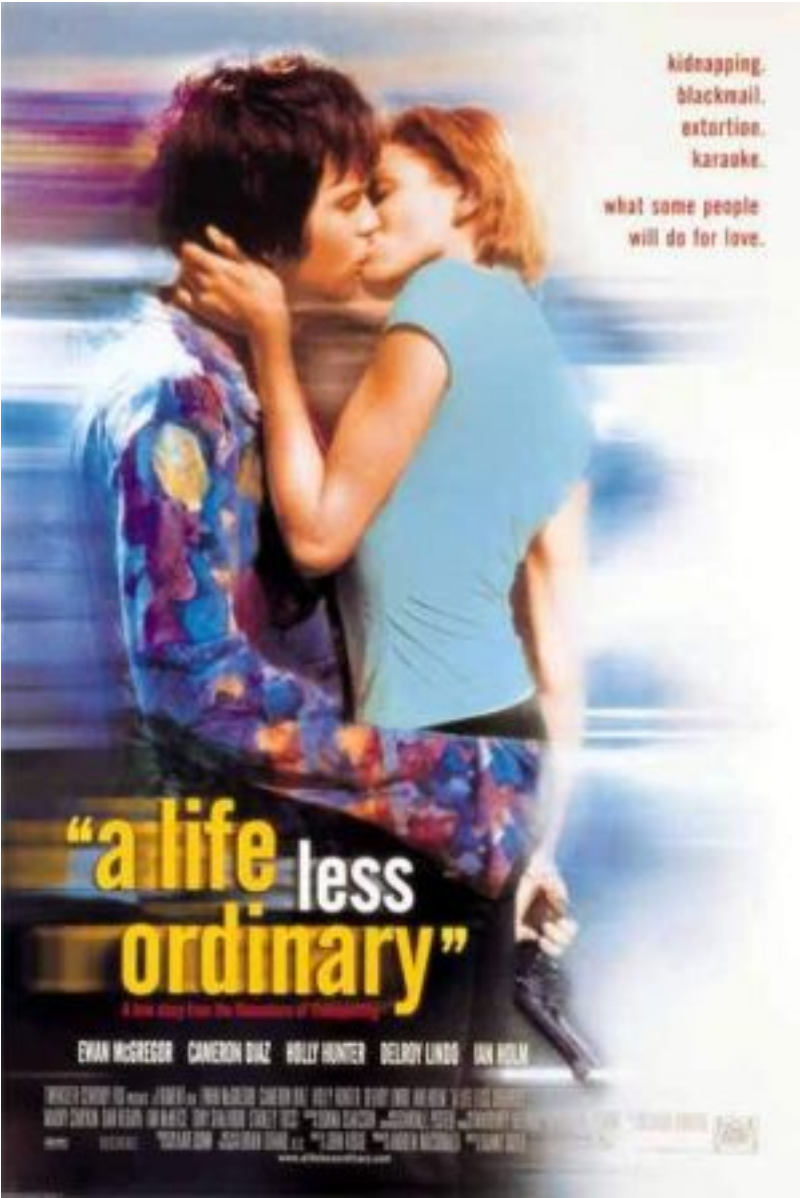
Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on November 15, 2010 - 12:46pm

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CHICAGO – In various interviews over the years, British filmmaker [Danny Boyle](#) [15] has expressed his belief that “your first film is your best film.” It may not be the most technically accomplished or dramatically satisfying work, but it marks a crucial period of freshness and experimentation, as the rookie director becomes acquainted with the creative challenges of feature film production. What makes Boyle such a consistently exciting and vital filmmaker is the fact that he approaches every new film as if it were his first. There are no two films he’s made that share the same genre, the same structure, and the same energy.

He works within genres in order to subvert them, while finding inventive and surprising ways of fusing his artistic sensibilities onto an entirely new cinematic landscape. Occasionally his gambles don’t pay off (“A Life Less Ordinary,” “The Beach”), but most of the time they do in a big way (“Trainspotting,” the Best Picture-winning “Slumdog Millionaire”). What unites all of his work into one coherent whole is a tireless visual exuberance and unquenchable thirst for life that reverberates through every frame. Since Boyle has so far made nine theatrically released features, I’ve decided to rank them in the form of a top films list, in honor of his latest effort, “[127 Hours](#) [16].”

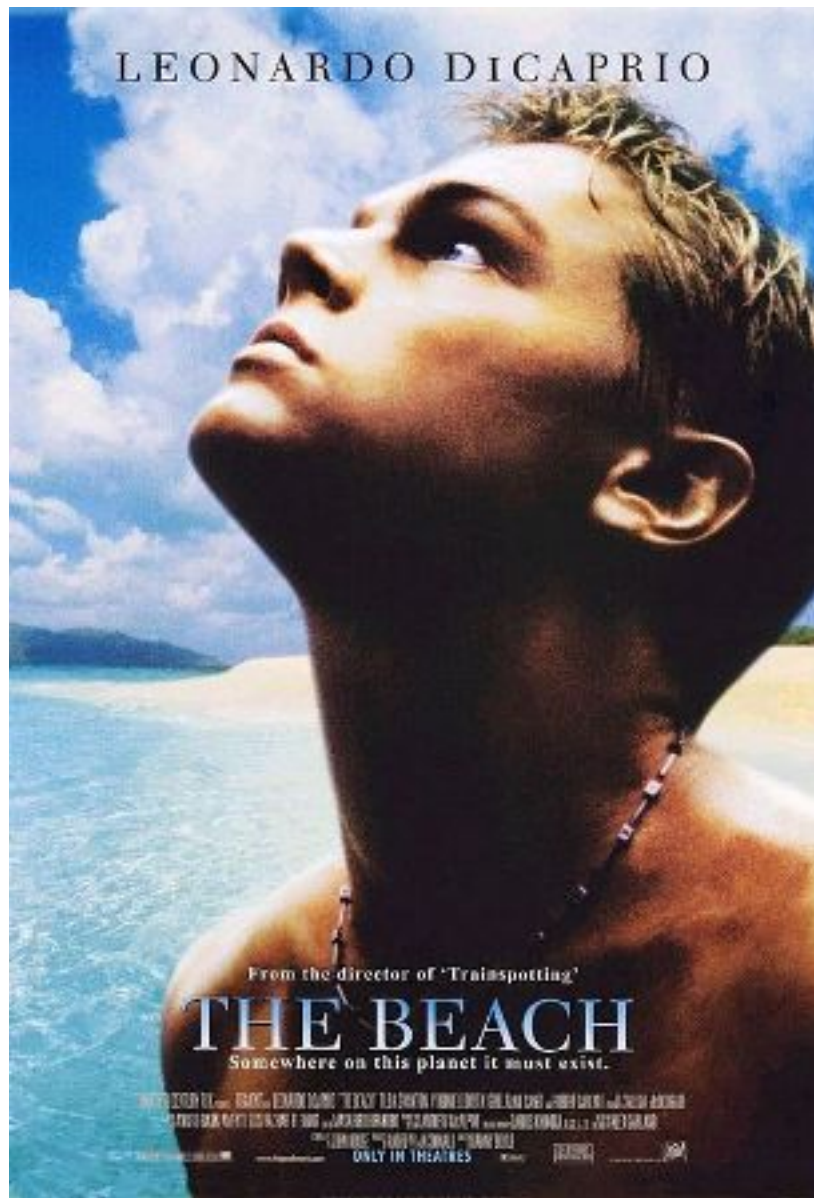
9. “A Life Less Ordinary” (1997)



There certainly is nothing ordinary about this bizarro romance between a poor aspiring novelist (Ewan McGregor) and a spoiled rich girl (Cameron Diaz), who are brought together by two scheming angels (Holly Hunter and Delroy Lindo). After being fired by Diaz’s wretched father, McGregor kidnaps his daughter, who ends up coaching him in the art of kidnapping. Boyle’s third feature may be one of his rare misfires, but it’s still packed with spectacular images, courtesy of Brain Tufano’s widescreen cinematography. They range from playful (a

dentist's office filled with snapshots of mouths) to jaw-dropping (a low angle of Hunter pinned to the front of a car as it sails over a cliff). Several of these images can be seen in Michel Gondry's brilliant music video for Beck's "Deadweight," one of many stellar singles on the film's soundtrack. "Ordinary" indeed works best as a series of images since its story is a complete mess. Scripted by John Hodge (who collaborated with Boyle on his first four pictures), the film shifts uneasily between forced whimsy and shrill pathos, as the angels resort to terrorizing the reluctant couple into each other's arms. Thanks to a "Wonderful Life"-style contrivance, the angels must complete their assignment, or they will be banished from Heaven, which is apparently no different from Earth, save for the conceit that everyone wears white suits. McGregor's charming performance functions as a precursor to his work in "Moulin Rouge," as he takes part in a spontaneous music number with the tone-deaf Diaz. Their screwball banter during a ransom phone call is the film's comic highlight.

8. "The Beach" (2000)



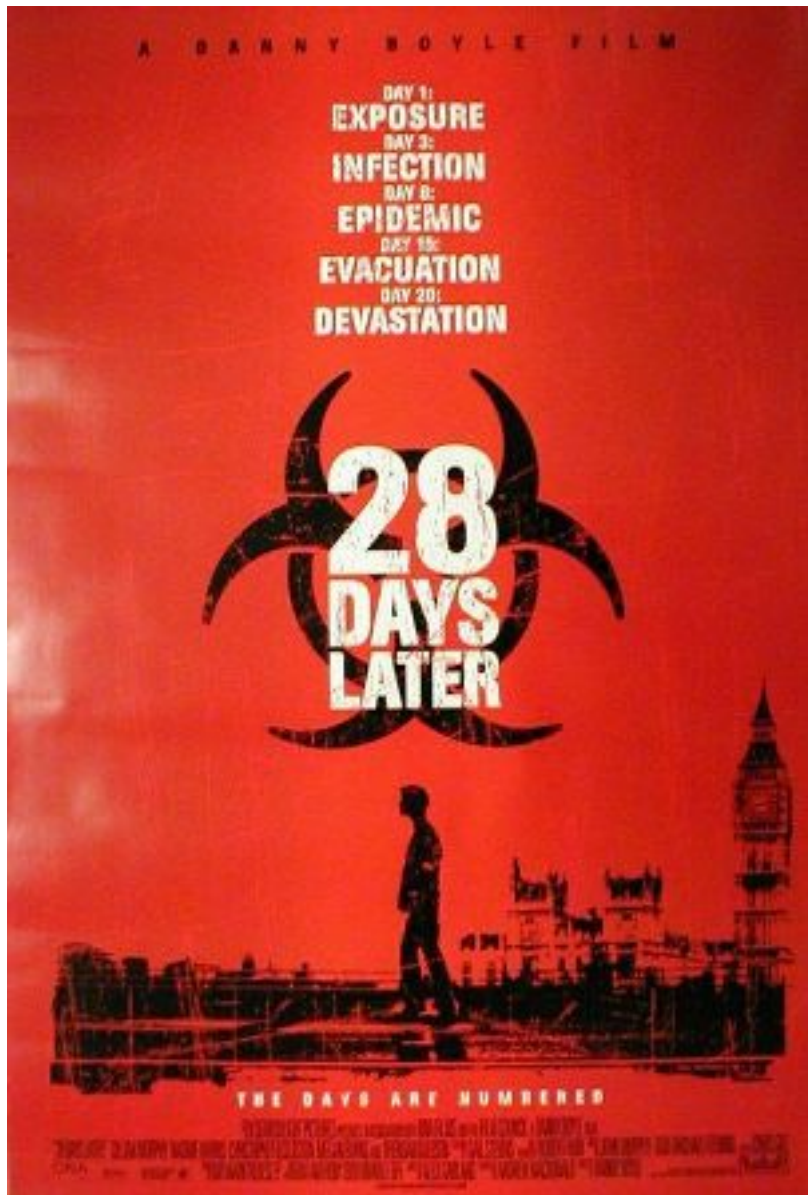
Scathing reviews and a damaged ecosystem gave Boyle's fourth film the worst press of his career. It's certainly closer to a mainstream studio product than anything the director has made before or since. Part of the reason may have been because the film was transformed from a British production with McGregor (who left the project) into a star vehicle for teen idol sensation Leonardo DiCaprio. Though the film certainly represents one of DiCaprio's post-"Titanic" stumbles, his work here is stronger and more complex than it was in James Cameron's blockbuster. Like many Boyle protagonists, Richard (DiCaprio) is a loner and adventurer who feels most comfortable on his own. There's a hilarious sequence in which he's depicted as the star of his own video game. But Richard is also a hugely unsympathetic jerk. After stumbling upon the map to a secret island paradise, Richard invites a young couple to join him, while secretly desiring to steal the girl (Virginie Ledoyen) for himself. There are several moments early on when Boyle quotes his favorite film "Apocalypse Now," to suggest that Richard may be heading toward his own heart of darkness. Once he arrives on the island, Richard realizes that there's a high price to be paid for maintaining paradise. Though the film was shot on location in Ko Phi Phi Lee, some shots of the landscape are so flat that they practically resemble generic screen savers. Yet the film itself is never dull, and is rather fascinating in light of its thematic relevance to Boyle's overall career. The filmmaker has always sought to capture the highs of extreme experiences, and paradise could easily be seen as a metaphor for drugs and money—two recurring elements in Boyle's work that offer an addictive yet unsustainable escape from reality.

7. "Sunshine" (2007)



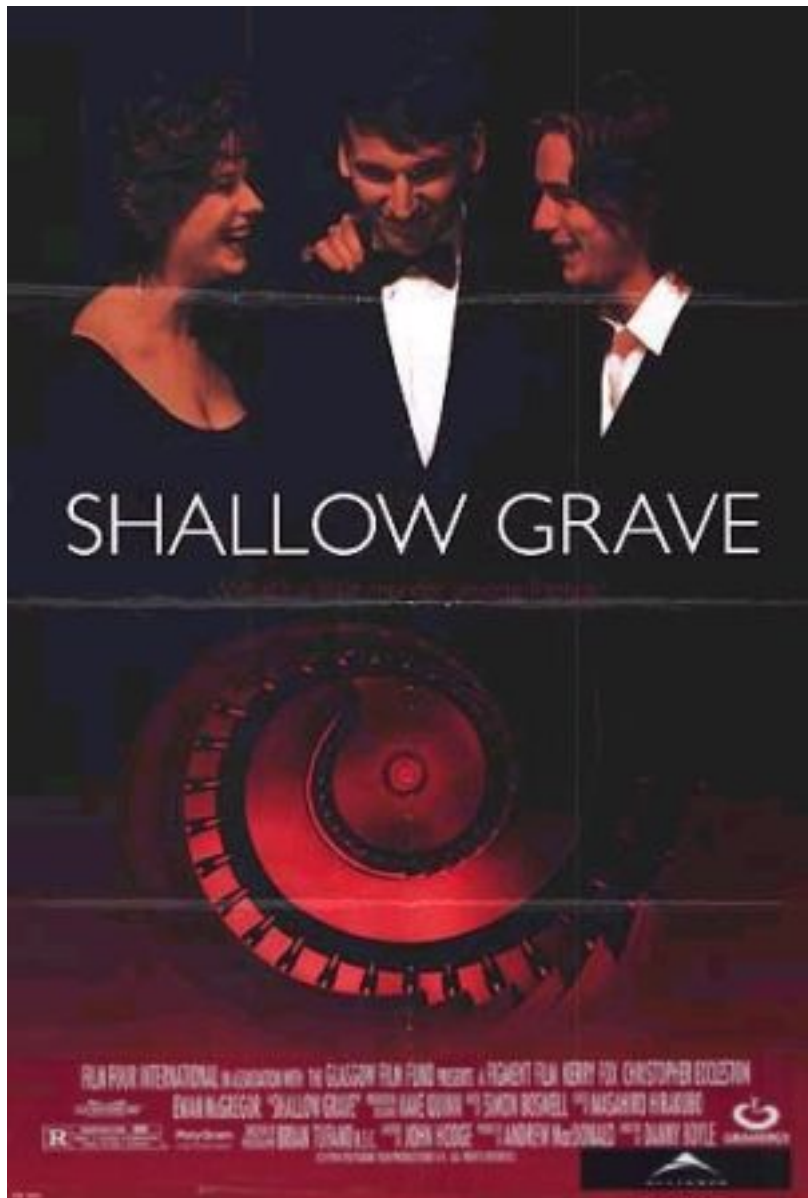
And now for a quantum leap in quality. Boyle's marvelously moody sci-fi thriller marked his second collaboration with Alex Garland, who also penned "28 Days Later," the film that represented a major comeback for the director. In contrast, "Sunshine" has quickly become one of Boyle's most under-appreciated efforts. The plot concerns a band of astronauts on a mission to reignite the ailing sun before it burns out. Cinematographer Alwin H. Kuchler ("Morvern Caller") and a team of first rate effects artists together created the most stunningly photogenic series of fireballs since "Backdraft." No wonder some of the characters become light junkies, hypnotized by the immensity and power of the towering yellow orb. Yet it's the characters themselves who are most problematic, emerging as two-dimensional types rather than individuals. Astronauts Cillian Murphy and Chris Evans are always at each others throats, while female crew mates Michelle Yeoh and Rose Byrne roll their eyes. That's about it as far as character development is concerned, and the script's banal talkiness occasionally causes the film to resemble a middling pilot for the Syfy Channel. Yet the uniformly strong ensemble elevates the material, while Boyle finds effective ways of conveying the characters' claustrophobia, occasionally viewing the action from inside their spacesuits. He also masterfully uses flash frames in order to increase suspense. Yet like "28 Days Later," the film falls apart in its disappointingly conventional final act.

6. "28 Days Later" (2002)



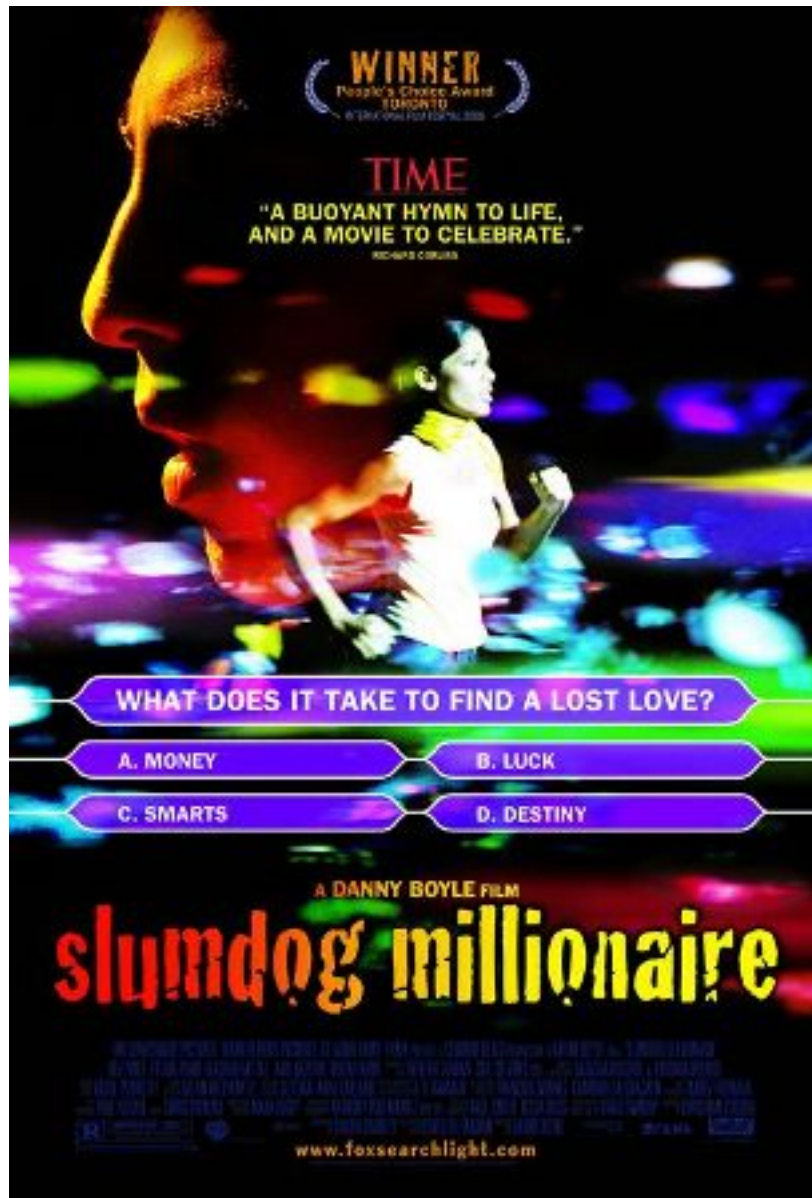
Over the past decade, many of the best zombie flicks have been in the form of tongue-in-cheek satires, from “Shaun of the Dead” to “Zombieland.” The genre has literally been done to death, but “28 Days Later” revitalized it by plunging the audience headfirst into the characters’ visceral horror and unease. In the film’s mesmerizing opening sequence, Jim (Cillian Murphy) wanders through the desolate landscape of post-apocalyptic London. The silence and emptiness in that sequence is as chilling as any of the scares to come. While Boyle made the odd choice of blurring the frame around his villain in “Sunshine,” rendering much of the climactic action borderline incomprehensible, the director’s approach to lensing the zombies (referred to by characters as “the infected”) in “28 Days” was a masterstroke. With the assistance of cinematographer Anthony Dod Mantle, Boyle utilized the slow-motion capabilities of his Canon DV cameras, resulting in sequences where every third or fourth frame of film appears to be cut, thus increasing the ferocious speed of the infected. There are several jump-worthy moments made all the more effective by the genuinely compelling characters. This film launched the career of Murphy, whose glassy eyes and angular face are utterly magnetic. It also offered a terrific showcase for Naomie Harris, whose character is such a hardened survivor that she brutally kills one of her longtime companions the instant he becomes infected, since the transformation from human to zombie occurs only in a matter of seconds. This leads to moments of surprising emotional power as the characters grapple with their fragile mortality, while connecting through their shared humanity. Brendan Gleeson is especially memorable as a kindly father who befriends Murphy on his quest for safety. Unfortunately, the film’s multiple alternate endings illustrate that Boyle was deeply uncertain about how to end this story. His penchant for happy endings (similar to that of Spielberg) led him to tack an abruptly artificial one onto the film’s theatrical cut.

5. “Shallow Grave” (1994)



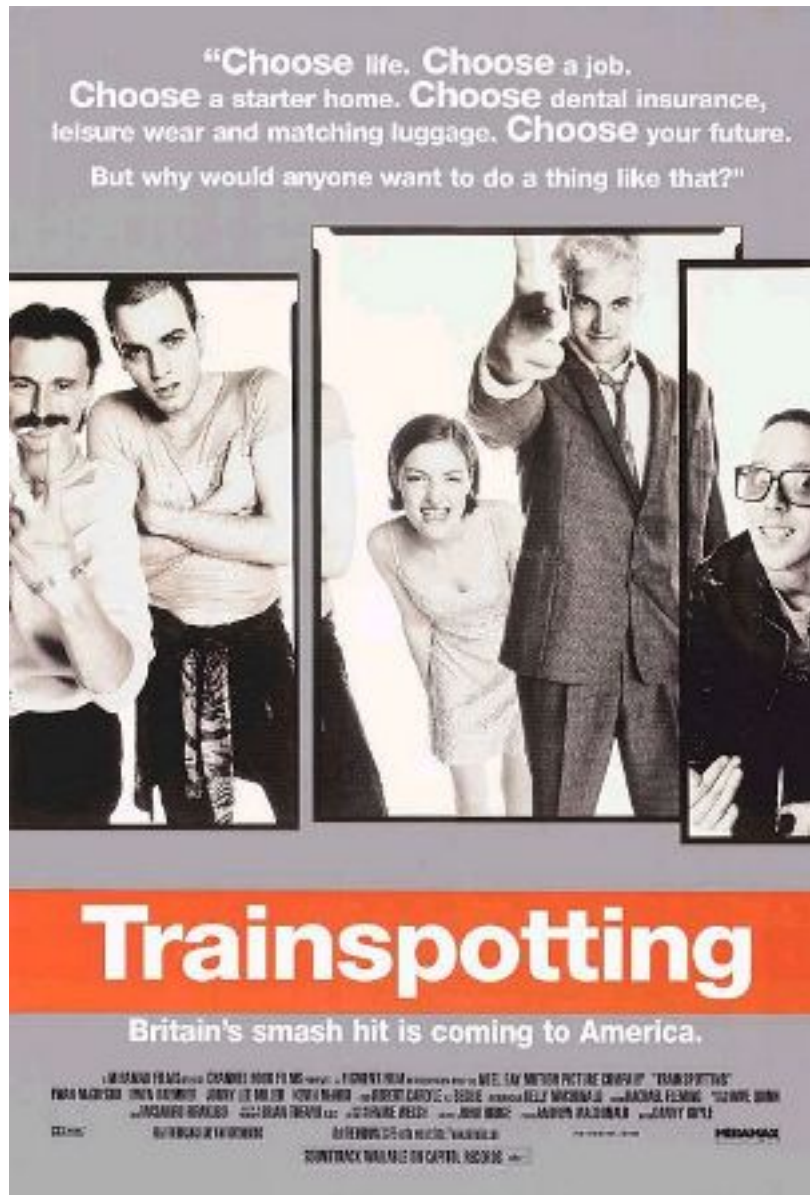
Taking a cue from the Coen Brothers' "Blood Simple," Boyle's directorial debut is a gleefully deranged, superbly executed thriller about the corrosive nature of greed, and the effect it has on three friends united by their shared arrogance. Boyle's distinctive style is assured right from the get-go, setting the standard for all the films that followed. It opens with a monologue delivered quickly and confidently by its main character, jettisoning viewers into the story with the speed of a freight train. The premise is deceptively simple: flat mates (played by relative newcomers Ewan McGregor, Christopher Eccleston and Kerry Fox) welcome a new tenant. It's not long before they discover him dead next to a pile of money. So what do the opportunistic twerps do? Keep the cash and bury the body. Pity they didn't bury it deep enough. Part of the film's pleasure is generated simply by watching despicable people getting their just desserts. There's a delicious moment when journalist McGregor is assigned to cover his own crime. Yet the film is largely anchored by Eccleston, as his character becomes increasingly unhinged, lurking in the attic while spying on his mates through drilled peepholes in the floor. As in Boyle's equally revelatory sophomore effort, "Trainspotting," this film explores a particular type of friendship linked by self-interest motives and crippling obsession that ultimately negate any semblance of trust or kinship. And Boyle fans are advised to be on the lookout for an eerie baby doll that foreshadows a similarly demonic infant destined to haunt McGregor in a future picture...

4. "Slumdog Millionaire" (2008)



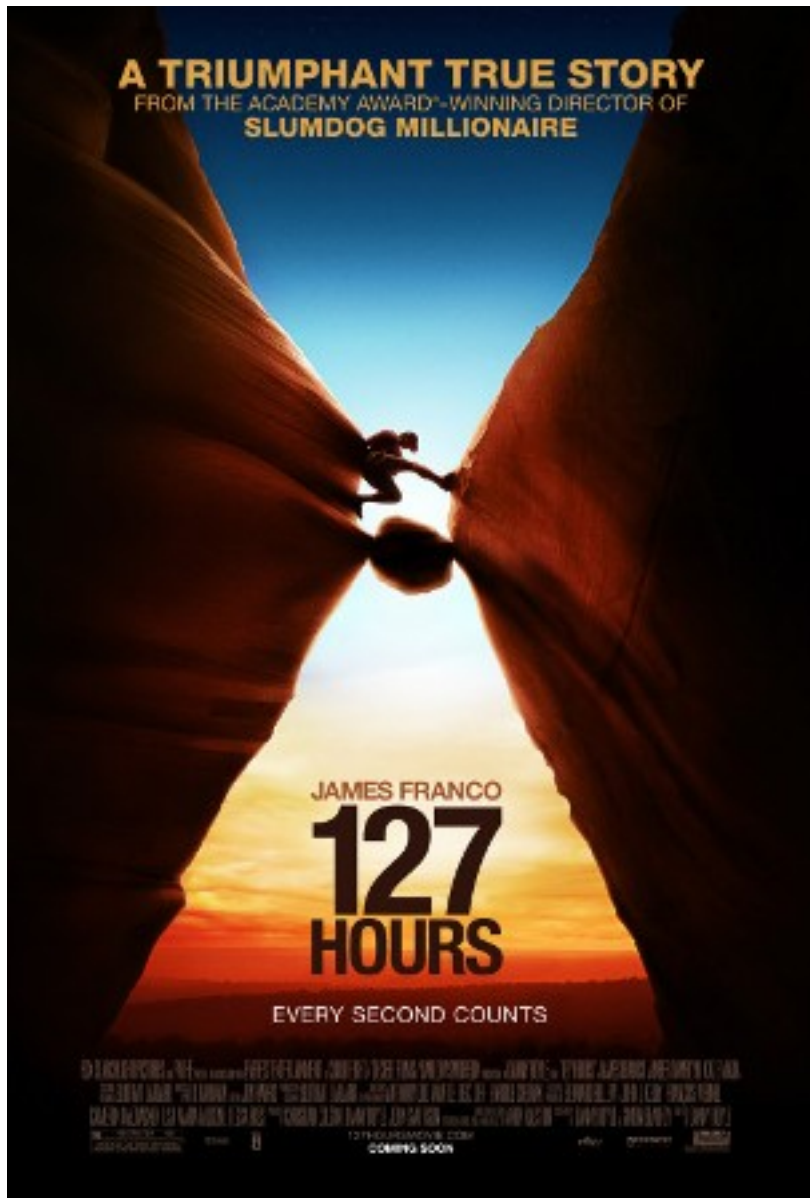
The most phenomenal critical and financial success of Boyle's career still manages to hold up in the aftermath of its hype. Though it has gained the reputation of an unabashed crowd-pleaser, it's easy to forget just how dark and rough-edged the film is, as it follows Indian street child Jamal as he comes of age in Mumbai, a land where poverty and prosperity seem to have coexisted since the beginning of time. The duality of the film's vibrant location sets the mood for the film, which mixes documentary realism and escapist flights of fancy with infinitely greater success than Boyle's similarly themed "Life Less Ordinary." "Slumdog" also shares that previous film's theme of fate, and how it paves the way for triumph. It's clear that love stories are not one of Boyle's strong suits, since the romantic relationships in his films are often contrived or underdeveloped. In the case of "Slumdog," audiences have the choice to either resist the epic romance between Jamal and the girl of his dreams, Latika, or simply buy into its shameless sentimentality. Their faerie tale subplot may have been a bigger problem if the rest of the picture wasn't so spellbinding. The script by Simon Beaufoy ("The Full Monty"), based on Vikas Swarup's novel, "Q & A," is ingeniously structured, centering on Jamal's tumultuous journey that led him to become an unlikely contestant on "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" As Jamal answers each question correctly, the film races back in time to illustrate how he came to know the answer. Boyle coaxes remarkable performances out of the children (all non-actors) who portray the characters at various ages. In the pivotal role of teenage Jamal, Dev Patel (from the fabulous British show "Skins") is as riveting as he is photogenic. Though the film's jovial headlines about box office numbers and Academy Awards were quickly forgotten in the wake of the subsequent Mumbai massacre, "Slumdog" is a kinetically thrilling and truly noble use of the cinematic medium to instill hope in an audience that is direly in need of it. This is one piece of escapism that wholeheartedly earns its Bollywood ending.

3. "Trainspotting" (1996)



Before “Slumdog,” this was the picture that Boyle was most renowned for. Critics credited it with revitalizing the British film industry, drawing comparisons to everyone from Scorsese and Tarantino. Is the film as great as everyone claims? You bet your rupees it is. This may still be Boyle’s most effortlessly engaging film of his career, a cinematic shot of adrenaline conveying the ecstasy and anxiety of a drug-fueled existence. It’s over before you know it, and is guaranteed to leave you buzzed for days. Scottish author Irvine Welsh’s immensely popular novel served as the source material for John Hodge’s magnificent script, which follows a ragtag group of Edinburgh heroin addicts in the late 1980s, led by brooding antihero Mark Renton, played by Ewan McGregor in an electrifying star turn. He’s well-matched by a fantastic ensemble that includes the fearsome Robert Carlyle (evoking the short-tempered volatility of Joe Pesci), the terminally befuddled Ewen Bremner, and the beguiling Kelly Macdonald in her film debut. The circular pattern of addiction is mirrored in the film’s plot structure and frenetic pace, as it jumps from one scene to the next, allowing each moment to appear both crucial and trivial. Since the characters are often numb to the realities of their existence, the film refuses to dramatize events in a conventional sense. Boyle finds endlessly inventive ways to allow the audience to share in the characters’ extreme highs and lows. “Trainspotting” bristles with raw sexuality and heightened surrealism, explosive joy and deep sadness. There’s an unforgettable moment when Renton injects himself with a drug that causes him to fall through a coffin-shaped hole in the floor, while Lou Reed croons “Perfect Day.” It’s the perfect visually poetic expression of how choosing a life dependent on drugs is the same thing as choosing death.

2. “127 Hours” (2010)



While “Trainspotting” was about the easy escape of choosing death, Boyle’s latest film is about the challenge of choosing life against unthinkable odds. Never has a film by Boyle been so thoroughly justified in its hope and uplift, since the film is based on an astonishing true story chronicled in Aron Ralston’s memoir, “Between a Rock and a Hard Place.” Ralston was mountain climbing in a Utah canyon when his right forearm became pinned between a boulder and the canyon wall for nearly five days. In the hands of a different director, the film could’ve become either an excruciatingly claustrophobic drama like “Gerry” or an exploitative thriller on the order of “Saw.” Though there have been reports of fainting during “127 Hours,” they are most likely the result of the film’s incredibly visceral camerawork and sound design than any amount of onscreen gore. Reuniting with many of his “Slumdog” collaborators, Boyle has succeeded in making a film that is even more inspiring than his previous effort, and in many ways, more terrifying than “28 Days Later.” As Ralston, James Franco delivers an extraordinary performance that instantly cements his status as one of the best leading men in the business. He exudes Ralston’s ironic wit, which remains alive and well during even the most tortuous moments. There’s a great comic monologue fueled by self-loathing that Ralston delivers to his camcorder (which functions like Wilson in “Cast Away”), where he curses himself for failing to tell anyone where he was going, and for being in too much of a hurry to undergo a decent search for his pocketknife. Screenwriter Simon Beaufoy, as well as cinematographers Anthony Dod Mantle and Enrique Chediak, do a wonderful job of opening up the story without ever allowing the tension to dissipate. Boyle has always directly utilized the camera to literally view the world through the eyes and psyche of his characters, and since this film focuses solely on Ralston, it emerges as Boyle’s most intimate and fully realized character study.

1. “Millions” (2004)



Now that “Slumdog” has endeared the global moviegoing public to Danny Boyle, here’s the film that deserves to be rediscovered. It flew under most moviegoers’ radar back in 2004, and has since then drifted into obscurity. “Millions” is not only the best and most emotionally resonant film of Boyle’s career, but it may also be his most personal, drawing on the filmmaker’s own Catholic upbringing for inspiration. The plot is an ingenious variation on “Shallow Grave,” depicting how children would react when faced with a mysterious suitcase full of cash. Nine-year-old Damian (played beautifully by Alex Etel, bearing a slight resemblance to Jerry Mathers) is a boy with a wild imagination and a passion for legendary saints. When a bag of money literally falls out of the sky, Damian assumes it was sent from God. His brother Anthony (the equally superb Lewis McGibbon) is a natural-born capitalist who uses the money to bribe fellow classmates to become his bodyguards. Damian wants to put the money to a more charitable use, and receives advice from the ghosts of various saints. Their conversations are written with great wit and wisdom by Frank Cottrell Boyce, who later adapted his script into an acclaimed novel of the same name. While so many family films fail in their attempt to capture the wonder of childhood, this one actually succeeds, partly because Boyle refuses to sanitize it for mainstream consumption. He never talks down to young viewers, who are guaranteed to be enchanted by the film’s playful, ominous magic. There’s even a shadowy figure (reminiscent of the “Shallow Grave” crooks) who lurks around the corners of the frame, as if he’s erupting directly from Damian’s fertile dream world. The film’s philanthropic message could’ve easily become heavy-handed, but Boyle delivers it with such unsentimental tenderness and poetry that it’s impossible not to be moved. And when Damian encounters a familiar apparition from his past, late in the film, it’s one of the great tearjerking moments in modern cinema. To Mr. Boyle, I say a heartfelt thank you and “Jai ho.”



[17]

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