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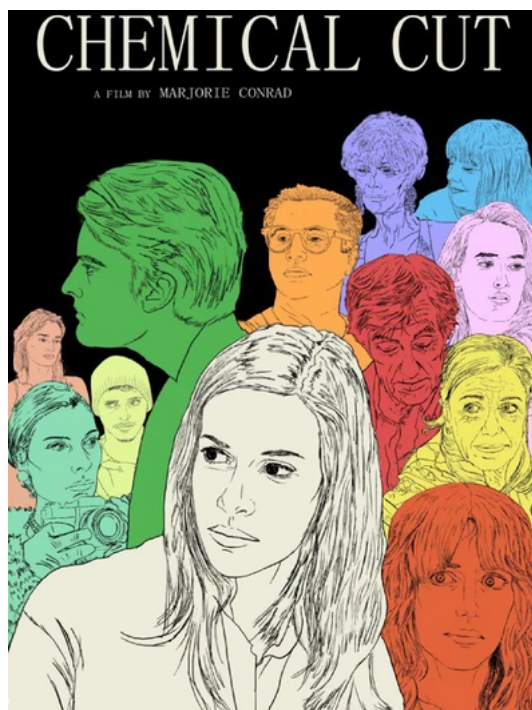


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Narrative Scouting Report Slamdance 2016 Marjorie Conrad

CHEMICAL CUT, FIGHT CLUB, GROUNDHOG DAY, THE NATURAL and the secret of dealing with life when it's overwhelming and you feel stuck

October 20, 2016 | Chris Lambert



Chemical Cut is grand and weird because being human is grand and weird. To me, one of the weirdest things about being human is the phenomenon of self-destruction and self-sabotage that proceeds real change. From what I've observed, the act of self-destruction is almost always the byproduct of being physically, mentally, emotionally, or fiscally unable to make a change to some facet of our life that's a recurring source of stress. There tends to be an overwhelming sense of immobility, paralysis, unending repetition as if the radio only played one song and it was at maximum volume in a car that's going no where but you can't get out of because the doors won't unlock and the windows won't roll down and, of course, for some reason, the heat is on and unadjustable.

My three favorite movies are Fight Club, Groundhog Day, and The Natural. And all three movies are, go figure, about people who self-destruct in order to make forward progress in life. But all three movies aren't all that relatable.

Look at Fight Club. It's rare for someone to be so stressed they fracture their psyche and then create an underground fighting ring that becomes a terrorist organization. So people can relate to how draining our modern consumer-economy is, the main premise of Fight Club defamiliarizes the narrative rather than makes it relatable.

And while many of us can relate to the general idea of Groundhog Day's gimmick—Phil Connors stuck reliving one day over and over again with no escape—no one in the history of being alive has, as far as I'm aware, been trapped in some actual distortion in the fabric of time that's caused them to relive the same day hundreds if not thousands or tens of thousands of times.

And The Natural is about baseball player with seemingly uncanny ability whose performance is affected by women. Many of us can relate to having people in our lives, especially the one's we're attracted to, influencing how we act and whether or not we're moving toward our goals or further from them. But not many of us relate to that concept set in the world of professional baseball in the middle of the 20th century.

This is why Chemical Cut is so cool and so sad. It's relatable. Like many 23 year old Americans, Irene is smart and has a lot to offer but isn't doing much and works a low-wage job that treats her like shit. She, like her manical best friend Arthur, is wayward. She's unsure of what she should be doing with her life, much less

where and how. So she changes her hair, as if that would solve her problems, then embarks on a career in modeling, as if that would solve her problems. Obviously, things only get worse from here.

Writer and director (and lead actress) Marjorie Conrad drives home how unvalidating and paralyzing Irene's life is by providing us insight into Irene's stressful work life, stressful social life, stressful family life, and the demands and interruptions that spoil Irene's private life. We never see Irene's romantic life—but the absence of a romantic life, of any romantic subplot, says everything Conrad needs it to say.

Anyone working a job that they hate can relate to Irene. Anyone with friends who use and abuse them can relate to Irene. Anyone with parents who mean well but are never entirely supportive, especially in the unconditional way many hope for, can relate to Irene. Anyone who never feels like they have a moment to be alone or at peace, who feels there's always something or someone demanding their time: they can relate to Irene.

The reason why I love Fight Club, Groundhog Day, and The Natural is simple. Those movies have helped me understand how to deal with life. I can't take the exact actions that Jack/Narrator/Edward Norton takes, or that Phil Connors takes, or that Roy Cobb takes. They're all in extreme and excessive circumstances that aren't applicable to my life. But I can and have and do extrapolate from those movies.

Fight Club teaches us to be not only self-aware ("My eyes are open") but responsible for the circumstances we find ourselves in—when we blind ourselves and when we refuse to accept responsibility, another version of ourself comes alive and complicates our existence.

Groundhog Day posits that when we have no self-respect and no self-love then it's impossible to give respect and love. It's also harder to receive respect and love. By taking actions that improve our self-respect and self-love, we give more respect and love, and we receive respect and love.

And The Natural reminds us about how holistic life is and that every action has a positive or negative consequence. If your goal is to wake up early on Saturday and run a marathon, then you can't spend Friday night partying. Sure "running a marathon on Saturday morning" and "drinking and eating and staying out late on Friday" are two very different actions. They don't overlap in time or space, sure. But what you do on Friday absolutely affects how you do on Saturday. And how you do on Saturday absolutely affects what you do the rest of your life. That's terrifying but also empowering.

Yet most people who watch those three movies won't come away from those movies with any idea of how to improve their own lives.

You know what movie will help people?

"Chemical Cut?"

That's right!

Chemical Cut gives us Irene's suffering, the breadth and depth of her self-sabotage. It gives us rock bottom. And it gives us catharsis. And in that catharsis is one of the paradoxical secrets to being human: that it's not only okay to slow down and take steps back, that we don't have to be constantly bounding and leaping and sprinting forward—often the quickest way to get ahead is to slow down and take steps back.

We're all self-destructing in some way, at some point. But movies like Chemical Cut, art like Chemical Cut, is capable of telling people, "Hey, you're not alone, and, even better, there's a way through all this mess," and I think that's really important.

Tags: Groundhog Day compared to Fight Club learning lessons self-destruction

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