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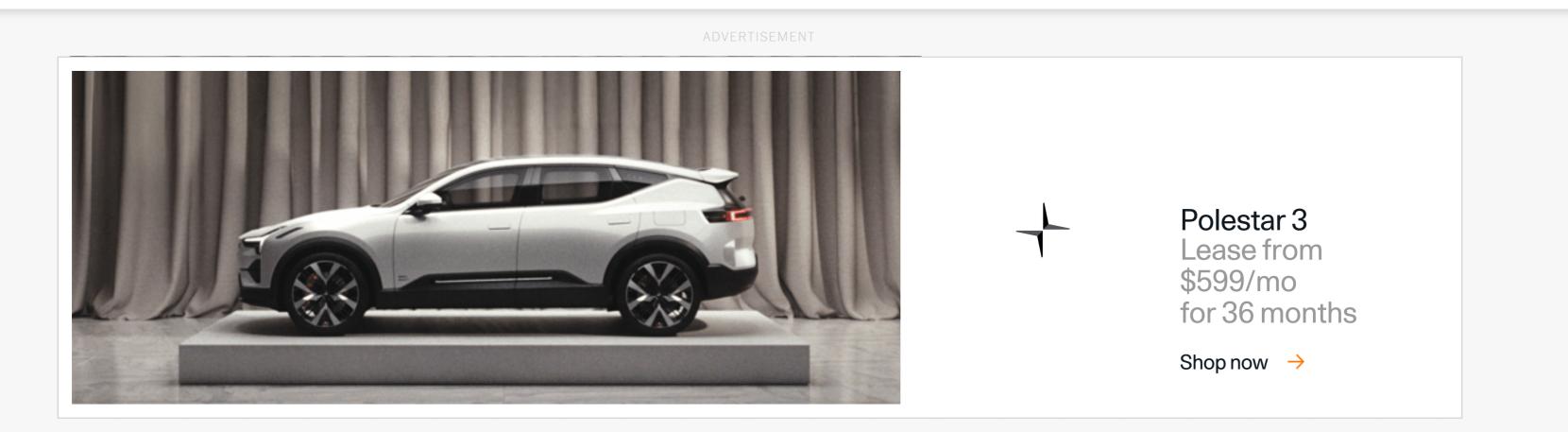
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The Big Picture on the Mini-Movie in 'Sinister 2' and Others

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Spectral killers host a snuff-film screening for a friend in "Sinister 2." Focus Features

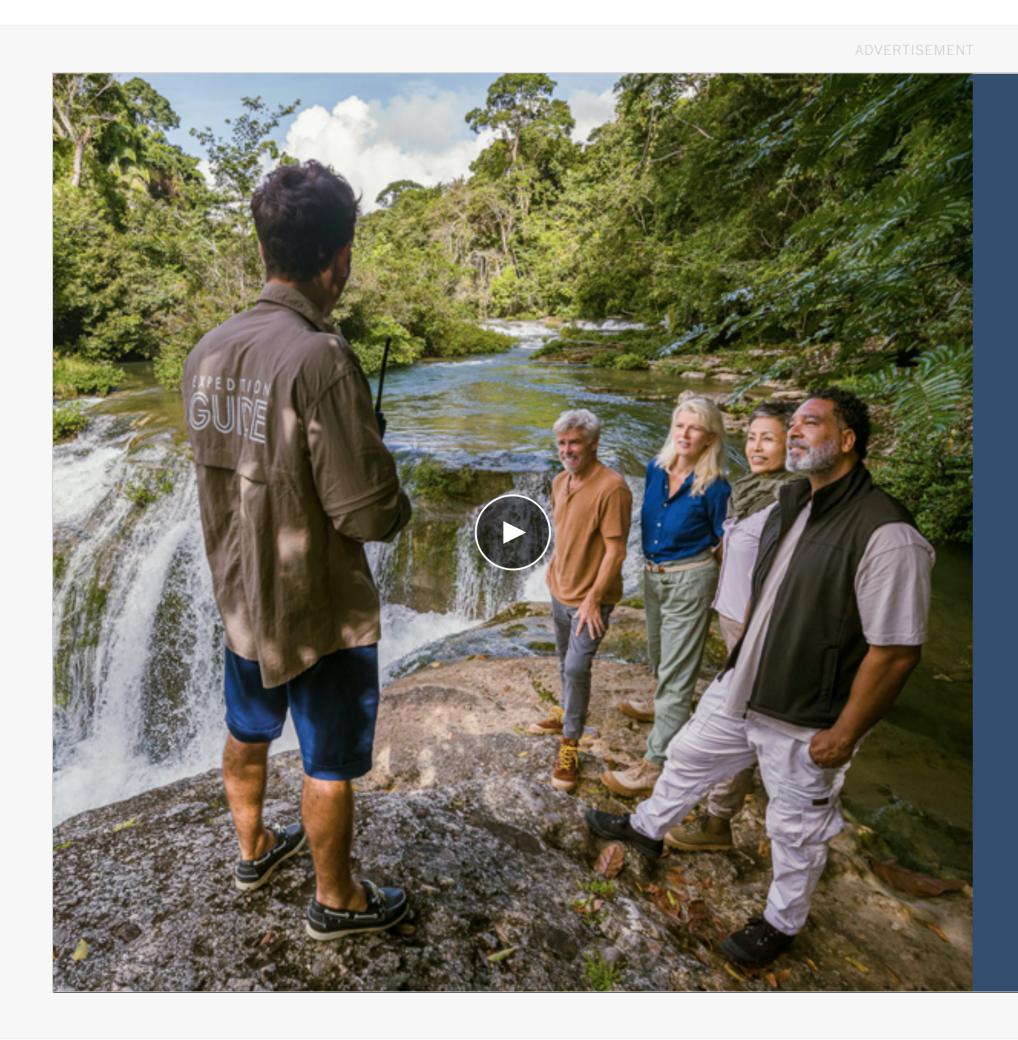
By Nicolas Rapold Aug. 19, 2015

Somewhere in an alternate universe, a multiplex is playing a curious slate of motion pictures: <u>"The Dogwalker," "Habeas</u> <u>Corpus," "Mant!"</u> and "Camp Bloodbath." If you don't recognize any of these titles, there's a good reason: All of them are imaginary films that pop up in actual movies. We catch a glimpse of these fake flicks when characters watch them in "Trainwreck," "The Player," "Matinee" and "The Final Girls."

Movies within movies have been around almost as long as movies, and at least since Buster Keaton played a daydreaming projectionist in "Sherlock Jr." (1924). These meta-creations usually appear only in snippets, as when Bruce Willis saves Julia Roberts from a prison execution in "Habeas Corpus" in "The Player," Robert Altman's 1992 Hollywood satire. Sometimes they play a bigger role, as in <u>"The Purple Rose of Cairo,"</u> when Jeff Daniels exits the black-and-white movie Mia Farrow is watching and enters her world. ("The Purple Rose of Cairo" is also the title of the made-up movie.)

"Trainwreck," "Clouds of Sils Maria" and "Maps to the Stars," all from this past year, feature examples of movies within movies. The summer saw another twist on the device in "Me and Earl and the Dying Girl," which features funny, punning takeoffs on video-store classics by the story's pair of teenage boys. This week, "Sinister 2" presents yet another riff, continuing the conceit from "Sinister" concerning Super-8 short films that portray macabre killings.

It's more than just a gimmick, or a way of working in clever references. The Super-8 reels are central to the "Sinister" stories about a series of occult family murders. In the first film, Ethan Hawke plays a writer who discovers a box of these films, and the sequel elaborates on the chilling fact that a child in each family directed each one.



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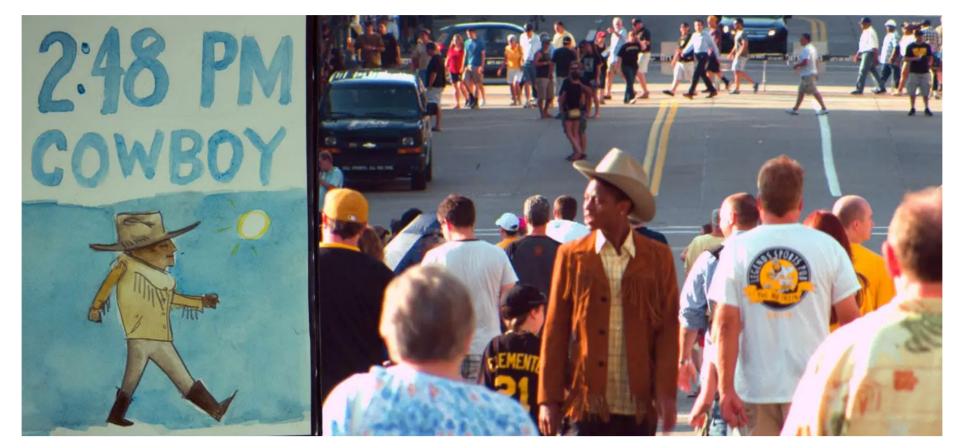
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"As both a horror filmmaker and a horror movie fan, I loved the idea of making a horror movie about a man watching horror movies," Scott Derrickson, the director of "Sinister" and a writer on both films, said in an email. "There's an ongoing self-reflexive question in 'Sinister' about the watching of horror cinema: Just how healthy and wise is it to subject oneself willingly to such alluring but brutal and horrible imagery?"

On the other side of the spectrum, the spoofs shown in "Me and Earl and the Dying Girl" present affectionate parodies. Titles include <u>"A Sockwork Orange"</u> (the Stanley Kubrick movie with sock puppets) and "My Dinner With Andre the Giant." But they also reflect the personal and artistic maturation of the characters who have been making them since childhood: the high school oddball Greg (Thomas Mann) and his pal Earl (R J Cyler).

"We were just keeping it simple and realistic: that these kids actually made these movies when they were 10 or 12 or 16," Alfonso Gomez-Rejon, the director, said in a phone interview from the Locarno festival in Switzerland, where "Me and Earl and the Dying Girl" just had its European premiere. "The rule was that everything had to be made within their resources at the time. All the costumes had to come from their parents' closets, and the cameras were what they had at the time."

A separate unit headed by the filmmaker Nathan O. Marsh and Edward Bursch made these mini-movies before, during and after the main production. With simple props, animation and punchy setups, the two sent up the likes of "Breathless," "Peeping Tom" and "Burden of Dreams."



A homage to "Midnight Cowboy" from the heroes of "Me and Earl and the Dying Girl." Fox Searchlight Pictures

"We just tapped into our high school selves — we even used our old equipment we used back in high school," said Mr. Bursch, who is now working on the next Wes Anderson movie.



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The mini-films' patchwork quality is part of their charm, but in "The Player," Altman wanted a glossier, professional look for his parodies to hit home. These include the fictitious death-row thriller "Habeas Corpus," which is described in the source novel by Michael Tolkin, as well as another takeoff with Lily Tomlin and Scott Glenn in a seedy hotel. **Editors' Picks**



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"In the prison scene, we strived for a look that conveyed that a Ridley Scott or Michael Cimino type was at the helm," Stephen Altman, the production designer of "The Player" and a son of its director, said by email. "Bob wanted both of these films to be something a major studio would make for summer release."

The Altman film sought to skewer its targets, and that's a frequent goal of films within films: from the porn film "Logjammin'" in "The Big Lebowski" to the reducto ad absurdum vision of dumbed-down cinema in the comic dystopia <u>"Idiocracy,"</u> in which the Academy Award winner for best picture is a film called "Ass."

Other examples of simulated films are more fondly rendered. Nostalgia drove the filmmaker Joe Dante, a pop-culture maven who made "Gremlins" and more recently "Burying the Ex." His 1993 film, "Matinee," stars John Goodman as a schlocky film promoter in the 1960s whose chef d'oeuvre is a giant-insect Bhorror movie called "Mant!" "With 'Mant!' I was referencing the sci-fi and horror pics I saw at kiddie matinees as a kid. Some were great, some were pretty bad, but I loved them all," Mr. Dante wrote in an email. "We lifted more or less verbatim some of the dialogue from these movies, particularly the dumbed-down-for-the-kids exposition."

That kind of film-historical precision recurs throughout the annals of movies within movies, from the <u>disastrous sound film</u> starring silent actors in "Singin' in the Rain" to the <u>antic silent short</u> in Agnès Varda's "Cleo From 5 to 7" (starring none other than Jean-Luc Godard) to the <u>faked Nazi propaganda film</u> in Quentin Tarantino's "Inglourious Basterds."



Nostalgia is at play even in the grim material of "Sinister 2." The director Ciaran Foy directed its <u>short horror meta-films</u> — brute-force combinations of setup and payoff — on 16-millimeter that was later degraded to look like eight-millimeter. Mr. Foy tried to give each child's "kill film" its own style, and enthused over the process.

"It reminded me of making my first movies when I was a teenager," Mr. Foy said. "There was a freedom to go into the minds of the fact that this is supposed to be a 10-year-old" shooting the film.

Far from being cinematic trickery, movies within movies just might serve a special purpose beyond telling a story: bringing a viewer closer to the fan inside the filmmaker.

A version of this article appears in print on Aug. 23, 2015, Section AR, Page 11 of the New York edition with the headline: The Big Picture on the Mini-Movie. <u>Order Reprints</u> | <u>Today's Paper</u> | <u>Subscribe</u>

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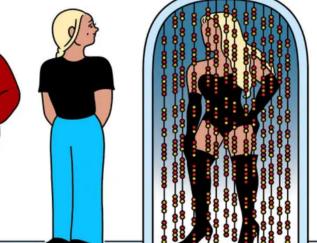


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