

Elvis is alive and living in Johnny Suede's hair

by Ira Nayman

Johnny Suede, the first film written and directed by Tom DiCillo (who was cinematographer on two Jim Jarmusch films, including *Down By Law*), contains all the trappings of postmodern film, but it ultimately rejects them, opting for a humanist perspective on experience. It is thought-provoking and entertaining.

Johnny is a twentysomething would-be crooner who is going nowhere; his biggest dream of success is nothing more than a one night stand in an obscure club. He has a relationship with a beautiful young woman whose poetry is nearly as bad as his music; when she dumps him, he starts an affair with a level-headed woman who works with mentally handicapped children. The story, though episodic, moves forward with a purpose: Johnny is brought to the point where he must ultimately decide what is truly important to him.

The postmodern trappings should be apparent to anybody familiar with this kind of film: it takes place in a bleak, rundown part of town where strange events are taken for granted. A ceramic hand rests in the middle of the road? No problem — pick it up and take back to your apartment. Black suede shoes fall out of the sky, shattering the glass of the phone booth you're in? Easy — they were sent by unknown forces to change your life, so put them on and let the good times roll.

Yet the shoes don't make things better: Johnny's band breaks up and his relationships don't go anywhere. In this instance, DiCillo works against the mythic framework he has set up.

Johnny Suede contains elements of other works of art, another postmodernist technique, from the songs of Ricky Nelson to the film *The Terror of Tiny Town*, a western featuring a cast of midgets. Intentionally

Johnny Suede
written and directed by Tom DiCillo
starring Brad Pitt and Catherine Keener
produced by Arena Films, Balthazar Pictures and Starr Pictures

or not, the film suggests a limit to quoting other works of art: if the audience isn't familiar with them, your clever effects will be wasted.

Although it starts slowly, carefully setting up later conflicts, *Johnny Suede* has some really funny scenes. Nick Cave has a wonderful cameo as an older, more successful musician (he and Pitt even look the same); too many years of "cool" behaviour seems to have left him on the verge of hysteria.

Pitt (who you may recall from *Thelma and Louise* or *Cool World* — well, *Thelma and Louise*, anyway) seems comatose in his early scenes, but manages to convey the depth of emotion underneath the detached exterior. The destruction of this unconcerned veneer through the course of the film culminates in a huge emotional outburst towards the end of the film; Pitt makes every step of the transformation believable.

Johnny Suede is an entertaining look at a young man who refuses to grow up. You don't have to be postmodernist to appreciate it, but it helps.



Alison Moir and Brad Pitt in *Johnny Suede*.

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Correction: excilbur apologizes for incorrectly identifying the Grad Lounge as the location for this event in last week's issue.

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