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Screen, Screen Reviews

Under the Silver Lake – Review

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Written by [Jacob Heayes](#) | Mar 25, 2019

Following up from his stylish horror homage *It Follows*, David Robert Mitchell has attempted to transition into the neo-noir space with his latest LA-set pastiche *Under the Silver Lake*. After a year spent in post-production turmoil from a lukewarm Cannes screening, the film has been quietly dropped on MUBI's streaming service day and date with its UK cinema release, hardly exuding the strongest confidence in the film. Unfortunately, the reasoning behind this is rapidly self-evident upon viewing. As a neo-noir film, *Under the Silver Lake* is confused and needlessly convoluted, one that vandalises its influences more than honours them. As the follow-up to one of the most accomplished and electric genre films of the decade, it's a soul-crushing disappointment.

To start with one of the few bright spots the film has to offer, Andrew Garfield leads the narrative as Sam, an aimless and paranoid stoner who spends his days as a voyeur of his scantily-clad neighbours and reading old comic books. Soon infatuated with the arrival of an enigmatic neighbour (Riley Keough), he finds himself exploring the city's secrets on the tail of a mythological dog killer once she suddenly disappears. There also may or may not be connections to a chart-topping punk band, secret codes and languages for the social elite and a comic-book written by a shady cartoonist. As a protagonist, Sam himself is somewhat indefinable and characterised by his surroundings, rather than any internal defining traits. Sam's apartment appears to be a microcosm of 80s and 90s




American pop culture, sucking the viewer into what can only be described as a prepubescent boy's wet dream. Superhero posters, metal bands and NES games line the walls like some sort of cultural torture chamber. Garfield's character isn't far off from the physical manifestation of this garish entertainment overload – he's unemployed, he's constantly paranoid at the state of the world and becomes fascinated by a contact lens billboard emblazoned with the slogan (and I kid you not) 'I Can See Clearly Now'.

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This is only one of several examples of the film's sledge-hammer approach to subtlety and homage, with the billboard motif in particular acting as a constant reminder that yes, John Carpenter's *They Live* was a film that existed and one that you'd probably rather be watching at this time. To add insult to injury, Mitchell scatters the narrative with blatant Hitchcock references and even a touch of Lynchian ambience – the LA setting and occasional bout of surrealist imagery makes it hard to ignore *Mulholland Drive* comparisons. Garfield gives a competent, even oddly watchable performance, meandering and pontificating throughout the discombobulated plotting with a uniquely careless and humorous attitude. For every absurd existential monologue, there's a scene where Garfield will aggressively kick a child to the ground or frantically scour the pages of Nintendo Power Magazine for clues. It's erratic and unpredictable – sometimes in a way that cracks an ironic smile, many other times in an irritating, self-absorbed fashion.

It's hard not to feel your blood boil as Mitchell insists on hopping from location to location, character to character without pausing to allow the audience to take a breath and appreciate any of the admittedly gorgeous camerawork or the incomprehensible twists and turns. Even worse, the runtime is a criminal 140 minutes, transforming the film from a flawed if oddball experiment to a cruel endurance test by the time the tortuously overlong final act arrives. When the credits mercifully arrive, you'll be left not wanting to ask questions, but to quickly escape before the film can suddenly threaten you with more meaningless semiotics gibberish. As a film of ideas, *Under the Silver Lake* certainly has concepts to spare. There's a handful of sequences that – disconnected from the grand narrative arc – I would call commendable, inventive even. Yet as a coherent string of plot






beats and a work of intrigue, it collapses before it even sets out the gate. Arrogant and nonsensical, the answer to what even lies 'under the silver lake' is one that's unfortunately not worth looking for at all.




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