


MOVIES

Perfect Sense: Love in the Time of Catastrophe

What would you do if you started losing your senses, one at a time? Ewan McGregor has the right idea: cuddle up to Eva Green

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How could the great plague begin? Perhaps with the loss of one of the five senses. Start with smell — not an essential sense, until you think of the sensations triggered by the olfactory function. A poignant synesthesia attends the whiff of a rose, or coffee, or sea air, or the perfume of a passing woman. A hospital corridor. A cigarette kiss. Fresh bedsheets, or dirty ones. The scent of roast beef as it cooks succulently in the next room, or as it starts to burn. “Cinnamon might have reminded you of your grandmother’s apron,” says the narrator of *Perfect Sense*. “Without smell, an ocean of images disappears.” Our collective memory is instantly and cruelly impoverished.



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The narrator is Susan (Eva Green), an epidemiologist in Glasgow, who first notices the olfactory disability in a local truck driver. Soon thousands in Scotland, England and Western Europe have suffered the same loss. It hits Susan, too, and Michael (Ewan McGregor), the attractive chef at a restaurant across the alley from her apartment. The two pursue an affair as their world begins to crumble. Smell is just the first of the senses everyone loses — and quickly, too quickly. As Susan notes, “They don’t even have time to give the disease a name.”

(LIST: [Top 10 Epidemic Movies](#))

Perfect Sense, directed with intense intimacy by David Mackenzie, is the latest in a veritable epidemic of apocalyptic movies:

28 Days Later and *28 Weeks Later*, *Blindness*, *Melancholia*, and their American cousins *Take Shelter* and *Another Earth*, have joined mainstream Hollywood films like *Outbreak*, *2012* and *Contagion* for the biggest surge of end of the world-anxiety movies since the onset of the Cold War produced a mushroom cloud of science-fiction paranoia. Instead of the pod people stealing your identity as you sleep, as in the 1956 *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, here it's a mysterious agent, never identified, that robs you of your senses, one at a time.

(LIST: Top 10 1950s Science-Fiction Movies)

While the big mainstream pandemic movies focus on the attempts of government officials to ward off catastrophe, the art-house variety takes its cue from Albert Camus' *The Plague*, concentrating on the victims, their panic or resilience, stabs of violence or passive acceptance. What's unusual about the sometimes screwy but mostly smart and always heartfelt *Perfect Sense* — which opens Fri. in New York City and is already available at home on Video on Demand — is its search for a middle ground.

Screenwriter Kim Fupz Aakeson (the author of children's books and a couple dozen Danish movies since the late 1990s) acknowledges that, faced with catastrophe, plenty of people would loot and maraud, because they "don't believe in anything but the end of the world." But most folks, though they are losing their senses, won't lose their common sense. Instead, they'll try to cope with their afflictions and maintain routine in their public and private relationships. A sous-chef will still prepare an elegant dish of lobster for patrons who can't taste it; Michael and Susan will share a kiss while wearing protective surgical masks. As his boss (Denis Lawson, the great Scots comedian, and McGregor's uncle) plaintively observes, "Life goes on." The sensorially dispossessed have a rallying cry as modest as it is hopeful.

Before the epidemic, Michael and Susan endured their own signs of emotional distress. He "can't sleep with someone else in the bed"; she, speaking often of her adored father, can't have children. The two symbiotic cripples will find comfort in bed, which cues some vigorous sex scenes from these criminally attractive actors. (Recall their sensational breakout films: McGregor in Danny Boyle's *Trainspotting*, Green in Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Dreamers*.) The bedroom whoopee is not nearly so incendiary as McGregor's erotic entanglements with Tilda Swinton and Emily Mortimer in Mackenzie's *Young Adam* from 2003. This time, it's just enough to warm the viewer between the chilly tolls of worldwide doom.

(READ: Ewan McGregor, the Actor's Actor)

When the plague comes, each sense loss is accompanied by strange symptoms — uncontrollable grief, ravenous hunger, sudden rage — that might have been devised by a sadistic acting coach as exercises for his students. The sight of Susan sobbing, or a woman devouring her lipstick tube, or Michael trashing an apartment make for unpersuasive acting and uncomfortable viewing; the movie briefly, serially, goes as mad as the disease's most virulently affected victims.

But this is, at heart, a love story, a parable of people who desire life too much to surrender to encroaching infirmities. They are a more sensible version of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail's* Black Knight, who loses all his limbs in battle and cries out to the departing King Arthur, "Come back here and take what's coming to you! I'll bite your legs off!" Except there's no daft belligerence in Michael and Susan's response to the plague. In staying together as their world evaporates into darkness and silence, they are displaying what anyone in love would recognize as quiet heroism — and perfect sense.