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John Moe: Normally, I say the name of the show, introduce myself, say “I’m glad you’re here,” and then we play a little bit of kind of upbeat music by Rhett Miller. Today, I’ll do all that, but I’ll replace the Rhett music with something much more depressing. It’s *Depresh Mode*. *Depresh Mode*. I’m John Moe. I’m glad you’re here.

Clip:

(Door slams.)

Speaker 1 (*Requiem for a Dream*): Where the hell you think I’ve been? Huh?

Speaker 2: Where’s the score?

Speaker 1: Well, we had a little bit of a problem. See—(out of breath) I mean, everything was going good, and then some dumb ass junkie on—

Speaker 2: Did what?! Some dumbass junkie did WHAT?! You mean you fucked it up?

Speaker 1: What the fuck is wrong with you?

Speaker 2: You promised me that everything was gonna be okay, remember? (Shouting.) I fucked that sleazebag for you! And then I put myself through fucking hell for you?!

Speaker 1: (Yelling back.) There’s nothing out there!

Speaker 2: I DON’T GIVE A SHIT! You fucking loser!

Speaker 1: (Beat.) Wanna be sure we have some extra stuff? Ty told me about a guy that’s holding some weight. BUT HE AIN’T SELLING IT!

(A phone dialing, followed by muffled ringing on the other line.)

Speaker 3: (Through the phone.) Yeah?

Speaker 1: You talk to me like that—

John Moe: Turn it off. Turn it off. Make it stop. Stop it. Oh.

That's the 2000 movie *Requiem for a Dream*. Darren Aronofsky directed it. I saw this movie when it came out, and I'm still a little screwed up from the experience of watching it. *Requiem for a Dream* is depressing as hell. Well made, well written, acted, directed, but depressing. It's the celluloid representation of depression.

That's our topic today: a look at truly depressing movies. And I ask you if truly depressing movies have value? Especially if you're someone with a special mind that experiences actual depression already. Are truly depressing movies toxic? Or do they make you feel seen and not so alone?

I can't answer that. Maybe you can. So, we've assembled some actual film experts to get their insights and their nominees for our list of truly depressing movies.

Drea Clark is one of the hosts of *Maximum Film*, a wonderful movie podcast here on the Maximum Fun Network. She's also a film producer and does programming for film festivals.

Transition: Spirited acoustic guitar.

John Moe: Drea Clark, welcome to *Depresh Mode*.

Drea Clark: John Moe, thank you for having me!

John Moe: There are sad movies, and then there are depressing movies. Would you agree with me that there is a difference between the two?

Drea Clark: Absolutely. I would 100% agree, because it's also—I think, as someone who works in film and as a film programmer, I'm asked for recommendations a lot. So, those are the—sometimes people are in the mood for like something sad. Like, “Oh, I'd like the catharsis of something specific to weep over.” And that's a whole different thing. Because those films, to me, often have like a moment of grace or an uplift or an exit ramp out.

A depressing film—right?—is one that captures either the world at large or a very specific part of it and the human experience in it and reminds you of, oh, what an exciting crushing bummer this all is!

(They chuckle.)

John Moe: All this whole life is. So, like a sad film, I think of like as *Titanic*. Where, yes, Jack dies, but her heart will go on—as is sung/shouted. (Chuckling.) And the necklace goes into the drink, but you know, it's a life well-lived or something. There's hope in all of it.

Drea Clark: For sure. I would put—like for me, *Cinema Paradiso* is near the—it's one of my all-time favorites, but it's near my list of, “Oh, do you want to cry? Because let me give you this portal to tears.” Because it's—there's loss at the end of it. It's this—you know, the disconnect of time and place, because it's about a younger man who's like—he's lost a person

who was a father figure to him, but he's also lost the town that he came from—that thing of you can't return home anymore. Like, there's a lot of disconnect.

But also he's given this gift of, oh, this person saw you in this incredible way. You were part of this beautiful thing that was happening. And like, to me, that's... it's so, so sad, because the idea of gift in that way— It's unknown. Like, that's not a guarantee for everyone, so like there's also something sad about that. But it's also—it's a gift.

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This character has gotten something, an experience of something. And so, that's an uplift for them. So. Yeah. (Chuckles.)

John Moe: But again, that's not where we're going today.

(Drea agrees.)

We're going to a much rougher part of town. We're going to somewhere where there is no hope, where there is just all darkness.

And when we reached out to you about this to talk about some of either your favorite depressing films or the most depressing films, what came to mind for you? What was the first one that popped into your head?

Drea Clark: The first thing that came into my head as something just so tragic and depressing is *Grave of the Fireflies*.

Clip:

(Two characters from *Grave of the Fireflies*, an older brother and a younger sister, speak softly to one another in Japanese.)

John Moe: Now this one came up on our Facebook group; this one came up on BlueSky. People—I have not heard of this film, and I'm scared to. (Chuckling.) Tell me about what *Grave of the Fireflies* is. It already sounds—

Drea Clark: I'm glad to hear there's other people with me on this. And it makes sense. If you've seen it, it stays with you forever. It's a 1988 film; it's actually a Studio Ghibli. So, it's a Japanese animated film. It's historical based, set in the mid-'40s—basically, when Japan is being bombed. And so, you're following two small children—a brother and sister—who lose their mother in the bombings and their life and their world, and their father is off fighting.

And then it is just a few hours of watching these kids try and survive in a war-stricken land. They're taken in by an aunt who's not a very compassionate caregiver. It has a lot of Charles Dickens orphan energy to it. But because of the specificity of place and how Japan in 1945 is portrayed through this animation, it's more modern in that way than, you know, your kind of like Dickensian orphans wandering around like asking—you know, being paupers or whatever.

And then the kids, it just gets worse and worse for them. And even though they have like these moments of like, oh, someone will help them and do something, ultimately like they're—you know, thieving and sick and getting worse. And then they find out the father has—I mean, I'm assuming there's not a worry of spoilers on this, but—

John Moe: Spoiler alert for a 1988 Japanese animation.

Drea Clark: Yes, thank you. Thank you. And so, like they just—it's just this continuing news and also that they're children. Like, they're of an age that you'd like to see them—the fields that they're in, you want to see them scampering, right? You want to see them looking forward to life. And these are kids who are—

John Moe: You'd like them to be plucky.

Drea Clark: Yeah, and they're already shouldering the burden, and the older brother even more so. And so, it just—it gets worse and worse. And then it ends, and it harkens back to the fireflies in the title when they originally see them and they find out, you know, they only live for a night. And so, then there's this very sort of beautiful metaphoric ending, but it's just—it's as dark and bleak and sad as it can be.

You can't—these are animated children, John. Like, your heart is—it's so bruised by what these drawn—hand drawn children— Because kids—humans went through that, kids went through that. I just—yeah, it's devastating.

John Moe: Do you find with truly depressing films, that there is a reason to watch them? Like, do you—it sounds like it's really well made. Like, do you draw some positivity in the fact that beautiful art has been committed? Or do you recommend people just stay the F away from these?

Drea Clark: I think for me—I think it's important to see darkness in humanity. And especially as it pertains to something like this. It's about war, right? It's about what happens when countries are attacking each other, the real people who are suffering from that.

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It's not just like, oh, there's this cold bomb being, you know, handled from miles and miles away. Like, no there's very real people suffering. And I think it's that idea of like, oh, if you're a meat eater, maybe understand what a slaughterhouse is like, right? Like, it's seeing the full way around things, and possibly through that humanity there's both larger and smaller

choices that you make in how you're living your life with regards to these things impacting on this—I mean, obviously—massive scale. But it's—

Anyway, I think that's important. And I also—I'm someone who embraces filmmaking as an artistic medium. And watching something—especially, you know, in this film, animation is often relegated to family films. It's films for children. This one has children in it; it is not a film for children.

And I think as a medium, watching an artist explore what can be told and how this can be conveyed—there's something important to that too, of—you're maybe distancing your emotions from that kind of more clinical understanding of it, but the appreciation of this is what this kind of artistry can do and how it can make you feel.

And that counts for a lot. You feel a lot, and it's not from any like human face that you're watching emote.

John Moe: *Grave of the Fireflies*. Okay, so we're writing that down in black pen on black paper, (chuckling) that way we can either refer back to it or just burn it or pretend it was burned. What other films came to mind for you?

Drea Clark: Okay, so I had another one come to mind. And again with the—I found this—it took me out at my knees. And it is just a film from a couple of years ago, 2022, called *Aftersun*.

Clip:

(Pensive orchestral music.)

Adult (*Aftersun*): You okay through there?

Child: Don't you ever feel like tired and down, and it feels like your bones don't work? Like, you're sinking?

Adult: Mm. (Warmly.) We're here to have a good time, eh? (Beat.) You know, I want you to know that you can talk to me about anything as you get older. You know?

Drea Clark: By writer-director Charlotte Wells, who's a Scottish filmmaker. And it's particularly difficult, because if you read any of the director's notes or what she said about it, it's semi-autobiographical. And it follows this young 11-year-old girl on holiday with her father. And it's about to be—

John Moe: Oh, sounds nice! Oh, she's on holiday! That's great.

Drea Clark: Certainly sounds nice. And so, yeah, you're like, "Oh, fun!" And then you get there and—

John Moe: What hijinks will she get involved in, I wonder?

Drea Clark: Sooo many hijinks.

No, this is—it's both a father and a daughter realizing the truths of each other. And the truth of him is he's a man dealing with an enormous amount of depression and has been battling through that forever. And as an 11-year-old, she's more cognizant to what that looks like. And so, it's him really straining to do exactly what you're saying—to have this uplifting, memorable vacation.

And then the elements that creep around the sides are you're like, oh, they're in Turkey at a resort, and maybe it's a rundown resort. And part of it's closed, and that's why they got a good deal on it. And he has a cast on his arm that's alluded to a lot, of maybe he did something stupid and hurt himself in some sort of way. And so, you see that, and you also see him realizing that his child sees through him. He's not getting away with it anymore; and what does that mean for her growing up?

And then there's these small flashes of them dancing. Honestly, talking about it almost makes me weep. There's small elements of them dancing, and you're like, "Oh, is this them as adults?" Because you do flash forward to see her as an adult and pregnant, very briefly, much later on. And then it's—at the end, it's alluded to like he did not make it much past this point. And those were fantasy imaginings of hers, like kind of weaving together these visions of him when he did have some high points on this holiday to the reality of he was not around after that.

And there's something about like that idea of like—yeah, again, a lot of these have to do with children in some way! But that idea of you turn a corner, right? Most people have that point where you realize your parents are fallible. For a kid who realize, "Oh, my parents are fallible. And also, my parent has some sort of demon they're dealing with that I can't fully grasp. But I see it more and more the older I get."

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And that is also heartbreaking. So, for this, it's devastating to watch. Because parts of it are devastating because of the sweetness. Like, he's trying so hard at times. And then he just has to go back to his room and be alone and still and quiet, because that's all he had in him was that one moment of trying. Like, it's brutal. (Chuckles.)

John Moe: I'm seeing this trend in both the movies you've talked about of "things are bad, but then they're getting worse; and then later on, they're going to be much, much worse."

Drea Clark: It's a depressing arc!

John Moe: My heart won't go on.

Drea Clark: My heart won't go on, right? That's the difference. Like, I hope for the young girl in this—her name is Frankie—like, I hope a rich and beautiful life. I hope she clings to the raft. But you know, the focus of it is their relationship. And I find it—I don't know! I just think there's elements of that that they're thought provoking as both—

I don't have kids, but I was a kid. I have friends with kids. Like, there's things about that on both sides of that relationship that are like ugh! Which is harder!

John Moe: Yeah. (Chuckles.) I have kids, and I've got this movie circled to maybe watch once.

Drea Clark: I'll say, it is—

John Moe: And then never again. That seems to be a thing. From what I've heard from our listeners, like the “watch one time” movie.

Drea Clark: Exactly. And maybe when you first asked like what the difference of a sad versus depressing—a sad movie I can maybe see like if it pops up on TV, if it's on cable, like I'll watch it again. A depressing—*Aftersun*? Oh, no. No, I experienced this.

I do think it's worthy of experience. Like, I think that this filmmaker is going to do great things. Paul Mescal, who plays the father, was nominated for an Oscar for this. You know, it's a really beautiful work for a first-time filmmaker. And it's so well done. But my heart could not handle it more than once.

John Moe: My heart could not go on.

(They chuckle.)

Drea Clark: My heart could not go on!

John Moe: Alright, let's do another film that came to mind when confronted with this bleakest of assignments.

Drea Clark: Oh my gosh. I'm realizing right now every single thing—I'm going to go the other way. I was going to say every single film that I put down involved children in some way. So, I'm going to step aside and do one that is not. And from 2012, the film *Amour* from Michael Haneke.

John Moe: (Gasps.) My wife suggested this one for this topic!

Drea Clark: Well, she knows what she's talking about.

John Moe: (Chuckling.) We saw this together in the theater.

Drea Clark: (Gasping.) You did?!

John Moe: And we came out and just sort of were in silence, and then we're like, “Whaaat the fuck?”

Drea Clark: And let me guess, you wouldn't watch it again, huh?

John Moe: We make jokes about it, but they're pretty dark jokes. But tell us what *Amour* is.

Drea Clark: So, *Amour* is this elderly couple living in Paris. And it begins with, you know, the sort of fire brigade or whatever—emergency services breaking down the door and discovering this old woman who's passed on and is now in the bedroom. And she's been covered in flowers. And then you get a sense that there's also another dead body in the apartment with her.

And then you go back a few months, and you find out that this is Anne and Georges. And they're former piano teachers. And again, they go through some things. They have a break in, she has a stroke and goes catatonic. Like, it's kind of harder and harder, the different medical things they're going into.

And again, this is France. But every country has its own exciting medical system navigations to deal with, which is depressing all on its own. And so, this is a woman near the end of her life who does not want to suffer in this way. And she's living with the love of her life who wants her to stay there as long as possible. And so, it's a sort of back and forth in that their daughter wants her to go to care, but he's said that she won't.

And he ends up helping her along. How's that? He ends up helping her past the rainbow bridge and follows shortly behind. And for me—I mean, there's so much in there. I think that especially for the elderly, for people in very dramatic medical conditions, like that's a whole other subject—

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—the idea of how we exit this mortal coil, with any kind of grace or our own sort of personal volition in ways beyond dealing with, “Oh, I'm just in an agitated state of ideation,” or “I'm an incapacitated 80-year-old who had a really beautiful run up 'til now. And this is where I'd like my train to stop.”

And so, you're dealing with that. That's a lot for the brain to untangle as you're watching these two people who you immediately care for and are rooting for and also understand the predicament that they're in.

There's just so much complexity to that. And to have it kind of all tied in with a love affair is what—it both—it buoys it, but it also makes it that much harder. Like, because then it's... that action, the—what he's motivated to do and why is all the harder for that. And it's just hard! (Chuckling.) Like, you saw it! You get it.

John Moe: Yeah. Yeah. Well, and again, it's a “things are tough and then they get worse” kind of scenario. I mean, there's love, as referred to in the title of *Amour*. That doesn't really save it from being a truly depressing classic.

Drea Clark: Yeah, it's—again, it's a one-timer. You're gonna watch this once You're not like, “You know what? It's a Sunday. I'm gonna pop in *Amour* while I fold my laundry.” Like, that is—yeah.

John Moe: Gonna flip around on cable, see what's on. Oh *Amour*! Awesome.

Drea Clark: “Oh, love this.” That’s not what you're watching this movie for.

John Moe: No, watch *Before Sunrise* if you want that kind of love affair.

Drea Clark: Exactly. There are plenty of those films out there for you. Many of them even in French apartments. But yeah, I still think the depth—again, the humanity of it, the affection, the life lived, all of those things, but just the idea of hardships. There's something in general, and it ties to the concept of depression, but in these films, the concept of futility. That's just so hard to like wrangle, right?

(John agrees.)

Of, oh, there's no way out of this.

Transition: Spirited acoustic guitar.

John Moe: That’s Drea Clark. You can catch her on *Maximum Film* here on the Maximum Fun network. Dan McCoy just ahead, and later film critic Dana Stevens from *Slate* joins us.

Transition: Gentle Acoustic guitar.

Mary: Hi, this is Mary from Minnesota, and the truly depressing movie that came to mind was *The Whole Wide World*, which came out in 1996. And I was newly-ish married and seeing the work of trying to love someone who was struggling with their mental health made me feel less alone. And it also felt like seeing my future more clearly than I could see it at the time myself. Whew! Just thinking about that movie brings me back. Thanks for asking. And thanks for everything you do.

John Moe: We're back and talking truly depressing films. *The Flophouse* is a wonderful podcast here on Maximum Fun. It's mostly about movies that didn't work out so well. Flops, as it were. Dan is also a writer and comedian.

Dan McCoy: I wanted to disclaim that I think that probably the most depressing movies I've avoided. You know? Like, I know for a fact that like people say *Grave of the Fireflies* is a masterpiece, but I don't need to see two cartoon children slowly succumb to radiation poisoning. I know this about myself.

(John agrees with a chuckle.)

So, of the ones that I've seen, I came up with three that I thought of. And the first one was *Dancer in the Dark*, which shows up on a lot of lists.

Clip:

Speaker 1 (*Dancer in the Dark*): (Desperate and quietly sobbing.) Please kill me. Just be my friend and show some mercy, please, and just kill me.

(A crushing mechanical noise.)

Speaker 2: Why did you kill him?

Speaker 3: He asked me to.

Music: *I just did what I had to...*

John Moe: A lot of lists. In our Facebook group, somebody brought that up, and the reaction—even through Facebook—was audible of people going, “UGH!”

Dan McCoy: (Laughs.) Yeah! I watched it because—

John Moe: Recap what that is for people who aren't familiar.

Dan McCoy: Well, it's been years.

John Moe: Who are blissfully unaware.

Dan McCoy: It's been years and years, and it's one of those one-timers. I saw it in the theater. It's Bjork is going blind.

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She needs money for some medical procedure that might help her. And honestly, I should have like refreshed myself on the plot, I realize now, having come on this. But I couldn't even bear to, I think, think about it. You know, it's a—

John Moe: You're too traumatized to look up what happens. (Chuckles.)

Dan McCoy: All I remember is that sort of circumstance and people letting her down lead her to being accused of a crime, perhaps stealing the money. I can't recall, but she gets hung at the end, and it's a musical. That's the real kick in the pants. It feels like Lars von Trier, who—I wanted to see this movie because I really liked *Breaking the Waves*, which is another very depressing movie, but it ends kind of on a weirdly triumphant note. You know, there's the bells ringing out from heaven kind of being like, yeah, you know, she is justified in everything that happened.

Whereas there's no triumph to the sacrifice then. It's just Lars von Trier being like, “I'm gonna make you I hate the fact that film exists. I'm gonna take the musical, a joyful form, and sort of just use it, twist it to my ends.”

And I'm not saying it's a bad movie; I think it's a very well-made movie, but it's a very upsetting movie.

John Moe: Yeah, yeah. You like Bjork? She's charming? Well, get this! Look what I'm gonna make her do.

Dan McCoy: It's very sad.

John Moe: It's very sad. Okay, so *Dancer in the Dark*. What's the second one on your list?

Dan McCoy: The second one sort of goes to the category that is movies that make me mad that I sort of went through it. You know, it could be a movie that I was enjoying during watching it, but then I'm like, “And that's where we end?! You're like—what? You're just like kicking me repeatedly.” And it's *Pan's Labyrinth*, a movie that is beautiful, has a lot of beautiful character designs of the creatures, you know.

And it's about, you know, a young girl during the Spanish Civil War, I believe. And it's—you know, there's a sort of fantasy element to it that it's never clear how much this is reality and how much this is her escaping the horrors that she sees every day. But you know, it tends towards feeling like it's maybe just an escape. I don't know.

And you know, spoilers for everyone, (chuckles) the child dies at the end. And she's sort of taken into this underworld, but really... I feel like she dies. And I've been through this trip with her, and I trusted my good old friend Guillermo del Toro to protect me. And then at the end, this charming little girl dies. And I'm like, “Well, to what end are you doing this, sir?” I know—is it like “war is bad”? Because that was not something that I was confused about. But. (Laughs.)

John Moe: That was already clear. So, you say it made you mad. Is it redeemed? Can a movie like this be redeemed by the good things that it has going for it? Like, it's Guillermo del Toro. It's, you know, a visual spectacle. It's—you know, it's very well reviewed. Or does just the depressing course of events that happen over the course of the film—does that just trump everything, and it just sucks?

Dan McCoy: I think it's redeemed. I want to be clear, as a film fan and someone who's interested in all of the things that movies can do, I'm glad I saw these movies. But on a personal level, you know, the way they sort of tore out my insides, I don't feel the need to return to them and appreciate that art again. I think they're both terrific movies in their ways that I think, had Letterboxd existed back then, I would have rated them highly, but I would not return.

John Moe: Yeah. You're glad that they exist for other people to see, but just not you.

Dan McCoy: Yes. Yes. I've taken that trip.

John Moe: So, we got *Dancer in the Dark*, we got *Pan's Labyrinth*. What rounds out our trio here?

Dan McCoy: What rounds out the trio is a swerve, which is what I think is the really, truly depressing film, which is—I have chosen in this category, *Robocop*, the remake. (Laughs.)

[00:30:00]

And this as a man who has a podcast focused on bad movies and has seen a lot of movies for the express—

John Moe: I was gonna say, there's *The Flophouse* coming out in number three.

Dan McCoy: Yeah, the purpose of talking about them, because I know they're not going to be good. This is the category that I find most dispiriting, where it's there's no compelling reason they made this movie other than it is a name that people recognize; it is intellectual property that can be plundered; and it is made by people who have no interest in putting a singular spin on the material and only seem to want to drain what was unique and exciting about the original movie.

Like, the *Robocop* remake has none of the humor, has none of the satire, has none of the stylish ultra violence. It is just a bland action movie. And I know that there are people out there in the world who will watch this movie and not see the original *Robocop* simply because they think that they don't like older movies. It depresses me to refer to the original as an older movie, since it's a movie from my childhood. (Laughs.) But—

John Moe: Right?

Dan McCoy: They won't watch it. And that's depressing. That's depressing to me.

Clip:

Speaker 1 (Robocop): Alex, listen to me. The EM-208s will try to maneuver you, so Maddox can get a clear shot. Do not let that happen. If Maddox hits you, everything but your life support will shut down. You'll feel more pain than you've ever felt in your life.

Alex: I don't know about that. I've been through a lot.

(Exciting rock music fades in.)

Speaker 2: Alright. I say we go on three. (Beat.) Three.

(Automatic gunfire.)

John Moe: Is it depressing from the angle of just the industry itself and the dearth of ideas and the remakes and the sequels?

(Dan confirms.)

Like, is it—? Or is it the film itself that is depressing?

Dan McCoy: The film itself is a bit depressing in that it is an utter waste of your time.

(They laugh.)

I'm being so mean about it. Like, but you know, I have long thought that people who like bad movies usually are true movie lovers, because why would you waste your time on bad ones otherwise? Like, you want to see all of them. And this has nothing to offer. So, that's depressing.

And also, you know, as a guy who is sort of nominally in the industry—I wrote for TV for ten years; God willing it'll happen again; and I'm trying to shop a screenplay, even though perhaps I'm—you know, my picture is up on someone's wall dartboard because of our podcast. I don't know. Like, it is depressing in a business sense that like this is all that people are interested in making, it seems like, is remakes.

John Moe: Yeah, yeah. Okay, well, so those are our three. *Robocop* the remake, which is just called *Robocop*.

(Dan confirms defeatedly.)

But I think we can call it *Robocop the Remake*.

Dan McCoy: Yeah, we should.

John Moe: *Dancer in the Dark* and *Pan's Labyrinth*. What were some of the finalists that come to mind that maybe didn't make your final cut, but are worth not checking out?

Dan McCoy: Oh, you know, (chuckles) everyone talks about—I think the one that comes up all the time as like a one timer, is—oh my goodness, and I'm blanking on the name. It's the Darren Aronofsky film, the drug movie.

Dan & John: (In unison.) *Requiem for a Dream*.

Dan McCoy: It's all over these lists, and it is relentless. It is a relentless march towards sadness. But I didn't say anything about it. Number one, because I think it is talked about a lot. Number two, because it is energetic in its sadness. It has at least that going for it.

John Moe: (Chuckles.) It's not the kind of movie that's going to lay around in bed all day. It's going to get out there and, you know, maybe not fit the depression stereotype quite as heavily.

Dan McCoy: Yeah. I think that was the only one that was kind of a contender.

Transition: Spirited acoustic guitar.

John Moe: Dan McCoy hosts *The Flophouse* podcast on Maximum Fun. Dana Stevens from *Slate* takes a whack at the parade of truly depressing films after this break.

Transition: Gentle acoustic guitar.

Stephen Hegarty: Hi, *Depresh Mode* team. My name is Stephen Hegarty, and I live in Plainsboro, New Jersey. My movie is *Matewan*, the John Sayles film from 1987 about the 1920 coal miner strike in West Virginia.

[00:35:00]

It's nothing to do with mental health, per se, but it is based on historical events and is utterly, relentlessly bleak. It is a sort of real-life epic of economic oppression, desperate poverty, race baiting, and gruesome violence in the service of power. Sheer hopelessness. (Sighs and chuckles.)

I used to rewatch it from time to time because it's such, such a great film. But I no longer do so. Our current moment seems, uh, quite bleak enough, thank you very much.

The podcast and the Preshies community has helped me profoundly, so thank you all for all you do.

John Moe: Dana Stevens is a film critic for *Slate*, and also hosts the weekly *Culture Gabfest* podcast at *Slate*. She's also the author of a terrific book about Buster Keaton called

Cameraman: Buster Keaton, the Dawn of Cinema, and the Invention of the 20th Century.
Dana Stevens, welcome to *Depresh Mode!*

Dana Stevens: Hey, John. Thank you for having me!

John Moe: What is the difference—Dana Stevens, esteemed film critic—between a sad movie and a depressing movie.

Dana Stevens: Alright. This is the question that I think we have to settle before we even start listing titles. Which goes back to—I mean, it gets really Aristotelian really fast. Like, it goes back to catharsis, and what is the purpose of art, and why are we witnessing a fictional representation of life in the first place, right?

I mean, it's to give us some sort of feeling in general, right? It could be to impart information or other things. But basically, it's to like leave us with some emotional—you know, bring us to some emotional place that we weren't at before we started watching, right?

John Moe: Why did Clint Eastwood team up with this orangutan?

(Dana laughs.)

What are we to get from this experience?

Dana Stevens: You see, that might be the best movie to watch when you're sad, honestly. What was it called? *Every Which Way But Loose*, right? *Any Which Way But Loose*.

John Moe: *Any Which Way But Loose*, yeah. And the sequel was *Every Which Way You Can*, but we're not going to get into titles, as you said.

Dana Stevens: (Laughs.) I mean—I guess, to me, the sad/depressing distinction really does have to do with really old questions about art and genre and things like that. Because it's sort of the difference between a tragedy and a comedy, in a way. Right? I mean, just the classic definition is like: a comedy, things turn out well for the main character. It's as simple as that, right?

And I think that's a really, maybe exaggerated—you know, very broad-brush way to look at it. But I would say that sad vs. depressing basically has to do with whether or not the final message of the movie is “we're all fucked,” or the final message of the movie is like, “this particular person in this story is completely fucked, but yet human life continues and has some meaning.”

Like, there's some titles on your list for discussion that I think just sheerly go in the depressing bucket, which does not mean they're not masterpieces. It does not mean that it couldn't be a great experience to see them, a great sort of emotional trial to see them. But I would not prescribe them for a depressed person. You know? (Chuckles.) Because you don't

want to send that person down the path of “everything sucks, and we're all completely screwed.”

John Moe: Well, there is value in seeing something that resonates with the feeling that you have inside. Like, “I'm not the only one in this deep pit. Von Trier is here with me.” You know?

Dana Stevens: Right? I mean, to me, I think if I had to go through and label them, that would go into the depressing—the simply depressing category. I do know that when I saw it in the theater, I remember at the end both thinking like that movie is brilliant—and at the time I was a huge Lars von Trier's fan. He's kind of lost me since. But both: that movie is brilliant, and I never want to see that movie again. You know? And I don't think I ever will. I can't imagine the circumstance where I just fire up *Dancer in the Dark* because I felt like it.

John Moe: Right. It's so different than the video for the Bruce Springsteen song “Dancing in the Dark” with Courtney Cox.

Dana Stevens: (Laughs.) Not sure—oh yeah! Where she gets up on stage before she was even famous! Right.

John Moe: She gets up on stage. Yeah.

Dana Stevens: That's one of those great baby celebrity moments, where you can point back and say, “We knew her when she was just dancing with Bruce at a concert.”

John Moe: Right, right. Completely different. In case you're wondering, dear listener, we're not talking about the Springsteen video. We're talking about Bjork being, I believe, wrongfully accused of crimes?

I've never—I saw what watching this film did to my wife, and I've never seen it myself because of the damage that I saw inflicted on the woman that I love.

Dana Stevens: Oh, you never saw it! Yeah, I mean, so I won't spoil it for people who haven't seen it. But yes, it's a very, very bleak melodrama starring Bjork and Catherine Deneuve. Which right there to me is a great selling point, that casting in a movie.

And it ends—well, I won't give away the ending exactly, but it ends with Bjork having to suffer greatly for a crime that she never committed.

John Moe: So, this is an example of a truly depressing film.

[00:40:00]

What would be an example of a sad film? And we're here to talk about the depressing ones, but contrast a *Dancer in the Dark* with a regular sad film.

Dana Stevens: I mean, I'm gonna say—you know, here's a movie that I can imagine, experiencing catharsis while watching because I was sad. You know? And coming through a sad experience while feeling like, you know, I have the courage to go on. And that would be *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*—a movie in which certainly what's being enacted is sort of a tragedy; you know, the tragic loss of love and of memory of these two people and lots of other characters as well.

But there's a sort of humanistic sense at the end of that movie that, you know, they've gone through that experience, and we've gone through it with them. But we've learned something; we've gained some kind of wisdom about love. You know, not unlike a Shakespearean tragedy in that way, right? There's not really a Shakespearean tragedy—maybe there's an exception somebody's going to tell me. *King Lear* is possibly an exception, but there aren't too many that just end with like, “Well, that sucked! Sucked for everybody! And onward we go.” Right?

I mean, there tends to be some sort of sense of redemption or, you know, a future. Something has been put right that was wrong before, you know? So, in that sense, though they are tragedies like *Eternal Sunshine*, they leave you with something to hang on to. *Dancer in the Dark*, I feel like it doesn't.

John Moe: The whole Lars von Trier catalog, does that qualify as depressing films? Because I just—I think of *Melancholia*. That certainly would score.

Dana Stevens: Yeah. I mean, I'm not a big fan of *Melancholia*, and I know lots and lots of critics, even who don't generally love Lars von Trier, are big fans of *Melancholia*. I think people who are fans of it, people who see what the movie's trying to do, would say that it's in the sad and not the depressing category. In the sense that though it's about literally the end of the world—right? The plot of the movie is a planet is about to collide with the Earth, and everybody knows that the world's about to end, so what do you do? It ultimately ends up being somewhat affirming of—you know, at least of relationships, right? Of love.

Like, the people that you root for in that movie are the people who choose to live and to confront the impossible that's coming. Not the people like Kiefer Sutherland's character who check out early, you know? So, in that sense, I guess that would be a life affirming one. And then Lars von Trier can be funny, too. In a very dark, mean way, he can be funny. So, I think he is about more than just Captain Bringdown, but he definitely can be that.

John Moe: Right. Well, who are the other Captains Bringdown? Who are the other officers in the truly, truly capital D Depressing oeuvre?

Dana Stevens: (Laughs.) I mean, I'll tell you—I can tell you a personal story. Here's the first thing I thought of when you invited me to do a show about, you know, “are depressing movies a sort of homeopathic cure for depression”—right?—was a period of my own life when I sort of used a director in that way. Maybe one of the couple of periods where I've been probably actually clinically depressed.

Like there haven't been big ones, but there was a period of my late 20s where just—yeah, like stuff was going badly in my life, and I was not doing well. And I went on this big binge of

Ingmar Bergman movies. That was all I wanted to watch. I was also sort of a budding cinephile, you know, trying to build up my film vocabulary and so forth. But it was really more of just a feeling that I needed Ingmar Bergman at that moment. I like needed to stuff myself with these bleak Swedish existential allegories, you know? And I couldn't get enough of them.

And I presume—because they weren't making me happier, right? They weren't like cheering me up in any sense. I remember watching *Cries and Whispers* at a period when I was sort of, you know, living in that very angsty space that the movie takes place in and finding it really necessary. And I'm not sure that I can completely answer the question why. It's going against my own theory that I just floated that a movie should be redemptive to qualify, but that was what I needed at that moment.

So, yeah, if somebody does want to watch *Dancer in the Dark* because they feel like shit, I feel like more power to you. That should be the movie you take on.

John Moe: So, is *Cries and Whispers* one without the glimmer of hope, the redemption, element to it? Is it painted all the way black?

Dana Stevens: Gosh, I mean, I saw it so long ago. It's painted red in terms of like the look of it. It's one of his most beautiful movies, and it's all in this very crimson— It's like, you know, the interior of a heart, the whole movie.

It's about a woman who's dying, an old woman who's dying—or not that old, but you know, a mother and her children and familiars kind of being around there for her last days and them interacting sort of in the antechamber to her deathbed. Yeah, I mean, it's really dark in that it ends with the death, and nobody is doing well at the end of the movie. But I think it is also a movie in some ways about survival.

I don't think that Ingmar Bergman is out to bum people out (laughs), you know, in his filmmaking. In the way that maybe Lars is! Like, Lars likes to make you feel bad. Oh, and here's another one! Since we talked about *Eternal Sunshine*, which is written, of course, by Charlie Kaufman—not directed by him.

[00:45:00]

But there's a movie written and directed by him that I think belongs thoroughly in the depressing *Grave of the Fireflies* bucket, and that's *Synecdoche, New York*. Have you seen that movie?

John Moe: *Synecdoche, New York*. Yes, Philip Seymour Hoffman.

Clip:

Music: Thoughtful, atmospheric music that turns discordant and ominous.

Caden (Synecdoche, New York): (In voiceover.) I have a lot of problems.

(A crash.)

Caden: (In scene.) AUGH! HELP!

(Scene change.)

Caden: I'm going through some things.

(Scene change.)

Caden: I'm hurt. Am I dying? Can you tell me that?

Doctor: I can't tell you.

Caden: You can't tell me?

Doctor: No.

Caden: No, you can't tell me?

Doctor: No.

Caden: You can't tell me if you can't tell me.

Doctor: No.

(Scene change.)

Caden: I'm lonely.

Therapist: Yes. And?

Caden: I'm afraid I'm going to die.

Therapist: Anything else?

Caden: I don't know what's wrong with me. And I want to do something important while I'm still here.

Therapist: Well, that would be the time to do it, yes.

(Scene change.)

Speaker: Death comes faster than you think.

Dana Stevens: And it's—how do you describe what that movie's about? It's sort of about an artist who goes further and further into the labyrinth of his own brain and his own creation? And kind of never achieves anything? Yeah.

John Moe: Yeah, I try not to describe it.

(They laugh.)

Dana Stevens: I mean, I try not to think about it. I mean, another movie that I admire—wouldn't quite call it a masterpiece, but I think it's an admirable film. That is just too—it's just too grim. I mean, the only message I feel like it's ultimately giving us is just like, “Give up now!” (Laughs.) You know? And maybe I'm corny in this way, but I don't think art should say give up now.

John Moe: Yeah, yeah. So, that's what *Synecdoche, New York* is for you?

Dana Stevens: For me, yeah. I mean, especially just the last 20-minute stretch of it or so. You know, essentially what happens is like the Philip Seymour Hoffman character gets older and older and doesn't achieve his dreams and, you know, eventually dies. (Laughs.) Spoiler alert. Like, his life is over.

And I never quite knew what we were to make of it, and I know so many other critics who are just crazy about that movie. I don't know. I think ultimately I just can't get on board with whatever it's trying to say, although it says it quite beautifully and with lots of nuance.

John Moe: Should art have hope in order to be any good?

Dana Stevens: I mean, I guess I don't want to be dogmatic about it. But when I look at the movies that mean the most to me—my sort of like, you know, internal top 10 or top 20, yeah! I think they have to have something. I mean, they can be very dark about the specific story that they're telling, but I don't want to get that claustrophobic sense that that's the only story that could be told. You know?

That's a little bit how *Synecdoche, New York* leaves me feeling is like, “Well, aren't we all just Philip Seymour Hoffman? Like, stuck in a room, unable to communicate with anyone, unable to achieve anything?”

And I don't know. I mean, art doesn't have to be uplifting by any means, but I think it should leave that little crack for the light to get in.

John Moe: The one that hasn't come up—because we got a lot of response on our Facebook group about this. We got a lot of response on BlueSky talking about this. The one that hasn't come up to me that I think might fit the category of movie without hope, tears us down, no need to ever watch it again—and I want to get your opinion as a respected film critic on whether I'm on or off base on this—is *Cape Fear*.

Dana Stevens: Mm! The original or the Martin Scorsese remake?

John Moe: The Scorsese, DeNiro remake. Cackling in the movie theater, Juliette Lewis, Nick Nolte, I think? Because it just—it's people being awful, and then things get more and more awful. And then they run out of film.

(They laugh.)

And then it's over.

Clip:

(A crash)

Speaker 1 (Cape Fear): The people call Samuel G Boat! Do you swear to tell truth, and nothing about the truth, so help you God!?

Speaker 2: Katie. Somebody's got a man the boat! We're heading into unprotected water!

Speaker 1: (Yelling.) Do you swear?

Speaker 3: I'll do it.

Speaker 1: Don't you make of your civic duty, darling! Go to the jury!

Dana Stevens: I mean, I saw that one so long ago, but yeah. That has always stuck with me as a kind of lesser Scorsese, as one of his remakes that didn't quite need to exist. It's a remake of an old Robert Mitchum movie that is memorable mainly because Robert Mitchum is super scary in the role.

But yeah, just sort of—yeah, a vision of bad people doing bad things. As is Michael Haneke's *Funny Games*. I don't know if you know that movie at all.

John Moe: No! Tell me about that.

Dana Steven: It exists in two versions too. It's a German movie. He's a German filmmaker. And then he decided—I don't know—five years or something after it came out, to remake it in the US in English with, you know, basically beat for beat. Like, I think it was even filmed on the same set; the same house was used.

And it's a home invasion thriller, in which—I don't know, just the home invasion goes as badly as you could possibly imagine. These two really nihilistic kind of thugs invade this bourgeois family's house and sort of torture them psychologically and physically all day. And yeah, it feels like an audience endurance test, and I resent movies that try to do that to me.

[00:50:00]

There's other Michael Haneke movies that I really love and admire, but I really don't like what he's up to in either of those *Funny Games* movies. And I was just angry by the end of the movie. I wasn't identified with the characters anymore. It was just me and Michael Haneke, you know, facing it off, and me being mad that he was trying to do that to his audience.

John Moe: Do you think *Requiem for a Dream* fits this category?

Dana Stevens: Ugh, that movie? Yes, absolutely. It's in the dumb, depressing category. See, that one has an added twist, which is that I just think it is not a good movie. Like, it's trying to make you feel bad, but it's not even marshalling great artistry along the way to do so. Does that make sense?

John Moe: So, I saw it—I think I saw most of it. (Chuckles.) I think I made it to the end, but I was kind of a mess by the end. And I've always been torn by it, because I thought, “Well, I'm feeling something, but I also don't want to experience this, and I never want to see this again.”

Dana Stevens: (Laughs.) That's an excellent description.

John Moe: And don't want any—I don't want any copies of this movie to be available to the public.

Dana Stevens: (Cackles.) Yeah, well, it has that audience endurance test quality I was talking about too. Which there have been movies in film history that, you know—that use that in a daring way. The idea that, you know, the audience has to be challenged or almost harmed in some way in order for the movie to land. But I just don't think *Requiem for a Dream* rises to the level of being a good enough movie and giving you enough.

I mean, for one thing, as I remember, the characters just don't feel like real characters, you know? They're constructs that are created in order for that very audience dynamic we're talking about to exist, right? Here's a person that can, you know, suffer or become degraded or become grotesque in some way, so that you—the audience member—will feel bad. You know?

And to me, that immediately takes me out of the story, and I'm no longer identifying with the, you know, Ellen Burstyn or Jared Leto characters. I'm just, again, like angry at the filmmaker for giving me that feeling that you described. Like, yeah, I feel stuff! Congratulations! Like, I would feel stuff if I watched a snuff movie too, but I'm not gonna do it!

John Moe: Is there—do you have a favorite among the truly hopeless movies, of the ones where there are no hope at all? Or are none of those your favorite?

Dana Stevens: Mm. Hm. Do I have a favorite among them? That's a really good question. I mean, *Grave of the Fireflies* probably would not make it onto any favorites list of mine, but if you were specifically selecting for that characteristic, like that is a really flawless work of art. And anybody who, for example, is a fan of that style—you know, it's from the Studio Ghibli, the same place that Miyazaki's movies come from, but Isao Takahata is the director. And yeah, I mean, I think that is an important movie and a great movie; it is just not a movie that I care to ever watch again. So, that would be one of the faves.

Almost any Bergman might count as one of those faves. And I think that's a moment when film history comes in, because the moment that Bergman is making those movies, you know, starting in the early '60s, is a moment when cinema needed to be kind of broken up in that way. You know, when sort of the big Hollywood era was ending, and foreign film and arthouse film was starting to be something that regular people once in a while took in.

And so, the idea that there was a movie that was about, you know, theology and about the big questions of life and might ask questions that led to frightening places or looked into the void, that was something that was new and exciting and was not just about manipulating the audience's emotions.

John Moe: Well, let me ask you this. What about your favorite movie to watch when you're feeling depressed? It doesn't have to be one of these hopeless movies. Maybe it's a movie full of hope, but what is your tonic movie?

Dana Stevens: That is a great question. I mean, it also—I guess it depends on whether you want to be taken out of your feeling or sort of submerged in it. The homeopathic versus allopathic remedy. If you're just going to talk about sheer entertainment, like I would watch one of my comfort movies. And my comfort movies would probably be—I feel the greatest comfort movie is the kind of thing that would be on sort of basic cable in the late '90s, early 2000s, you know? A movie that was just—you see it almost every afternoon on the same station punctuated by ads, you know.

And for me, the movies that fall into that are sort of big, audience-friendly thrillers, like *Twister*. Absolutely love the 1996 *Twister*. I've seen it countless times. *Speed*, actually by the same director, Jan de Bont. *Speed* is just a movie that's always solid and always silly, but yet completely engaging. I mean, *Titanic* is another of those movies—right?—that always seem to be on TV in the year 2000, punctuated by local infomercials. That kind of movie is comforting to me.

[00:55:00]

Because probably just generationally, it falls at a moment where it brings back a simpler era of movie watching and movie making.

But I do also believe in the homeopathic remedy. It just would have to be a movie that has some sort of hope or beauty or redemption at the end of it, but I would probably be more likely to reach for a movie that touches on more aspects of the human experience than just a thriller, you know? Because I think sometimes when you're depressed, you need to be reminded that art is good, you know? (Laughs.) That there are things about life that matter beyond entertainment. And sometimes it can feel really good to watch something that's a great work of art.

So, I could imagine putting on, you know, just one of my favorite movies. And that then you get to the question, "What are your top 10 movies in the world?" Which is sort of always chasing the impossible, I think, because it keeps on changing. What's the movie that you would put on?

John Moe: The movie I find that I keep returning to, sometimes even to comfort me as I go off to sleep, is *Ocean's Eleven*. The George Clooney *Ocean's Eleven*.

Dana Stevens: Yeah, I can see that!

John Moe: Because I like how it's a plan, and it's laid out. They tell you what's going to happen, and then what's going to happen happens, and then there's some minor hiccups, but for the most part it all happens like it's supposed to. And I think it's a reassurance of order in a chaotic universe.

Dana Stevens: Yeah, I can totally, totally see that!

Music: "Building Wings" by Rhett Miller, an up-tempo acoustic guitar song. The music continues quietly under the dialogue.

John Moe: Thank you to Dana Stevens from *Slate*, and to Drea Clark and Dan McCoy from Maximum Fun and listeners Mary Catherine Ricker and Stephen Hegarty. We have a Letterboxd list of all the films we talked about today. That's on our show page at MaximumFun.org. And before you write in: Dana was right, I was wrong. The Clint Eastwood orangutan movie was called *Every Which Way But Loose*, the sequel, *Any Which Way You Can*.

Music: "Every Which Way But Loose" by Eddie Rabbitt.

Every which way but loose, you turn me

Every which way but loose

Inside, the fire's burning me

In my mind, you just keep turning me.

Every which way but loose

Baby there's no excuse

To turn me every which way but loose

(Music fades out to be replaced with "Building Wings" again.)

John Moe: Hey, have you ever wanted to make your own podcast? You've heard mine, but if you ever wanted to make yours, I'm teaching a one-day online class on February 1st, 2025, called "How to Write Your Podcast". It's a writing class where you'll learn from me how to develop an idea, find your story, write it, and speak it. It's being done through the Loft Literary Center here in Minneapolis, and space is limited. But again, it's online, so you can join from anywhere. Go to LoftLiterary.org, and search up my name for more details. My name's John Moe.

By the way, our show exists because people support it with their dollars. We really love you, people who do that. You make this show possible. You make a show that can help people when it goes out into the world. If you've already given to the show, thank you so much. If not, it's so easy to do, and it's so important to keep this show going. It's so important that you give.

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Our electric mail address is DepreshMode@MaximumFun.org.

Hi, credits listeners. After all that talk of depressing movies, I think I'm going to watch *Anchorman* again, because I like that movie.

Depresh Mode is made possible by your contributions.

[01:00:00]

Our production team includes Raghu Manavalan, Kevin Ferguson, and me. We got booking help from Mara Davis. Rhett Miller wrote and performed our theme song, “Building Wings”. *Depresh Mode* is a production of Maximum Fun and Poputchik. I'm John Moe, bye now.

Music: “Building Wings” by Rhett Miller.

I'm always falling off of cliffs, now

Building wings on the way down

I am figuring things out

Building wings, building wings, building wings

No one knows the reason

Maybe there's no reason

I just keep believing

No one knows the answer

Maybe there's no answer

I just keep on dancing

(Music fades out.)

Transition: Cheerful ukulele chord.

Speaker 1: Maximum Fun.

Speaker 2: A worker-owned network.

Speaker 3: Of artist owned shows.

Speaker 4: Supported—

Speaker 5: —directly—

Speaker 6: —by you!