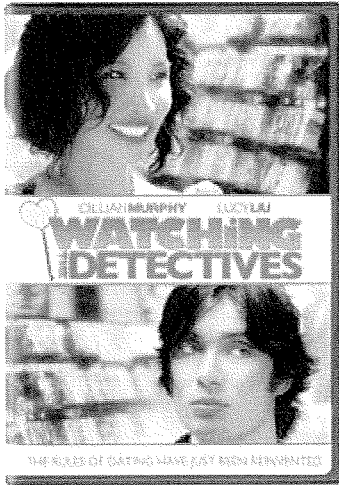


Watching The Detectives

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Neil (Cillian Murphy) isn't just obsessed with movies; as the owner of a small video store about to do battle with the Blockbusteresque "Media Giant" chain, he believes the only way to keep the place afloat is to live and breathe the pictures. When he breaks up with his girlfriend, his line is, "You're not at all like Katharine Ross in 'Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.'" Whether starring in ill-fated theme nights or directing and starring in a noir-influenced commercial, Neil is in desperate need of a life, and everyone knows it but him. Enter Violet, a mysterious woman with a penchant for elaborate pranks who at once seems to have taken a shine to Neil and deeply desires to ruin his life, from trashing the new Media Giant to making believe she's been bound and gagged.

Just another loser looking for a quirky girl to save his life? Writer-director Paul Soter's debut is frail in concept but its charms sneak up on us to the point that the winsome Violet (Lucy Liu) doesn't seem

annoying so much as bewitching. Murphy, too, works as Neil, but it takes him almost the length of **Watching The Detectives** to look at all comfortable onscreen. (How can Murphy, so surefooted in "Batman Begins" and "Breakfast on Pluto" alike as a bag-wearing maniac and an Irish transvestite, seem out of his league as a dork? We wish we knew.) Soter leavens the double-cross-heavy plot by tossing in homages to everything from noir dialogue -- Neil: "How do you get around?" Violet: "I get around." -- to, in one shimmering sequence, the Burt Lancaster movie "The Swimmer." The fun starts right up top when in homage to the diner scene in "When Harry Met Sally," Neil's ex-girlfriend shows how she faked for him her admiration for "The Seventh Seal." Instead of getting him out of his movie-addled world, Violet manages to coexist with Neil in it, and any renter can sympathize with that.