

Another Earth

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [October 4, 2011](#) issue

Screenwriters love genre pieces because they provide definition and structure. When all else fails, scribes can always fall back on their audience's understanding of the way the genre game is played.

Redemption movies and science fiction films are popular genres that have thrived since moviemaking began—guilt and wonderment have never been out of style. *Another Earth*, a Sundance darling that has gained attention by word of mouth, follows the latest cinematic trend by combining both genres into one mysterious, if uneven, film. The genre mix isn't as pronounced as in *Cowboys and Aliens*, which screams its high-concept merger in its title. But *Another Earth* is still a curious blend that can cause dizziness.

The story orbits around Rhoda (rising star Brit Marling, who also co-wrote the script), a high-achieving young woman who has just gotten into MIT to study astrophysics. The same night she finds out about her acceptance, word spreads around the globe that scientists have discovered a second Earth, almost identical to our own. Rhoda's curiosity about the new orb, combined with too much acceptance-letter partying, leads to a drunken car crash that leaves a young mother and son dead and a father emotionally ravaged.

Four years later, Rhoda is out of prison but racked with guilt. She hides out as a janitor at a high school—until she unexpectedly spots composer John Burroughs, the man who survived the crash. She longs to apologize but finds it too painful. And there is an alternative to figuring out how to address her guilt: winning a contest for a one-way ticket to Earth 2, where Rhoda can start over.

The concept of a parallel universe is nothing new. The *Twilight Zone* employed it in at least half a dozen episodes. But the merging of the genres allows director and co-writer Mike Cahill to spin the idea in a different direction: we are less concerned about the planet itself and more interested in it as a place to hide from our tragedies while still viewing shadows of our own lives. Interestingly, the film is at its weakest

when it is hewing to the familiar demands of the genre, especially in the somewhat clumsy first act. It picks up steam as the story boils down to a heated confrontation between love and guilt. Will Rhoda fess up and tell John who she really is? Will she fly away to Earth 2 to escape her agony, or will she stay on Earth 1 to work out the problems she has created?

Most of the film's third-act rebound is due to Marling's understated performance. She never allows Rhoda to tip her hand, so we are left wondering what is going on in her head, right up to the magical final shot—which suggests that *Another Earth* may have more on its mind than it first suggests.