

FILM REVIEWS

***Wormwood: Road of the Dead* (Kiah Roache-Turner) Australia 2014**

Guerilla Films

(This review contains spoilers)

The third angel sounded his trumpet, and a great star, blazing like a torch, fell from the sky on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water — the name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters turned bitter, and many people died from the waters that had become bitter.

—Revelations 8:10–11

When you name your debut film after an apocalyptic star which is sent by some omnipotent deity to wreak havoc upon mankind, you better have the goods to back it up, and fortunately writer/director brothers Kiah and Tristan Roache-Turner's *Wormwood: Road of the Dead* delivers. Zombie films have historically displayed a tendency to be framed within an eco-political narrative — think *Dawn of Dead* (both the 1978 original and its 2004 remake), *Day of the Dead* (1985), *28 Days Later* (2002), and *Land of the Dead* (2005), for example. Like these, *Wormwood* is a film of its time which seeks to capitalise on fears regarding pollution, scientific misconduct, natural fuel shortages, and shifting power dynamics. Such themes, of course, closely parallel the *Mad Max* films, including the recent *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), a film to which *Wormwood* has been repeatedly compared. From the films' subtitles (*Road of the Dead* vs. *Fury Road*) and depiction of the post-apocalyptic disintegration of society, to the way in which each posits female characters as not only being integral to a new way of life but actually the key to ensuring humanity's survival, these films are indeed comparable.

The theme of resurrection may be located at the heart of both these films, but there is one marked distinction between *Fury Road* and *Wormwood*: where the former ultimately maintains a largely serious tone, the latter mostly takes an irreverent approach. What's more, the world is beginning in *Fury Road*, and follows a road in the Australian outback that ultimately leads to a promise of rejuvenation and rebirth; by contrast, *Wormwood* travels along a road of the dead. For the protagonists in *Wormwood*, the world as they knew it is

ending, a fact which not only drives the narrative trajectory but also provides the basis for much of its black humour.

Within the first few high-octane and bombastic moments of the film, the tone is set. Four heavily shielded men, in suits of makeshift armour comprised of hockey pads and welding masks, run from under a garage door and into a herd of the undead in order to reclaim their truck with chains and hooks. As vibrant red blood from the exploding heads of the undead perforates the dominant greys of the opening shot's *mise en scène*, the figure of Benny (Leon Burchill) stands amidst the chaos. With tufts of hair protruding from either side of his hockey mask, he goads the undead with a resolute, 'come on you fucking zombies!' While nothing about this scenario sounds particularly funny, the juxtaposition of Benny's provocation, the accelerated pace interspersed with moments of slow motion and staccato movements, and the shambolic stumblings of the undead do hint at the film's comic marrow.

Set in contemporary Australia, *Wormwood* tells the story of how two adult siblings find each other once the apocalypse has struck. Having lost his wife and child to a seemingly airborne zombie virus, Barry (Jay Gallagher) embarks upon a road-trip to find his sister Brooke (Bianca Bradey), accompanied by sidekick Benny. Once reunited, the brother-and-sister duo endeavour to defeat forces more sinister than the undead: renegade military powers who for some never-explained reason are kidnapping the living for scientific experiments. As a result of these experiments at the hands of a maniacal dancing scientist, and set to the dulcet notes of KC and the Sunshine Band's 'Get Down Tonight', Brooke is dramatically transformed from victim to victor through quite an unusual innovation, thus providing a refreshing twist to what is often considered a genre at the edge of exhaustion.

At the same time, *Wormwood* does have issues elsewhere pertaining to character development. For example, some characters are represented as both tokenistic and stereotypical, as is the case with the military, all of whom are depicted as antagonistic alphas. Other, more interesting characters often seem to be squandered, a symptom perhaps of the accelerated pace at which the film moves. This is the case with Chalker (Yure Covich) whose altruistic efforts essentially save Barry from himself upon the immediate death of his wife. While he initially makes for a compelling inclusion to the plot as a counter-balance to Barry's fatalistic nihilism, though, he is ultimately demoted to playing the role of a bumbling stoner. However, many of the film's minor faults are saved by its fresh take on a number of themes such as religion, a theme which is typically more notable in zombie films due to its absence.

An apocalyptic harbinger, according to *The Book of Revelations*, 'Wormwood' is a disease-carrying star which will wipe out mankind, carrying the souls of the good to heaven

and the bad to hell, and condemning those left behind on earth to endure a trial by fire. Religion in zombie texts usually comes in the form of a survivor's quest to comprehend why the undead walk again. Protagonists therefore generally try retrospectively to uncover what we as a species have done to deserve such a plight, highlighting the jumbled uncertainty that humanity calls faith. While biblical references abound in *Wormwood*, unlike the Spanish zombie film [*R.E.C.*] (2007), which ultimately uses spiritualism as an engaging plot device, it is strongly implied here that divine intervention within the world of *Wormwood* is contingent upon humanity's ultimate quest to destroy itself through science.

Emblematic of this destruction, *Wormwood* employs the trope of the psychotic mad-scientist whose experiments on both the living and the 'dead' hint at possible explanations for why the latter are returning as flesh-crazed zombies. Seen as far back as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), the trope of the mad scientist is not necessarily a novel theme within zombie narratives. Yet the manner in which *Wormwood* invokes the trope of the mad scientist as an unhinged disco-dancing enthusiast is not only evocative of Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), but also seeks to denigrate the position of man-made science, so that it comes to seem like little more than comic buffoonery in the shadow of the greater laws of natural science. As a consequence, *Wormwood* shares a further similarity with *Mad Max: Fury Road*, in that it reveres the laws of Mother Nature above the dogmatism of religion and man-made science.

While eco-undertones and theological rhetoric do permeate the film in quite innovative ways, what really distinguishes this zombie film is a satisfying return to comic horror that combines absurd zombie humour with apocalyptic logic. Though punctuated with quite surprising moments of pathos, such as Frank's (Keith Agius) admission about the death of his son, for the most part *Wormwood* is outlandish without being slapstick and immensely macabre without being morbid. When Old-Testament warnings have materialised, and family members who once loved and cherished you are now clutching at your throat in order to rip it open and eat the contents, all bets are pretty much off. Thus, within the world of a zombie apocalypse, you can pretty much get away with murder, which is essentially what Brooke and Barry manage to do. Like the fallen star which seeks to root out all that is corrupt in mankind, Brooke and Barry have made their peace with the dead and now set their sights upon the evil which lives.

Sarah Cleary

***The Babadook* (Dir. Jennifer Kent) Australia 2014**
Causeway Films/Screen Australia
(This review contains spoilers)

‘For me, the entry point was the idea of facing the unfaceable’, says director Jennifer Kent of her 2014 debut film *The Babadook*.¹ Arguably the backbone of every horror film or fiction ever written, the idea of ‘facing the unfaceable’ is hardly a revolutionary approach in terms of genre. What is interesting about Kent’s film, however, is the overwhelming emphasis on the return of the repressed, drawing an overt connection between supernatural and psychological haunting; or in other words, the idea that what is perceived as supernatural haunting is actually a result of psychological trauma. This has led many reviewers to posit that the real monster in the film is not Kent’s antipodean bogeyman, the Babadook, but rather the repressed grief of the main characters that is embodied by the figure.

The plot centres on widowed single mother Amelia (Essie Davis), who is traumatised by the death of her husband seven years previously. The opening scene is a disorientating, dream-like sequence in which Amelia relives the moment her husband was killed in a car accident as he drove her to hospital to give birth to their son, Samuel (Noah Wiseman). The film draws the reader into Amelia’s daily grind — her mundane job, her difficult, demanding son, her self-centred sister, and her overall lethargy with life. Davis’s portrayal of the harassed single mother is convincing, as the viewer begins to sympathise with her manifestly un-maternalistic impulses. During their nightly bedtime-story ritual, Samuel pulls the eponymous book from the bookshelf: *The Babadook*. The striking red cover of the book stands out in stark contrast to the grey-blue visual tone of the film, which Kent originally considered shooting in black and white. The rhyming narrative contained within the picture-book becomes increasingly disturbing as Amelia reads on, shifting from the initial depiction of the Babadook as a friendly but shadowy figure, to that of a malignant, lurking predator in a matter of pages. The refrain ‘you can’t get rid of the Babadook’ becomes a sinister incantation, coupled with the repeated summons ‘baba ba-dook-dook-dook’, three sharp knocks that indicate the Babadook’s desire to ‘get in’. The claustrophobic feeling of the film increases as the story progresses, focusing almost exclusively on the mother-son dyad and their interaction with the book, with the action being situated for the most part in their

¹ Jennifer Kent quoted in an interview by Tara Brady, ‘The Babadook: A Truly, Madly, Creepy Film Debut’, *The Irish Times* (17 October 2014), <<http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/film/the-babadook-a-truly-madly-creepy-film-debut-1.1966224>> [accessed 10 March 2015].

unnecessarily large, but suitably creepy Victorian house. The book itself undergoes various forms of destruction: it's hidden only to reappear on the bookshelf; it's shredded and binned only to materialise on the doorstep, crudely taped back together with a few additional pages prophesying Amelia's filicide (which by this stage, the viewer is also considering!); finally, it's burned by Amelia in the classic cathartic act of exorcism. But, of course, the Babadook is not so easily expunged from their lives, as the book suggestively reminds us: 'the more you deny me, the stronger I get'.

The film is consciously folkloric in theme and tone, with Kent herself admitting that the word 'Babadook' was deliberately crafted to evoke the sort of gobbledegook name that a child would invent for a monster. One interviewer quotes Kent as stating that her objective was to 'create a myth in a domestic setting', and that 'even though it happened to be in some strange suburb in Australia somewhere, it could have been anywhere [...] I'm very happy, actually, that it doesn't feel particularly Australian'.² Kent's disavowal of the film's Australian provenance strikes me as particularly odd in that the film seems to be very much informed by its locale. Indeed, how could it not be, given that it features an exclusively white, middle-class Australian cast of characters, worth noting, in this regard, as they are strikingly juxtaposed with the black figure of the Babadook. The word Babadook itself, in fact, is evocative of Aboriginal etymology, similarly constructed using a combination of elongated vowels and hard g/k sounds. Although the Babadook is entirely of Kent's invention, she nevertheless roots it deliberately in a mythology, with the book itself being the material example of this. This would seem to contradict the assertion that the film is placeless, given that myths are typically deeply culturally inscribed and inherited. Myths are also perpetuated primarily, if not exclusively, through narrative means, again signposted by the book as a haunted object, or rather, an object that induces haunting through its narrative. Certainly, if nothing else, the setting is a refreshing re-orientation away from the ubiquitous American backdrop of much contemporary horror cinema.

Considered in light of these elements — the white, suburban setting, the folkloric aspect, the Aboriginal trace — the form of possession that the Babadook takes assumes a particularly racial quality. The book lingers on the image of 'the Babadook growing right under your skin', suggesting that this entity is externally infectious but also develops from within. This is not unlike the relation between supernatural and psychological haunting, each

² Jennifer Kent in interview with Ryan Lamble, 'Jennifer Kent Interview: Directing *The Babadook*', *Den of Geek* (13 October 2014), <<http://www.denofgeek.com/movies/the-babadook/32451/jennifer-kent-interview-directing-the-babadook>> [accessed 10 March 2015].

being informed by the other in that externalised, supernatural haunting is often configured as the result of some subjective trauma. It could be argued that the shadowy figure of the Babadook, the silhouette of whom is visible in the background of many shots, represents the Aboriginal, the Australian Other, the shadowy figure that haunts the white Australian consciousness as a result of collective cultural trauma, a legacy of colonialism. The entity is imbibed and later abjected by Amelia, entering and exiting through her mouth. As she vomits a black substance onto the basement floor — the basement being the place where all Amelia's dead husband's things are kept, and psychologically evocative of the unconscious, of course — it stains her skin in the process, a further indication of a racial subtext, or perhaps more generally suggestive of how we bear the marks of psychological experiences, subjective or otherwise.

However you interpret *The Babadook*, the film offers some genuinely good scares without resorting to cheap jump tactics, gradually drawing the viewer in and building the terror to a climactic crescendo. Though the conclusion is somewhat dissatisfying, there is an acknowledged return to the classic horror-movie format here in terms of the haunted-house setting, the folkloric bugbear, and the eventual reunification of a fractured family unit. Coupled with this, the visual tone and eerie soundtrack add a pleasing stylistic touch that is so often absent from big-budget horrors. It is somewhat reminiscent of cult classic *Donnie Darko* (2001) in this regard, blurring the boundary between psychological and supernatural projections, while maintaining an ethereal aesthetic that eschews cliché. With such high expectations following this debut, it will be interesting to see what Kent's imagination conjures up next.

Aoife M. Dempsey

***Leprechaun: Origins* (Dir. Zach Lipovsky) USA 2014**
 WWE Studios/Lionsgate
 (This review contains spoilers)

After an eleven-year break, the *Leprechaun* franchise has been rebooted with a whole new look, attempting a seriousness not found in its six predecessors and likely disappointing fans of those more comical, campy films. The feature-film directorial debut for Zach Lipovsky, *Leprechaun: Origins* follows a more traditional horror formula than the original, and sees two young American couples — the career-driven Sophie (Stephanie Bennett) and Ben (Andrew

Dunbar), and the laid-back Jennifer (Melissa Roxburgh) and David (Brendan Fletcher) — travel to a small Irish village in search of Celtic artefacts mentioned in history-buff Sophie’s guidebook. Not finding these, they stop in the local pub, described by David as having ‘old Irish charm’, and meet Hamish (Garry Chalk) who tells them of the ‘Stones of the Gods’, which are a seven-mile hike away, and not mentioned in guidebooks in order to keep the village private from tourists. He offers them a ‘cabin in the woods’ for the night, supposedly near the start of the trail to the stones. However, it turns out that the area is inhabited by a leprechaun to whom the villagers owe a debt for mining his gold years before, and the young travellers are actually locked in the cabin overnight as a sacrifice to the creature. Hamish has been protecting his community from the wrath of the leprechaun for years by offering up tourists in this way. It is from this point on that the horror ensues and the characters are picked off one by one, until only the expected survivor remains.

The most notable departure from the source material taken by *Leprechaun: Origins*, and the driving force for its less playful tone is the fact that the leprechaun has become more creature than character. He no longer speaks, but instead growls and grunts. He is also much less visible to the audience, who mostly see claws or shaky close-up shots of an alien-like face. When he is shown in full, his movements appear almost gorilla-like in congruence with the sounds he produces. With this re-characterisation, actor Warwick Davis, known for playing the Leprechaun role, is replaced by wrestling superstar Dylan ‘Hornswoggle’ Postl, whose first appearance in the WWE ring was also as a leprechaun character. His debut in this film requires more physicality than acting skills, however, as he has no dialogue and the few shots we do see of his character reveal simply a generic monster. Not only has the leprechaun lost his voice, but the transformation to this creature has affected his vision as well. POV shots reveal that the leprechaun inexplicably now seeks out human targets through a type of thermal, or ‘gold’ vision, similar to that found in the *Predator* films, reconstructing him as more of a ‘hunter’. While the original leprechaun was a quippy troll-like man in a green suit with a predilection for cleaning shoes, playing twisted tricks, and using his supernatural powers to mimic voices, levitate, teleport, and escape death (except by four-leaf clover), this new leprechaun is a primordial beast that lacks magical power (other than its vision) and brings only villainy and gore to the table. The acquisition of gold no longer seems to be his sole objective as he now accepts offerings of innocent people (apparently needing to feed on humans), though he will still take any of the precious metal that he comes across. This results in close-ups, not only of gold jewellery being pulled out of ears and tongues, but also several deep cuts, impaling, and a particularly gruesome death in which a spinal cord is torn out. Due

to this complete alteration of the title character, the only connection this film (the first in the franchise not to credit Mark Jones as a writer) has to its predecessors is the use of the classic line, ‘fuck you, Lucky Charms’.

Though this film intends to rebrand the *Leprechaun* franchise from comic to dark and grim in tone, it fails to make a serious attempt at the portrayal of Ireland. The only film in the franchise to be set in Ireland, it was actually filmed in Vancouver, Canada, and contains quite a few questionable moments in its representation of Ireland. Elements of the setting seem out of place, including vehicles more suited for a safari-type expedition and references to a prevalent population of wild boars. Though there are a number of Irish characters in the film, none of them are played by Irish actors, quite a range of accents are heard amongst the population of a single village, and the key local character is given the Scottish name of Hamish. The Irish language itself is mistranslated in the film when Sophie finds a book and, using it to figure out what they are up against, tells the group that *Tuatha Dé Danann* means ‘leprechaun’. In fact, it refers to a mythological tribe of supernatural kings and queens who were worshipped as deities. Though leprechauns, like other Irish fairies, may be derived from the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, they appear more prominently in later folklore and stereotype than in the ancient mythology. Despite the film’s title, which suggests that the subject of the creature’s back-story will be explored, there are no attempts at incorporating the legend of the leprechaun beyond this small link. Many of these elements would perhaps not be noticeable to the intended American audience, but they make it hard for an Irish audience to take the film seriously.

Overall, while the reboot does give this film a darker tone than the rest of the entries in the *Leprechaun* franchise, it actually detracts from its success in this case. The loss of the campiness that gave the earlier films their charm is not made up for in Harris Wilkinson’s screenplay, which follows generic formula too closely, resulting in a predictable storyline and characters. In addition to the film’s lack of leprechaun lore and its predictability, the plot is problematic in a number of ways, perhaps the most obvious of these being that, despite the fact that the leprechaun no longer has supernatural powers, the villagers as a whole have been unable to kill it for years. Enter four American teenagers who manage to foil the murderous attempts of the creature, and the villagers, for almost the first hour of the film. Though three of them do eventually die, Sophie single-handedly manages to behead the leprechaun in the end, begging the question why no one else could.

Of course, the growling heard after the beheading suggests that the leprechaun has developed the power to resurrect, or that there are others nearby. This sets up the possibility

for a sequel which, like this film, despite its problems, is likely to make profits with a straight-to-VOD and DVD release, following the pattern of a number of other films in the genre that do not strive for ingenuity. Ultimately, *Leprechaun: Origins* falls short of the unique and grim representation of leprechaun folklore that it could have been, instead settling in the ranks of creature features that lack truly distinctive qualities.

Loretta Goff

***It Follows* (Dir. David Robert Mitchell) USA 2014**
Northern Lights Films/Animal Kingdom/Two Flints
(This review contains spoilers)

It Follows was released in Ireland and the UK several months ago, having already garnered very positive reviews from festival screenings in the US and elsewhere. In some respects, the film absolutely merits the praise that has been bestowed upon it. However, for this reviewer at least, it also has one major problem that undermines the suggestion from some quarters that it be anointed a modern genre classic: as we shall see, the sense of familiarity that it goes out of its way to inspire is both its greatest strength and greatest weakness.

The basic plot presents us with an intriguing take on the clichéd ‘sex = death’ dynamic seen in so many other suburban horror films about teenagers. Protagonist Jay’s (Maika Monroe) decision to have sex with ‘Hugh’ (Jake Weary), the new boyfriend she has been dating for a few weeks, has consequences so immediate and bizarre that in other hands they may have made the film seem almost puritanical; were it not for the fact that Mitchell depicts Jay’s plight with considerable empathy and nuance, this would seem like a textbook case of supernatural ‘slut shaming’. After their initially consensual liaison, Jay is chloroformed, tied to a wheelchair, and forced to listen as ‘Hugh’ (who is actually a Jeff, and has been hiding his true identity, for reasons that soon become obvious) explains that he has just passed on what is essentially a sexually transmitted ghost, a ‘thing’ which will slowly follow and then kill her, unless she decides to perpetuate the curse and ‘pass it along’. It’s a stunningly staged scene, and one that sets up the premise in an efficient and eerily atmospheric manner. It’s just a shame that the rest of the film never quite lives up to it. The one truly original aspect of the film lies in the fact that the shape-shifting ‘it’ which will now doggedly follow Jay does so at walking pace, a detail that intensifies rather than diminishes her (and our) fear for her safety. This is essentially the slowest chase movie of all time, which

lends Jay's dilemma the ridiculous yet implacable logic of a nightmare from which it is impossible to awake.

As several other reviewers have noted, the entity which subsequently appears to Jay in both familiar (as friends and family members) and unfamiliar forms, tends to appear naked, or in underwear/dishevelled clothing. Sometimes the apparition manifests itself in the guise of an individual in an obviously brutalised state. This might suggest that it embodies a literalised representation of sexual trauma, with the victims rendered as a succession of mindless, mute ghosts, forever trapped in the immediate aftermath of their initial ordeal. In a tendency that is regrettably emblematic of the film as a whole, however, this intriguing idea is never effectively explored (in part because, as the ambiguous ending demonstrates, Mitchell has no problem with leaving plot threads hanging). The film's exploration of victimhood may, however, find its most obvious expression in the story of Jay herself, who appears to be suffering from severe trauma throughout, both as a result of her assault at Jeff's hands and the subsequent uncanny revelations that serve to destabilise her reality.

Adding to these suggestive elements is the fact that, from the outset, Mitchell also makes it clear that Jay is constantly subject to voyeuristic male attention. Two local boys spy on her in the pool and later peek in at her while she lies in her bed, recuperating from her attack; childhood friend Paul (Keir Gilchrist) appears caring but is obsessively fixated on her; and neighbour Greg (Daniel Zovatto) is a charming but unreliable cad who has treated Jay badly in the past and doesn't really believe her story (to his own detriment). Even before the haunting begins, therefore, Jay is beset by men who are either absent (her father), predatory (like Jeff), or, like Paul, all too willing to take advantage of her vulnerable state for their own sexual and emotional gratification. If one were to remove from the film altogether the scenes in which other characters see evidence of the ghost's object-throwing abilities, it would seem very much like a story tracing the psychological ramifications of rape, with the entire haunting being a hallucination brought on by trauma. One could therefore also see the entity being emblematic of the more general abuse of female sexuality imbedded in mainstream culture — although this might also be crediting the film with a thematic coherency I'm not *entirely* sure it possesses. However, while it represents the film's most interesting interpretative possibility, this is also a plot development which, as the likes of Keir-La Janisse's outstanding book *House of Psychotic Women: An Autobiographical Topography of Female Neurosis in Horror Films* (2012) makes clear, is in itself by no means at all uncommon within the genre.

The film's intriguing but ultimately underdeveloped undertones of (potentially) feminist protest are juxtaposed throughout with scenes in which the inherent liminality of the narrative's setting, a suburban neighbourhood just outside of Detroit, is underlined. The inherent in-between-ness of the locale is emphasised from the start by the visual and narrative focus on the neighbourhood's proximity to the natural world. Mitchell uses the real-life industrial and suburban ruins of present-day Detroit as a resonant backdrop. At one point, the teenagers even refer to the neighbourhood that separates the suburbs from the city as 'the border' as if to underline the implication (always erroneous within the suburban gothic tradition) that safety and security lie on one side only: the suburban side, of course. Jay's neighbourhood, like the ghost that stalks her (and possibly Jay herself) is trapped between two worlds. It is also likely that symbolic significance lies in the fact that the bodies of water featured here are all in some sense surrounded by barriers (be they natural or man-made), a detail which underlines the film's broader interest in themes of confinement and inevitability. We first meet Jay as she immerses herself in a backyard pool. It's an activity that seems to represent one of her primary forms of escapism, yet at the same time suggests that, despite her desperate attempts to transcend the world around her, Jay remains stuck in one place, literally treading water.

As suggested by my analysis so far, *It Follows* is often genuinely enthralling, with a dreamy atmosphere that can transition from the gently melancholic to 'Oh-dear-god-it's-right-behind-you' flurries of panic in the blink of an eye. The young cast, led by the excellent Monroe, is good in a self-consciously naturalistic fashion, Rich Vreeland's electronic score pulses and rumbles ominously, and Mitchell has an undeniably sharp eye for the disquieting deployment of the implacable, shape-shifting entity. Yet there is one major problem here: the almost complete lack of thematic, visual, or narrative originality (slow-walking ghost aside). To call this film derivative would be a polite understatement; any half-way knowledgeable horror enthusiast will experience a strong sensation of déjà vu throughout, most particularly in relation to Mitchell's recurrent reliance upon *Halloween*-style slow tracking shots. In addition, the actual composition of many of his most striking images — such as repeated scenes in which teenagers appear on non-descript suburban streets in various states of sinisterly suggestive undress — owes much to the work of photographer Gregory Crewdson, and in particular, his 2003 series 'Twilight'. The opening scene of *It Follows*, in which a young woman careens out of her home in night-clothes and, incongruously, a pair of high heels, as if in pursuit from an attacker whom no one else can see (which later proves to have

been the case), is essentially a Crewdson still that has been brought to life, albeit with substantial input from the opening scene of Hideo Nakata's *The Ring* (1998).

In fact, while the debt *It Follows* owes to *Halloween* has rightly been noted by most critics, the core premise — that of a curse which must be deliberately passed on to someone else if the protagonist is to survive — is straight out of *Ring*'s playbook. *Ring* author Koji Suzuki also entitled a short-story collection *Dark Water*, which could almost be an alternate title for *It Follows*, given the prominence that bodies of H₂O are afforded here. Ultimately, it all adds up to a sense that what we have here is an undeniably clever, well-acted, and atmospheric effort that at the same time blatantly cribs many of its best moments, plot developments, and visual flourishes from pre-existing genre material. Although *It Follows* explores anxieties surrounding female sexuality in particular in an undeniably sensitive fashion, it is also a savvy and occasionally pretentious assemblage of familiar elements precision-engineered for the festival circuit. As such, it is likely to frustrate those familiar with the horror genre as much as it impresses.

Bernice M. Murphy

***The Haunted Palace* (Dir. Roger Corman) US 1963**

Blu-ray release: Arrow Films 2015

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***The Complete Dr. Phibes — The Abominable Dr. Phibes* (Dir. Robert Fuest) UK 1971 /**

***Dr. Phibes Rises Again* (Dir. Robert Fuest) UK 1972**

Blu-ray release: Arrow Films 2014

From the late 1950s until the late 1970s, one actor reigned as American cinema's king of horror: Vincent Price. The careers of most of today's movie stars often seem to peak when they are still in their thirties, but Price was nearing fifty when he began appearing in the genre pictures which eventually made him a hero to millions. Although his rise to fame was slow, Price certainly made up for it in his later years. The sheer number and range of movies he made in the 1960s alone was astonishing. It is some of the classics from this period, including *House of Usher* (1960), *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1961), *The Masque of the Red Death* (1964), and *Witchfinder General* (1968), which assured him the lasting adoration of new generations of horror fans.

While it took years before his talents were recognised by Hollywood, Price's timing could not have proven better. When the kind of gothic-horror epics which had been out of

fashion for most of the 1950s were revived at the end of that decade, Price was ready to take all the juiciest parts. With his mellifluous voice, Mephistophelean looks, snide charm, and air of brooding and otherworldly menace, Price was a larger-than-life figure ideally equipped to bring a gallery of fantastic gothic characters to the screen.

Inevitably, some of Price's movies turned out better than others. Indeed, he would have been the first to admit that many were terrible. On the other hand, their fantastic production rate means that a number of superb films overlooked in their day now await rediscovery. Arrow Films have done much to encourage this, by releasing many of Price's movies in luxurious Blu-ray editions, with restored visuals and sound, and packed with intriguing extras. Recently, they have added two very different titles, one of which will be known to all Vincent Price fans and another with which even some of his most devoted admirers may be unfamiliar: *The Complete Dr. Phibes* (1971/72) and *The Haunted Palace* (1963).

To begin with the earlier film, *The Haunted Palace* has long been perceived as forming part of the 'Poe Cycle' directed by Roger Corman between 1960 and 1965, and based on the works of the grand master of American gothic literature. *The Haunted Palace* may take its title from Poe's 1839 poem but there its only legitimate connection with him ends. Instead, the movie's real distinction, and what shall make it especially interesting for modern horror enthusiasts, is that it is the very first screen version of a tale by H. P. Lovecraft. Roger Corman, wishing to move beyond Poe, convinced American International Pictures to back a film based on Lovecraft's 'The Case of Charles Dexter Ward'. They agreed, with the caveat that it should be marketed purely as a Poe movie, and that Lovecraft only be given a minor writing credit.

Price plays Charles Dexter Ward, who travels to the New-England village of Arkham with his bride Anne to claim an ancient mansion he has inherited. Arriving in the ruinous, fog-shrouded town, they quickly detect that all is not well in Arkham. The locals demand that they leave, frightful mutants wander the streets, and an atmosphere of dread hangs over the place. Captivated by an uncanny portrait of his great-great-grandfather Joseph Curwen, Ward discovers that his ancestor was burned for witchcraft a century before, but not before cursing the town. Falling under Curwen's malignant influence, Ward resumes the sorcerer's diabolical experiments in inter-dimensional cross-breeding.

Frequently dismissed as one of Corman's lesser films, *The Haunted Palace* is actually one of his best. The screenplay, by the noted author Charles Beaumont (who wrote many classic *Twilight Zone* episodes, as well as scripting *Night of the Eagle* (1962) and *The*

Masque of the Red Death (1963)), is a cunning adaptation of Lovecraft's original and solves many of the structural problems which left Lovecraft himself dissatisfied with the story. *The Haunted Palace* also displays Corman's artful ability to make movies for a few hundred thousand dollars which looked like they cost several million. Daniel Haller's inventive sets and Floyd Crosby's stunning cinematography make this one of the era's most stylish horror films, something which can now be fully appreciated thanks to Arrow's beautiful restoration work. The only disappointment remains the climactic manifestation of Cthulhu, clearly a shoddily made glove puppet.

This weak point notwithstanding, *The Haunted Palace* allows Price to demonstrate his range as both the benevolent Ward and the evil Curwen. He is ably supported by the impressive Debra Paget, the perpetually creepy Elisha Cook Jr, and Lon Chaney Jr, giving his final film performance. Unlike the eerie earlier entries in the 'Poe Cycle', *The Haunted Palace* is also genuinely frightening thanks to Corman's tense direction. Easily the most memorable moment is the nightmarish scene in which Ward and Anne are slowly but inexorably surrounded by a band of ghastly mutations. If the film alone were not enough, this exemplary release also contains a treasure trove of commentaries, an interview with Corman, Kim Newman on Lovecraftian cinema, and specially commissioned artwork.

Arrow's other Price-related releases, *The Abominable Dr. Phibes* and *Dr. Phibes Rises Again*, remain arguably the actor's finest cinematic foray. Made back to back in 1971/72, they are not just a synthesis of every horror movie Price had made up until then; they are two of the genre's true classics. Masterminded by a completely original cinematic talent, director Robert Fuest, and written by James Whiton and William Goldstein, *Dr. Phibes* sees the titular deranged scientific genius, concert organist, and Biblical scholar seek revenge on the medical team who failed to save his beloved wife Victoria after the car crash which also left him hideously disfigured. Phibes turns to the Old Testament, devising horrible deaths based upon the Ten Plagues visited upon Egypt. Before long, pillars of the British medical establishment are rapidly being eliminated in fantastically gruesome ways, much to the bewilderment of Scotland Yard.

The brilliance of *Dr. Phibes* lies in its extraordinarily vibrant execution. Not one shot lacks imaginative flair, and its art direction, cinematography, and set designs give it a dazzling, 'Art Deco meets Glam Rock' look. Price is at his maniacal best here, hammering out Mendelsohn on his futuristic pipe organ while gleefully plotting the destruction of his latest victim with his glamorous silent assistant Vulnavia (Virginia North). Since Phibes has a rubber mask for a face and can only speak when plugged into a gramophone, it's to Price's

enormous credit that he still manages to give a performance which is both exceptionally sinister and also strangely poignant. In addition, Fuest populates his world with a marvellous collection of oddballs, played by the likes of Hugh Griffith, Terry-Thomas, and John Laurie.

Almost as visually rich, *Dr. Phibes Rises Again* is the weaker film thanks to its rushed pacing, confused ending, and the comparatively uninspired methods by which Phibes dispatches his enemies. This time, the reanimated lunatic heads to the Valley of the Kings to harness the River of Life and restore Victoria, only a step behind his ruthless nemesis Darius Biederbeck (Robert Quarry), who is bent on winning immortality too. While the *Phibes* films have never lacked admirers, occasionally they have been accused of being hollow pieces whose only real pleasure consists in watching people die in a variety of unusually nasty ways. What prevents this is their astonishingly lively, albeit jet-black, sense of humour and their inventive subversion of archetypal horror film formulas. It's also important to remember that, along with 1973's *Theatre of Blood*, the *Phibes* movies represent the very last of the original Golden Age of horror cinema, before a very different new breed of film came to dominate the genre.

Although both films have long been available on DVD, Arrow's *The Complete Dr. Phibes* is the first opportunity most horror aficionados have had to see Fuest's unique vision as it was first presented in cinemas. Apart from the gloriously restored prints of the films themselves, this set includes an exhaustive array of extras which should be enough to satisfy even the most fanatical *Phibes* obsessive, including commentaries by the late director himself and screenwriter William Goldstein, a documentary on Price, The League of Gentlemen discussing their enthusiasm for the good doctor, and a 100-page booklet. This is an absolutely outstanding release, and (as with *The Haunted Palace*) it is one which befits these superior horror films.

Edward O'Hare

***Tusk* (Dir. Kevin Smith) USA 2014**
Demarest Films
(This review contains spoilers)

Horror has long been known for exploiting the rich potential of the animal kingdom to frighten audiences. This dynamic is most prominently seen in the 'creature feature', which exaggerates the truly monstrous qualities of fierce wildlife to evoke dread. From the

predatory stealth of the great white shark in *Jaws* (1975), to the diminutive but no less deadly spider in *Arachnophobia* (1990), the creature feature has in fact undergone a revival in popularity as of late, particularly following the release of outlandish TV movie *Sharknado* (2013). However, animal-themed subject matter has also regularly been explored in the sub-type of ‘body horror’, during which a beast colonises a person’s body, a category perhaps best exemplified by *An American Werewolf in London* (1981). As with the creature feature, filmmakers have also drawn upon what are perceived to be less obviously dangerous fauna and so infuse comedy, in an attempt to breathe new life and originality back into animal-centric body horror. For instance, latter years have seen the turn of the unassuming sheep in 2006’s *Black Sheep* and even the humble beaver in *Zombeavers* (2014).

Not only have animals acted as a source of fear by inhabiting human bodies through various curses and infectious mutations, they have also found themselves to be either directly or indirectly involved in scientific experiments which fabricate human/animal hybrids, from the botched teleportation test of *The Fly* (1986), to investigators dabbling in ethically questionable genetic research in *Splice* (2009). It is from this tradition that Kevin Smith’s *Tusk* (2014) emerges, and is set to tarnish irreversibly the image of the decidedly innocuous walrus. While some of Smith’s previous contributions undoubtedly contain sinister undertones, such as 2011’s *Red State*, *Tusk* represents his first legitimate foray into horror, and is the primary offering in the upcoming Canadian-centred ‘True North’ trilogy. *Tusk* melds aspects of the forced captivity familiar from torture porn with the kinds of bizarre interspecies fusions engineered in *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1977) and *The Human Centipede* series (2009–2015), all the while securely anchored in Smith’s cult-film and indie sensibilities.

Tusk follows podcaster Wallace Bryton (played by the criminally underrated Justin Long), who, along with his friend Teddy (Haley Joel Osment), hosts an online comedic radio show dubbed ‘The Not-See Party’, which celebrates the lives of weird and wonderful individuals. The film opens with the pair mocking the star of an internet video — The Kill Bill Kid — who has cut off his own leg with a sword while emulating moves from Quentin Tarantino’s seminal movie. Despite objections from his girlfriend Ally (Genesis Rodriguez), Wallace travels to Canada to interview the viral sensation, only to find he has since taken his own life. Still pursuing a story for the broadcast, Bryton stumbles across a handwritten ad left by an elderly gent who seeks the company of someone with whom he can share his life’s adventures. Wallace responds to the message, and arranges to meet its author, a wheelchair-bound man named Howard Howe (Michael Parks), who lives alone in his elegant home,

surrounded by precious curios and mementos from his travels. As the pair become acquainted over tea, Howe describes an incident in which he was shipwrecked at sea, only to wash up on an island on the brink of death. It was here, he claims, that he found protection and salvation in the company of a walrus whom he christens ‘Mr Tusk’, and with whom he forged a deep and meaningful bond. As Howe recounts his tale, Bryton becomes increasingly drowsy and eventually collapses to the floor unconscious.

The next day, Wallace awakens to find himself confined to a wheelchair, at which time Howe persuades him that he had fallen unconscious due to a spider bite, and, as a result, a local doctor had to amputate his leg to save his life. Wallace’s immediate shock is palpable, while Howe constantly maintains a measured, albeit deceitful facade. It is later that evening over supper that Howe outlines his scheme to transform his detainee into a walrus, using a lifelike walrus suit he has fashioned, in addition to which he insists that his victim behaves like the creature; at this point the striking similarity of Wallace’s name to ‘walrus’ takes on extra significance. When questioned as to his motivation for his actions, Howe’s veil of sanity slips as he reveals an alarming loss of touch with reality, proclaiming his ambition ‘to solve a riddle older than the sphinx. To answer the question which has plagued us since we crawled from the surf and stood erect in the sun. Is man, indeed, a walrus at heart?’ Meanwhile, having been alerted to his capture, the film also tracks Teddy and Ally’s efforts to retrace Wallace’s movements in order to rescue him.

Tusk’s opening act is especially solid, specifically the initial encounter between Wallace and Howe, which plays to Smith’s aptitude for dialogue-driven scripts, as their exchanges are engaging and witty without feeling contrived, allowing the banter to flow freely back and forth. The instances of extended conversation facilitate character development naturally, without depending upon awkward exposition; indeed, the tension generated following the revelation of the plan echoes that found in the imprisonment of Paul Sheldon by Annie Wilkes in *Misery* (1990). But it is Howe’s incentive for the conversion that is remarkably unique for the body-horror genre. It transpires that Howe was obliged to kill and eat Mr Tusk to survive, and has since murdered as many as twenty-three people. Thus, he now seeks to resolve an internal conflict which requires an unwilling participant to assume the walrus identity and re-enact the scene of this butchering — but now in the form of a duel in which Howe must die. Accordingly, he aims to conduct and direct his own death in a performance that will free him from his compulsion to overcome the guilt he suffers for slaughtering Mr Tusk; in other words a *passage à l’acte* that will at last permit him to exit the stage forever.

The talent of both lead actors in *Tusk* functions to lend gravitas to what is admittedly an otherwise ludicrous plot. Parks excels in preserving the controlled intensity of the distinguished old seafarer, and his account of his ordeal is reminiscent of Quint's monologue regarding the ill-fated *USS Indianapolis* from *Jaws*, confirming the film's positioning of the sea as a haunting backdrop, ripe with material for horror. Likewise, Long's acting prowess is only further demonstrated by taking his character's unsettling and uncanny predicament and imbuing Wallace's abject dread with a dimension of authenticity and humanity, in a portrayal that harkens back to what is arguably the most tragic of human-to-animal transformations, Jeff Goldblum's Brundlefly in *The Fly* (1986). In conjunction with his earlier work in the *Jeepers Creepers* franchise (2001, 2003), and 2009's *Drag Me to Hell*, Long's turn in *Tusk* will continue to cement his reputation as one of his generation's most consistent scream kings. However, the unexpected, and uncredited appearance by Johnny Depp as former homicide detective Guy Lapointe is a casting choice that will either come as a pleasant surprise partly due to its absence from the film's marketing, or succeed in inducing groans, a response which will likely depend upon whether or not the viewer has grown weary of the oversaturation of Depp's quirky, eccentric shtick in recent years. While this may not be his most peculiar role, Lapointe is certainly one of Depp's more tolerable oddballs and in fact delivers moments of genuine levity despite residing safely within the actor's comfort zone of mad hatters.

At first, the premise of *Tusk* might seem so ridiculous and self-assured (typified by the inclusion of Depp's character) that the film might be accused of exuding an air of smugness; ultimately, though, this is not the case. While the bulk of the jesting involves a playful teasing of Canadian cultural stereotypes by the American characters, it is this subtle use of humour which allows Smith to keep his tongue firmly in his cheek, granting respite from the disturbing walrus transformation, and providing stark contrast when juxtaposed against these overtly horrific scenes, thereby keeping the film moving at a steady pace. Yet, the principle reason I recommend *Tusk* is that it reinvigorates the effective power of storytelling as a narrative device, prioritising this over predictable plot points and cheap jump scares so often resorted to in modern horror.

Most surprisingly, the film operates as a compelling character study, as the real terror of *Tusk* lies not just in Wallace's plight, but rather in how the walrus stands as a cipher for greater traumas experienced by Howe, a man persecuted by the spectre of the neglect and institutional abuse he alleges to have endured throughout his formative years. It is only in his complete isolation at sea, whereupon he adopts Mr Tusk as a type of surrogate attachment

figure, that Howe welcomes a modicum of reprieve from his life's hardship, all of which serves to portray him as an intriguing, sympathetic, but ultimately troubled soul.

Gavin Wilkinson

TELEVISION REVIEWS

Wayward Pines (Fox, 2015)
(This review contains spoilers)

Several factors influenced my decision to start watching Fox's *Wayward Pines*, not least the fact that it came recommended as a mix of two ground-breaking cult television series, Patrick McGoochan's *The Prisoner* (1967–68) and David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (1990–91). Moreover, M. Night Shyamalan's involvement as series producer and director of the opening episode suggested the show was likely to offer an eye-opening experience and an entertaining ride, even if the quality of this experience was far from certain. The most compelling motivation, though, was the discovery that the show was based on a series of novels — Blake Crouch's *Wayward Pines Trilogy* (2012–14) — and as a result would be a self-contained, ten-part series.

It's certainly tempting for any television mystery series to hold off on a conclusion for as long as possible. Here *Lost* (2004–10) and even *Twin Peaks* spring to mind as series that started off with strong premises but forgot that suspense requires a proportional payoff. Thankfully, due to its limited running time, *Wayward Pines* did not have the opportunity to go similarly astray and manages to deliver a flawed but entertaining thriller.

The action begins with our protagonist, Special Agent Ethan Burke (battle-hardened Matt Dillon) coming to terms with his surroundings, and opens with a close-up shot of Ethan's eye as he regains consciousness on a forest floor. We soon learn that Ethan and his partner were involved in a serious car crash while investigating the case of two missing colleagues, but neither partner nor car — nor, indeed, any signs of civilisation — are to be found. Trekking through the surrounding forest, Ethan discovers a quaint mountain-side town by the name of Wayward Pines. The town's innocent façade soon begins to crumble, however, when several unsettling elements become apparent: none of the phones have