

FILM REVIEWS

Melancholia (Dir. Lars von Trier) Denmark/Sweden/France/Germany 2011
Zentropa Entertainments

To describe *Melancholia* as a film about the relationship between two sisters, at a wedding where things go disastrously but hilariously wrong, is to make it sound like a chick flick. To describe it as a film about the end of the world is to make it sound like a disaster movie. To describe it as a film about depression might just make it sound like a film nobody would want to watch. Happily, it is none of these films: it is a bizarre, glorious combination of all three.

The film is divided into two parts. The first focuses on a young bride, Justine (Kirsten Dunst), who is suffering a relapse of depression on her wedding day. Her inability to enter fully into the rituals of the day (guessing how many beans are in the jar, cutting the cake, the first dance) highlights the unreal nature of the wedding, while jarring discrepancies remind viewers that we are watching a film (Justine, her sister and both her parents all have different accents – the actors' own). The outrage expressed by the wedding planner (cult horror actor Udo Kier, in a star turn) at Justine's refusal to stay put and stick to the schedule provides some of the funniest moments in a film full of deliciously black humour: "She ruin my wedding – I will not look at her!" Von Trier has suggested that the wedding is a ritual into which Justine forces herself, only to find it to be empty; certainly, the confusion of the wedding planner and the guests at this wedding-without-a-bride, and the incongruity of Justine's exploits as the bride-without-a-wedding (urinating on the golf course, taking a bath while still wearing her veil) do point to a degree of artificiality around the event. The dissonance and futility of this most human of ceremonies is played out against the backdrop of an impending event which threatens to make everything meaningless: a giant planet named Melancholia is on a collision course with Earth.

The second half of the film takes place some time later, on the same estate, which is owned by Justine's sister Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg, also seen in von Trier's 2009 film, *Antichrist*) and her husband John (Kiefer Sutherland). Justine arrives by taxi from elsewhere, and John and the butler travel in and out of town, but it gradually becomes clear that the women are, for some reason, trapped on this estate. Justine's horse refuses to cross a bridge, and later, when Claire tries to drive away,

her car will not start and her golf cart stalls. They are effectively imprisoned in the large, gloomy house, with its gardens full of eerie topiary. So, rather than showing us a city full of people reacting to the threat of the approaching planet, as in some of the big-budget disaster movies of the last few years, von Trier limits the action to an isolated country estate, and the relationship between the two sisters becomes the emotional focus of the film. For them, the estate is the world, and as *Melancholia* approaches, there is no escape.

At this point, Justine's perfect husband (played by Alexander Skarsgård, notable as one of the sexy vampires in HBO's *True Blood* [2008-present]) and perfect job are both gone, and all the fight has gone out of her. Claire's attempts to make Justine feel better fall flat: she runs a bath into which Justine is physically unable to lift herself; a favourite home-cooked meal turns to ashes in her mouth. The viewer simultaneously feels Justine's despair and Claire's enormous frustration. At one point, Claire tells Justine that she sometimes really hates her: a moment which speaks volumes about the limits to which the disease of depression can push those fated to observe but not experience it.

Various motives are suggested for Justine's outrageous behaviour (the most excessive instance of which is perhaps her sexual intercourse with another man on her wedding day): is she behaving this way because of her depression? Does her depression stem from her relationship with her parents (darkly comic monsters played by John Hurt and Charlotte Rampling)? Or is she more sensitive than others to the influence of the approaching *Melancholia*? The film has touches of realism which anyone with a loved one who suffers from depression will recognise: the smile that fails to reach Justine's dead eyes; her exhaustion. Both von Trier and Dunst have suffered from depression, and have spoken about bringing their real-life experiences to the film. For all that, however, depression, or melancholia, remains a mystical condition in this film: the dialogue between Justine and her mother on their shared gift of premonition suggests well-worn clichés of madness as a form of insight, of the mad being somehow saner than the sane. As the planet gets closer, it is Claire and John who crumble, and Justine who takes charge. Allusions to artistic works throughout the film remind us of the creativity possible at the juncture of desire, madness, and death: the striking image of Justine in her wedding dress floating in water is reminiscent both of Millais's *Ophelia* and of the work behind that, *Hamlet*.

Soaring above it all are the longing strains of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*: here too are layers of meaning. Wagner's work remains controversial – is it acceptable art or Nazi art? – while von Trier was declared *persona non grata* at the 2011 Cannes film festival after an apparently pro-Nazi outburst. The infamous Tristan chord, which appears at the beginning of Wagner's opera, sets up a desire for a consummation which will only be satisfied at its end. *Melancholia*'s opening montage shows the meeting of Earth and Melancholia, and the recurrence of the Tristan chord at various points throughout the film ratchets up the tension as we wait for this consummation. The other long-awaited meeting is the one between Justine and oblivion: like Melancholia, hurled toward Earth by the death of its star, Justine has lost an anchor of meaning and worth in this world, and for her its end can only be a good thing.

Whether you are drawn in by the story and the sisters, or irritated beyond measure by them, the film leads you to its only possible conclusion: to the desire for it to be over. The ending, when it comes, is something of an anticlimax. We have been worked up to wish for the end of the world, and all that happens is the end of a film. We stumble out of the cinema into the sunshine, take a deep breath, and try to decide whether or not to be glad that we are still here.

The author would like to thank Jennifer Six for allowing her to read her unpublished dissertation “‘Enjoy it While it Lasts’: A Cognitive Approach to Cinematic Hybridity, Emotion and Mainstream/Art Cinema” (2012).

Ruth Doherty

***The Raven* (Dir. James McTeigue) USA 2012,**
FilmNation Entertainment/Intrepid Pictures

Edgar Allan Poe's life and legacy have inspired a myriad of works, including Louis Bayard's novel *The Pale Blue Eye* (2006) and DC Comics' *Batman: Nevermore* (2003). As early as 1915, filmmakers were integrating Poe as a character into their projects. These and other fictionalised accounts of Poe's life often mix reality with characters from his stories and the author's presumed detective skills. The 2012 film *The Raven* follows this tradition neatly. The famous “lost days” just before Poe's death are shrouded in mystery, thereby providing the perfect backdrop for this type of story. There are many gaps in the history of Poe's demise, which allows *The Raven* to

delve into a modern Gothic version of what could have happened, although many details do deviate from known reality.

The movie tells how Poe, played by John Cusack, is roped into helping a local police officer, Detective Fields (Luke Evans), unravel the mystery of a series of murders that appear to be inspired by the writer's grisliest stories. Soon he becomes personally involved, when the murderer kidnaps Poe's young love, Emily Hamilton (Alice Eve), with the promise that she will die if they do not find the perpetrator in time. The killer leaves behind clues related to the girl and to Poe's writing that should eventually lead them to him.

Naturally, it helps to be familiar with Poe's stories in order to appreciate this film fully. Having read most of his stories already, I recognised the scene from "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" before anybody in the movie made a connection: two women brutally killed inside a room with a locked door and a sealed window, one body stuffed up the chimney with amazing force. Only gradually does Fields perceive the parallels between this first crime and Poe's writing. The viewer's ability to pinpoint references gives a little thrill each time another detail is spotted. "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Masque of the Red Death" also make appearances; conversely, Poe's raving in the pub about his recently published poem "The Raven" seems a little forced, not to mention irrelevant to the rest of the film. Its only merit is that it may work to establish character for those unfamiliar with Poe's purported reputation as a troublemaker. Overall, the title's relationship to the plot is unclear, but perhaps the intention was simply to entice the audience with a reference to Poe's most famous piece.

In this film, we find many Gothic tropes, but often with a modern twist. There is a clear focus on death with an underlying question of what is and is not real, all immersed in a thoroughly constructed dramatic atmosphere. However, in this filmic adaptation, the traditional "virginal maid" is less of an "innocent", as the character Emily is clearly involved in a sexual liaison with the writer. On the other hand, she does not seem to stray too far from Gothic norms. She is in many ways the "damsel in distress" who needs her hero (Poe) to rescue her in the end. She is also the daughter of Captain Hamilton (Brendan Gleeson), a member of the upper classes – a familial relationship which holds true to the Gothic mode. That being said, the Gothic often incorporates elements of secrecy with regards to parentage, but here there are no

lingering secrets about Emily's family. Instead, scriptwriters Ben Livingston and Hannah Shakespeare use secrecy in a different way, having Emily and Poe hide their relationship from her parents. As a whole, the film lacks the supernatural element which would be expected of Poe's tales, and instead, the creators decided to implement a more restricted imagined universe, abundant in mysteries which are ultimately resolved at the end, detective-style.

Clearly, Emily's character represents the real-life Sarah Elmira Royster, a young woman who was taken away from Poe by her father to marry another man. Years later, following the death of her father, their renewed relationship led Poe to ask for her hand in marriage on several occasions. She refused every time. In the movie, though, it is Emily who pushes a grudging Poe to propose to her, a twist used to enhance the effect of his loss and guilt when she is kidnapped by the criminal.

As the story unfolds, Poe willingly takes on the role of hero, even though it seems contrary to his troublemaking nature. Scott Peeples, English professor at Charleston College, has discussed Poe's heightened sense of self-importance, as well as his propensity for consuming too much alcohol ("Edgar Allan Poe Expert Comments on *The Raven*", <http://news.cofc.edu/2012/04/27/edgar-allan-poe-expert-comments-on-the-raven>). However, the film portrays Poe as more confident than he allegedly was, according to Peeples. Toward the end, the writer puts himself at risk and goes as far as to drink poison to ensure Emily's safety, knowingly causing his own death to save his love.

The story deviates most obviously from reality toward the end. There is a lack of legitimate information as to what Poe did in the last few days of his life, but some of the circumstances under which he was at last found and his behaviour before dying have been documented, albeit unreliably. Given the right to do so, the movie takes some liberties with this information in the name of dramatic effect and viewers get the full benefit of this deft combination of realistic possibility and absolute invention.

On 3 October 1849, Poe was found in Baltimore in a state of "great distress", according to Joseph W. Walker, the man who found him. Poe allegedly repeated the name "Reynolds" during his last night alive, a notion taken up to great effect in the final moments of the movie (here lies another point of contention for those familiar with the true story, for it actually took him four days to expire after he was picked up). Speculation has trampled all over any possible truth-finding efforts in regard to

the cause of Poe's death or who Reynolds really was, which once again enables the filmmakers to use their own imaginations to wrap up their tale. In *The Raven's* version of Poe's demise, the hero raises his face to the sky and murmurs, "Lord help my poor soul". Although real-life accounts vary on this point, Dr. John Joseph Moran did initially report this sentence as Poe's last words. Whether true or not, Cusack brings a dark emotionality to the scene and the words offer a sense of redemption for a troubled, unsettled life. By giving up his life for Emily, Poe gives viewers a chance to forgive his history of drinking and fighting, as shown early on in the movie.

With its Gothic subversion of widely accepted fact, *The Raven* is compelling, as it fires the imagination for those familiar with Poe's mysterious death. Cinematographic choices like dark lighting portray the gritty underbelly of Baltimore, sweeping us along from the newspaper office where Poe's work was published, to the tunnels under the city and back again. It is a worthwhile thriller in its own right, whether or not the viewer is a fan of Poe's work or historical fiction. What the movie lacks in accuracy, it makes up for in emotionality. It is a "What if?" exploration of Poe's lost days that upholds and also plays with standard Gothic tropes and the tradition of incorporating Poe's written material into his own life.

Marek Lewandowski

***The World's End* (Dir. Edgar Wright) UK 2013**
Universal Pictures

Several issues ago, I started putting together the idea for a review (never finished) of the Gothic and horror-inflected collaborations of Edgar Wright (as director and co-writer) and Simon Pegg (as co-writer and star), to mark the release of *Hot Fuzz*, the second instalment of what's variously termed the "Three Flavours Cornetto" or the "Blood and Ice Cream" Trilogy. That trilogy has now been completed with the release of *The World's End*, in which Wright, Pegg and many of their usual cohorts (in particular, Nick Frost) pay homage this time to the science-fiction genre. Yet it's another hybrid tale, which draws on a classic Gothic/horror sci-fi trope – body-snatching and mind control. In *The World's End* a group of friends reunite and try to complete the pub crawl they first attempted as teenagers twenty years before, the culmination of which is the apocalyptic-sounding "World's End" pub, only to

discover that their home town has been overtaken by alien-controlled robots. Like the teenage versions of the protagonists who never made it all the way to the “World’s End”, then, I may never have completed the original review, but like the grown-up versions of those protagonists, it’s time – at last – to finish what I started.

From their first collaborations for television on *Asylum* (1997) and *Spaced* (1999-2001) to their now-complete cinematic trilogy (*Shaun of the Dead* (2004), *Hot Fuzz* (2007) and this year’s *The World’s End*), Wright and Penn – along with a stable of regular co-stars – have gleefully pastiched and paid affectionate homage to a range of genres (also appearing in cameo roles in George A. Romero’s *Land of the Dead* in 2005). The rom-zom-com of *Shaun of the Dead* may have been their most direct foray into the horror world, but across their body of work as a whole, Gothic/horror themes and tropes abound, beginning with the surreal Gothic setting of the show on which they first worked together. Directed and written by Wright but co-written by David Walliams, and first screened on Paramount Comedy Channel in 1997, *Asylum* was loosely centred on the false imprisonment of a hapless pizza delivery boy (Pegg) in the titular institution, which is run by authorities whose own sanity is constantly in question; his fellow inhabitants included future *Mighty Boosh* player Julien Barrett and Jessica Hynes *née* Stevenson. Next up was the stand-up/sketch show *Is it Bill Bailey* (1998), with Wright again on directorial duties and Pegg as one of the featured actors, but things really took off with *Spaced*, with Pegg and Hynes as co-writers and co-stars. Over the course of its two series, *Spaced* openly referenced Gothic/horror texts throughout – most obviously in the sequence in which a strung-out and hallucinating Tim (Pegg) envisions himself fighting zombie hordes while playing *Resident Evil* (a sequence which famously provided the impetus for *Shaun* in the first place).

But there were other nods – in the establishing shot of the house in which much of the show takes place (which clearly recalled the Bates Motel in Hitchcock’s *Psycho* [1960]); in the repressed memories and flashbacks that haunt several of the main characters; and in sight gags and parodies galore, which included references to *The Shining* (1980), *The Omen* (1976), *The Sixth Sense* (1999), and both *Evil Dead* (1981) and *Evil Dead II* (1987). And *Hot Fuzz*, in which uptight policeman Nicholas Angel (Pegg) is sent to the sleepy rural location of Sandford where he uncovers the dark secrets that lurk beneath the idyllic “Village of the Year”, may have presented

itself as a paean to action cinema, but it owed as much to *The Wicker Man* (1973) as it did to *Bad Boys II* (2003). It also boasted a slasher-subplot that at times referenced famous horror-movie deaths (in particular in one churchyard death that clearly recalled *The Omen*). These links seemed to be further underlined by the fact that horror icons such as Edward Woodward and Billie Whitelaw were cast in supporting roles. Unsurprisingly, then, *The World's End* turns its comedic eye to another hybrid form with Gothic/horror undertones – a dystopian science-fiction tale about conformity and apocalypse on both a personal and global scale.

As *The World's End* opens, Gary King (Pegg) sits in a group therapy session, reminiscing about the failed attempt to complete the pub-crawl known as the “Golden Mile” that he and his teenage friends made on the night that they finished school. Soon, he sets about getting the gang back together – Oliver (Martin Freeman), Peter (Eddie Marsden), Steven (Paddy Considine) and Andrew (Nick Frost). All have now grown up and grown apart from Gary’s man-child, having tired of his ways and irresponsibility years before (in particular Frost’s character), but reluctantly make their way back to Newton Haven for the ill-fated reunion. Along the way, they also bump into Oliver’s sister Sam (Rosamund Pike), the object of both Gary’s and Steven’s teenage (and continued) lust. The early scenes of this awkward reunion establish the radically altered nature of the friendships involved, and the various attitudes that each man has developed in the process of growing older – Gary seeing his friends settling into mundane middle-aged, middle-England lives, them seeing him as deluded in his refusal to do so. The town, too, has changed, its collection of generic pubs and public spaces anticipating the broader and more overtly sinister type of conformity to which its inhabitants have succumbed, at the hands of the alien force that now controls the town – and which Gary King and co must attempt to evade.

In depicting Newton Haven as a homogenised space, *The World's End* echoes themes that recur also within *Shaun of the Dead* and *Hot Fuzz*. In the former, a zombie outbreak initially goes unnoticed because the zombies don’t actually look or act all that differently from a “normal” population so subdued and deadened by the routines of modern life that they fail to notice what’s going on around them (and by the end of the film, the survivors will have settled back down into a modified version of this pre-zombie “normal” life). *Hot Fuzz* boasts a (both literal and figurative) Model Village, and a Neighbourhood Watch Alliance that goes to murderous lengths

to maintain Sandford's "Village of the Year" status – cleansing the streets of jugglers, living statues, hoodies and anyone else who fails to conform (or who stumbles upon their plot) "for the greater good". In different ways, too, the earlier films engage with ideas about growing up, and settling down, most clearly in the case in *Shaun of the Dead*. Whereas Shaun starts the film faced with choosing between a life with his slacker best friend Ed (Frost) or his girlfriend Liz (Kate Ashfield), who wants him to wise up and commit to her, in the end he's allowed both (keeping the now-zombie Ed chained up in the garden shed, permanently on-call to play computer games). In *The World's End*, we seem to encounter older, more extreme versions of these characters, but with the situations apparently reversed – Frost as the "sensible" one who has accepted responsibility and Pegg as the ne'er-do-well, a man so hell-bent on getting his old friends to go along with his plans that he dupes them into believing that he's just lost his mother to cancer, and thus merits their sympathy and support.

Gary's insistence on completing the "Golden Mile" drives the narrative – but it turns out that it is a different kind of failed attempt entirely that has compelled him to do so (remember the film opens with Gary in therapy). By reassembling his old friends and attempting to complete what he sees as unfinished business, he is not just attempting to recapture past glories – he is also attempting to establish some kind of purpose in his life. The scene in which this becomes apparent – and in which Andrew and Gary both realise the secrets that each has been concealing from the other – gives rise to one of those genuinely affecting moments that this collection of films (and *Spaced* too) have always done so well, amidst all the pastiche, homage and frenetic camera-work. It still brings a tear to my eye when Mike (Frost) sacrifices himself in a game of 'Nam-inspired paintball and "dies" in *Spaced*; or when Shaun and his stepdad Philip (Bill Nighy) share a brief moment of connection before the latter succumbs to a zombie bite. And don't get me started on what happens with Shaun's mum Barbara, played by Penelope Wilton, or Shaun's plaintive "I don't know if I have it in me to shoot my mum, my flat-mate and my girlfriend all in the same evening".

Inevitably, the latest film will send fans back to the earlier texts, just as I've done here, to find the kinds of self-referential links and echoes across all three that might be expected – the running gag (amended on each occasion) in which Pegg jumps a backyard fence; the cameos from familiar faces; the reverence paid to the local pub as a site of security and camaraderie. There's always the danger that this

might turn into self-indulgence, but here it seems to serve a thematic purpose, and is in keeping with Gary's own insistence throughout on looking back. To some extent, the main character himself embodies the very idea of self-indulgence, because of his apparently relentless insistence on clinging to past glories and perceived refusal to grow up. But despite Gary's initial abrasiveness and bull-headed insistence on pursuing his quest, the film doesn't damn him, not least because it's his actions that manage to expose the extent of the conformity-horror that has taken hold. Nor, I think, does it join him in wallowing too much in an attempt to recapture past glories at the expense of moving on.

*****SPOILER BEGINS***** Crucially, when Gary is faced with the option of succumbing to the aliens' plans, and is actually given the chance to be remodelled as a robotic version of the youth that he has glorified all along, he ultimately declines. In doing so, he refuses to conform, but is also allowed to accept that he has grown older without having to follow the various routes his school-friends have taken. The film ultimately resolves itself (in a well-observed and brilliantly realised coda) by allowing each of its characters to revert to the paths they had chosen in life (albeit modified for a post-apocalyptic world), suggesting that each lifestyle choice is, in the end, valid, and each brings with it its own rewards and challenges. Admittedly, a couple of them have been turned into robots by the end, but they're still in a position to resume (and rebuild) the lives they had been living previously, reintegrating into a post-apocalyptic society in which the lines between the "blanks" (as they're called) and the norms is not actually all that clear-cut. Rather than seeing this as a scathing indictment of dull, conformist middle-aged life and an all-out endorsement of Gary King's ideals, though, it seems to me that it suggests something more balanced, and potentially more bittersweet. In their own ways, each – Gary included – has chosen to conform to a particular set of ideals on their way to adulthood and middle age; and each of them is tasked now with at least recognising (and possibly accepting) the ways in which old friends may choose a different way of going about their lives, whether that is as (relatively) contented father and family man; corporate high-roller; or aging Goth. Gary is allowed retain this identity, then, still defining himself in terms of his past, teenage self in the closing scenes, and reasserting his role as the leader of a new gang – the robot versions of his old school-friends that have survived the climactic apocalypse. But there are also indications that he's learned a thing or two.

Early in the film, for example, he had scorned Andrew's sobriety (telling him that King Arthur didn't order waters at Camelot after winning the Battle of Hastings), but by the end, Gary King can walk into a pub and order five glasses of water.

*****SPOILER ENDS*****

In clinging to the past, Gary has actually been struggling to maintain a sense of identity, and the film ultimately rewards him with one. In the end, it seems, there *is* only one Gary King, but he does prove capable of change. By sticking with him to the bitter (or lager) end, *The World's End* brings about a resolution that is both satisfying and cathartic. What's more, it even grants him a memorable and strangely appropriate romantic sign-off to Sam, with whom he once shared a passionate teenage clinch in a disabled toilet in one of the pubs on the "Golden Mile" – as he wistfully tells her, "We'll always have the disableds".

There *is* something of an elegiac tone to all of this at times – the sense of an ending – and whereas *Spaced*, *Shaun* and *Hot Fuzz* all ended with reunions, this one starts with a reunion and (without giving too much away) ends with the characters apart again. In this, it parallels the filmmakers' own recent career trajectories. *The World's End* reunites them at a point at which each has already completed several separate projects – Wright with *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* (2010) and the forthcoming *Ant-Man* (currently scheduled for release in 2015), Pegg as key player in two movie franchises (*Mission Impossible* and *Star Trek*), and as co-writer and co-star (with Frost) of *Paul* (2011). Gary's backward glance, then, is also the film's, and it seems significant that it begins in the same location as the first onscreen collaboration between Wright and Pegg (in an "asylum"), and ends with the characters poised to move on to new things.

But ultimately, *The World's End* is as much about beginnings as endings. The film may close, to some extent, at a new beginning, but it remains to be seen if it will give way to new collaborations between Wright, Penn and company. For now, though, happily, it's enough that they've brought this trilogy to a satisfying conclusion. And while it may be giving away too much to say that this is a film that briefly envisions a world without Cornettos – a horrifying prospect indeed – at least we'll always have the Cornetto trilogy.

Jenny McDonnell

***Snow White and the Huntsman* (Dir. Rupert Sanders) USA 2012**
Universal Pictures

We are, undoubtedly, in the midst of a fairy tale renaissance. We have been increasingly exposed to an array of texts that retell, reimagine, and revamp the fairy tale as we know it – with varying degrees of success. Within the last couple of years the likes of *Red Riding Hood* (2011), *Hansel and Gretel: Witch Hunters* (2013) and *Jack the Giant Slayer* (2013) have appeared in cinemas, while television shows such as *Grimm* (2011-present) and *Once Upon a Time* (2011-present) are both still running. Last year alone saw two blockbuster retellings of “Snow White”, with Tarsem Singh’s *Mirror Mirror* and Rupert Sanders’ *Snow White and the Huntsman*. The former was met with generally scathing reviews, and so a second attempt at reviving this played-out tale seemed, to some, superfluous. But this, I argue, is far from the case.

Snow White and the Huntsman offers a rather loose interpretation of the “original” story. In Grimm, Snow White is only seven years old, though she is strangely (and not to mention disturbingly) deemed fit to wed her prince come the end of the tale. By contrast, in Sanders’ retelling, Snow White is already an adult for the majority of the action. Such a change is accompanied, too, by more explicitly adult themes, resulting in a piece that is largely Gothic in tone. If several changes have been made to this tale, its core parts nonetheless remain the same. Again we find the magic mirror, the poisoned apple, the largely ineffectual men of the story, and at its centre what is, in essence, a bitter and highly sexualised rivalry between age and youth: between wicked stepmother and persecuted heroine.

This should have been a horror movie. At times, indeed, it comes tantalisingly close to being one, but is ultimately held back and confused by its more saccharine requisites. Firstly, Kristen Stewart is, perhaps unsurprisingly, a little lacklustre. With very few lines, she seems more of an *objet d’art* than anything else. Meanwhile, Chris Hemsworth (who some may know from 2012’s *The Cabin in the Woods*) makes for a bearable, if not entirely convincingly Scottish, huntsman. Here the huntsman is the love interest, along with William, Snow White’s childhood friend who seems to have been added solely for the purpose of recreating “that” love triangle (for which Stewart was famed in *Twilight* and its sequels [2008-2012]). The customary dwarves undoubtedly add a little charm to the film, though the casting of non-dwarf actors

(who had to be digitally reduced in size) caused considerable controversy among the Little People of America, with Warwick Davis weighing in with his opinion that the decision was “inexcusable”. The lead dwarf (interestingly named after forest theorist John Muir) is unfortunately plagued by lines that are almost physically painful – he is the blind dwarf who can “see” with his heart once Snow White arrives, because she is so pure, so beautiful, and she “will heal the land” because she “*is life itself*”.

It is in its Gothic aspects that the film finds its redemption. Visually, it is utterly stunning and its dark and fantastical imagery is hauntingly provocative. Indeed for me the highlight of this film lies in its depiction of the Dark Forest. Masterfully portrayed as a landscape of nightmares, the threatening environment of the fairy tale forest is not only recalled, but is quite literally brought to life. In a montage reminiscent of von Trier’s *Antichrist* (2009), the forest becomes hideously animated. The suggestive shadows give way to a plethora of monstrous possibilities as the trees themselves writhe, scratch, grab, and seem to bleed.

No less unnerving are the villains of the piece, who seem themselves almost extensions of this hellish landscape. Sanders presents us with a more intricate picture of the infamous and cruel stepmother – here named Ravenna – who in this story is accompanied by her eerie and lascivious brother Finn. Incestuous undertones are rife in this dark coupling, but his desires have strayed too, it seems, to the young Snow White. We learn that he has spent years watching her in the cell to which she was banished as a child, forbidden to enter by his jealous sister. Snow White escapes upon his first ingress, after fearfully whispering “you’ve never come in before”. As he sits threateningly at her side, the scene is uncomfortably suggestive of a perverted uncle visiting a child’s bed. Sam Spruell gives a truly creepy performance as this loathsome monster that pursues the girl through the woods. His death is a particularly satisfying moment as he is brutally impaled upon an uprooted tree, leaving his sister alone to complete her bloody task.

Ravenna, of course, must kill Snow White. Charlize Theron makes for a genuinely frightening villain. In place of the simple, unquestioned evil of the fairy tale, this wicked stepmother is one who has also suffered at the hands of wickedness. In an intriguing twist, her immortal and cursed fate is of her mother’s making: as a child she was force-fed blood for beauty, and so surely had little chance of benevolence. We learn first of her evil in a scene that parallels the opening of *Basic*

Instinct (1992). In bed with the king, she thrusts a sword through his chest, murdering him as she spits the words “men *use* women [...] when a woman stays young and beautiful forever, the world is hers”. And so her curse is that she must forever eat the hearts of women and drain their youth in order to preserve her own. The patriarchal mirror defines her self-worth as “the fairest of them all” – a position unthreatened until her stepdaughter comes of age. (One childish observation is that it is a *little* hard to swallow Stewart’s beauty as any real threat to Theron’s...) Interestingly, it is hinted that the man from the mirror may be a mere figment of her imagination – a literal reflection of her own misandric madness. This woman has issues indeed and seems near-crippled by them for much of the narrative. When she finally confronts Snow White in the forest (a delayed move that is hard to justify – why, we must ask, did she not do so before?), she appears as a man, as the young William, and kisses Snow White before offering her the poisoned apple. This, in turn, has its desired effect. Snow White is killed and Ravenna promises portentously to “give this world the queen that it deserves”. But we already know this story – and so we know that Snow White will reawaken and good will, of course, win out. Ravenna is killed and in death returns to her actual age: a shrivelled and pathetic old woman who spurs our involuntary sympathy. We are left desperately wanting to know more of her, but instead the focus predictably shifts to the “happily ever after”.

The ending is unsatisfying, but a seeming requisite. Indeed the film’s predominant fault is that it is constrained by its form as a retelling. Nonetheless, it is a brave and thought-provoking adaptation that begins to explore the nasty underbelly of our folklore; I can only hope that it provokes more dark and disturbing fairy stories to come.

Elizabeth Parker

Stoker (Dir. Park Chan-wook) UK/USA 2013
20th Century Fox

The opening shot of *Stoker* is a preview of its ending. The protagonist, India, strides into a patch of tall grass and wildflowers growing by the side of a road and pauses to reflect on her heritage: “Just as a flower does not choose its colour, we are not responsible for what we have come to be. Only once you realise this do you become

The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies 12 (Summer 2013)

free. And to become adult, is to become free". It is only when the scene is revisited at the film's close that we attain a full understanding of the monologue's significance: the red and white mottled flower she pauses to contemplate is dyed with arterial spray, and just off-screen a county sheriff stumbles away from her, spluttering, with a pair of pruning shears planted deep in his neck. This is a very different kind of coming-of-age story: not a young woman's entrance into the wider world through the navigation of its complex social codes, but an embracing of her outsider status and murderous capabilities.

The story follows the eponymous Stoker family in the aftermath of the mysterious death of their patriarch, Richard (Dermot Mulroney), a tragedy which mars the eighteenth birthday celebrations of his devoted daughter, India (Mia Wasikowska). India's icy relationship with her queenly, socialite mother, Evelyn (Nicole Kidman), is further strained by the sudden arrival of Richard's estranged brother, Charlie (Matthew Goode), who takes up residence in the family home and begins to exert a demonic and seductive influence over the two women of the house.

As a tense and noirish thriller, the film pays homage to the work of Alfred Hitchcock. This is especially apparent in its employment of ironic, loaded dialogue: "I want to know my brother's wife", says Charlie in an off-handed way that almost plays as innocent; "too tannic", he says of a young wine, giving sour-faced India a sidelong, speculative glance. "Not ready to be opened." The plot directly echoes Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) in its premise of an inter-generational struggle between a homicidal monster and a plucky ingénue, yet that which serves as a grand finale for Hitchcock is, as the scriptwriter Wentworth Miller states in an interview for Collider.com, merely "a jumping off point" for *Stoker*. India suspects Charlie from the start, yet her dogged avoidance of her uncle in the early part of the film becomes an erotically charged fascination, and her repulsion is revealed to be rooted in recognition rather than fear. "Have you ever seen a photograph of yourself, taken when you didn't know you were being photographed?" she asks her soon-to-be first victim, reflecting on her newfound transgressive daring. "From an angle you don't get to see when you look in the mirror – and you think, 'that's me; that's also me'".

In fact, both are monsters, and Charlie and India intuit in one another the same inherited characteristics that mark them out as different. Neither can bear to be touched (except, it seems, by one another); they both suffer from a synaesthetic

hypersensitivity which makes the exterior world's colours and sounds brash and unbearable; they exhibit a predator's capacity for patience, watchfulness, and sudden violence. They are also ingénues, both at times betraying their lack of worldly experience: India, with her pale, floating dresses and flat, tomboyish shoes (later to be exchanged for vampish Christian Louboutins), still wanders around the house and grounds as if it is a private childhood kingdom. Charlie, we come to understand, has not been travelling in Europe for the past eighteen year as he initially claims, but residing in a mental institution (for burying his baby brother alive in a sandpit). He has mastered culture by correspondence course rather than by experience, and thus his urbane persona is as false as his slightly-too-dark tan, his travel stories pat and implausible.

The Stoker name is an obvious hat-tip to the godfather of the vampire genre, and hints of the Victorian Gothic persist throughout. Charlie exhibits vestigial vampiric qualities: he cooks lavish meals which he does not himself eat and he enters the film as a pillar of shadow atop a grave. In a playfully metatextual scene, India taunts her merry widow mother with her stated intention to follow to the letter her encyclopaedia's entry on nineteenth-century mourning practices: "What are you going to do today?" "I thought I'd... draw the curtains... stop the clocks... cover the mirrors... and then retire to my room". As in popular readings of Victorian Gothic, sex and death are twinned. Yet here the conventions of text and subtext have been switched: where in a Gothic narrative (such as a vampire story), the act of killing is covertly sensualised, and seen as at least partly representative of sublimated sexual desire, for India Stoker it is the solicitation of sex that is the cover act; her shameful, true desire that of wreaking death. This revelation plays out in a scene where uncle and niece enact a homicidal *ménage-à-trois* with a would-be date rapist, in which India lies beneath their struggling victim in the missionary position, and the snap of his neck stands in for climax.

In the grand tradition of the genre's earliest works, such as Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1765), the central looming and sinister presence in the narrative is a building. The architecture of the Stoker house is not "Gothic" in architectural terms, but a hybrid of Victorian institutional tiling and sweeping art-deco curves, with a smattering of tastefully crafted tchotchkes from the later twentieth century. These disparate elements of interior design are united by the use of hyper-saturated colour –

entire rooms of regency green, soft-hued oriental bamboo or deep, blood red. Although the house is not closed-off or remote, its timelessness (or, perhaps, out-of-timeness) gives it a labyrinthine quality, implying that the central characters are somehow confined within it until the inevitable, bloody resolution which breaks its hold (at least on India). The Stoker house therefore fits John Clute's definition of a Gothic "edifice" in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (John Clute and John Grant (eds.), Orbit, 1997): "more than a house and less than a city [...]; it is coextensive with the mind of its builder or ruler [...]; it is alive; it occupies simultaneously the past, the present and the future".

Trapping the characters in such a claustrophobic environment allows for greater tension and increased audience focus on the performances of the three central cast members. Kidman (*Moulin Rouge*; *The Others* [both 2001]) is a perfect choice for the poised, beautiful-yet-brittle Evelyn. The preppy, clean-cut looks of Goode (*Watchmen* [2009]) are somehow sinister, evocative of a boy playing at adult charm and sexuality. Wasikowska (*Alice in Wonderland* [2010]; *Jane Eyre* [2011]) has a quirky, odd-angled beauty and impassive facial expressions which make her both captivating and believable in the role of nascent psychopath.

For horror aficionados, the biggest pull of *Stoker* is not its cast, but its distinction of being the English-language debut of South Korean director Park Chan-wook. Less shockingly gory than his self-written offerings such as the masterful revenge tragedy *Oldboy* (2003) and offbeat take on the vampire myth, *Thirst* (2009), *Stoker* nonetheless displays Park's highly stylised aesthetic, layered visual symbolism and dark, absurdist humour, as well as his preoccupation with the themes of sensuality, incest and revenge. Fans of Park's work will agree that none of his charm has been lost in translation.

Kate Roddy

***Excision* (Dir. Richard Bates Jr.) USA 2012**
BXR Productions

Excision, based on the 2008 short film of the same name, is a contemporary twist on the stereotypical teenage misfit movie, documenting the tumultuous life of the

protagonist Pauline (Annalyne McCord). *Excision* primarily scrutinises the twisted realms of macabre fantasy occurring in Pauline's fragile teenage mind. The film addresses many of the darker aspects of confused adolescence in an unforgivingly direct fashion and openly examines issues that are often considered taboo such as disturbed youth, sexual desire, disease and even menstruation. *Excision* further accentuates many of these issues through a fetishised depiction of the macabre, most pointedly within a series of dream sequences. In structural terms, the film uses distinctive fantasy and reality segments, which are thematically interconnected. We are provided with contextual elements stemming from Pauline's "real-world" living situation with her parents and her critically ill sister Grace (Ariel Winter), who suffers from cystic fibrosis. This is paralleled with the horrific fantasy segments, into which Pauline retreats in response to the events occurring in her woeful everyday life, and in which she encounters and confronts the same themes and difficulties that she faces on a day-to-day basis. The intricate balancing act between the various degrees of strife in Pauline's immediate existence and the horrific fantasies occurring in her mind, positions *Excision* as one of the most memorable horror films in recent times.

The film's overall effectiveness lies in this division into two distinct but related sections. It employs an idiosyncratic visual style to provide an immediate contrast between these fantasy and reality segments. We are initially introduced to Pauline's fantasy-ridden dream sequences, which punctuate the film and include its clearest forays into horror (although this line is gradually blurred towards the end of the film, as fantasy inevitably transitions into the real world). In these sequences, there is an undeniable cinematographic flair evident from the start, as the film visually evokes the strong use of colouration in the work of directors such as Oliver Stone (*Natural Born Killers* [1994]) and Dario Argento (*Suspria* [1977]). The immediate use of a surreal blue background in the film's opening segment, against which a bloody Pauline convulses, proves instantly striking. This soon gives way to a scene which offers a stark contrast, in the film's depiction of a typically suburban "reality". With it comes an introduction to the fraught relationship between Pauline and her mother (Traci Lords). This dynamic is subtly developed within this confined and conservative suburban setting. The often deadpan and black humour used in these scenes mocks the contradictions of the suburban world in which Pauline lives and knowingly subverts convention and societal norms. Lords, previously known for her

work in the adult-film industry, is cast as an overtly religious and etiquette-conscious mother, while John Waters (director of such notoriety as *Pink Flamingos* (1972) and *Cry Baby*, the 1990 film which saw Lords transition from adult film to mainstream cinema) plays the role of the local priest and Pauline's makeshift psychiatrist. The tongue-in-cheek mocking of religion in this fashion also serves as a device to bridge the gap between Pauline's horror-laden fantasies and the scenes of her domestic reality. Atheistic Pauline is also depicted in somewhat ironic real-world prayer sequences, which act as an open dialogue with, what is to her, a seemingly non-existent God. This in turn serves a dual purpose, providing insight into Pauline's future intentions (such as losing her virginity), as well as acting as a bridge between subsequent dream sequences, which visually narrate Pauline's aforesaid fantasies, of sex, and even abortion, after her pre-planned (real-world) intimate encounter with a classmate.

Excision's interweaving of macabre fantasy and harsh reality is especially commendable. It expertly weaves Cronenbergian surrealist horror with cutting black humour, yet doesn't allow this to distract from its central focus on the protagonist's compulsive behaviour and fixation. Fixation is indeed a highly prevalent theme within the movie. Pauline's bloodied imaginings are paralleled with her obsession with medicine, prompted by her sister Grace's fatal diagnosis with cystic fibrosis. The title of the film itself references the medical process which is literally defined as "the surgical removal of a foreign body or of tissue". The act of "excision" is also a recurring feature of the film, in both the fantasy and "real-life" sequences. It helps form a thematic connection between Pauline's surreal fantasies and her everyday life, as she tries to increase her prowess at medicine in a vain attempt to find a cure for her sister's condition.

Despite *Excision's* tendency to focus on the use of exaggeration, we are also left with welcome lulls in between the often grotesque events which occur onscreen. Pauline's understated interactions with her sister serve as a means of humanising her abrasive personality, illustrating that her deluded attempts to cure Grace's condition have their origins in her love for her sister. Several small scenes portray Grace's cystic fibrosis treatment, and the effects that the disease has upon her psyche, presenting her as a sympathetic character and leading the viewer to hope that she may avoid a fate which is cleverly implied throughout the course of the film. As Pauline's

situation gradually worsens, *Excision* constantly provides us with subtle clues in reference to this inevitable fate. The film's horrific finale functions to elicit an emotional response from the audience – employing shock tactics through the use of an extremely graphic and sudden resolution of Pauline's internal conflict about her sister's illness.

Overall, creating a successful piece of cinema that deals with the broad range of issues which may be attributed to the stereotype of the traumatised adolescent is a huge ask. However, writer and director Richard Bates Jr. has effectively realised and amalgamated these themes on all fronts, and moreover, has interweaved them with a stylistically modernised interpretation of its aforementioned predecessors of the same genre. *Excision* sometimes shocks, sometimes incites laughter, and most importantly, draws a powerful connection between the genre of horror and a convincing character study, resulting in a highly credible piece of cinema. In order to appreciate fully the film's shockingly abrupt ending, though, it may be necessary to experience the film for a second time – thankfully, it bears, and rewards, repeated viewings.

Oisín Vink

***Maniac* (Dir. Franck Khalfoun) USA/France 2012**
La Petite Reine/Studio 37

Maniac (2012) is both a remake of the 1980 feature directed by William Lustig and co-written by/starring Joe Spinell, and a reimagining of the contemporary POV horror genre. Ultimately, it is an utterly different cinematic experience to each. The grindhouse spirit of the original is updated in a disconcerting grunge aesthetic, and fused with a simple yet effective cinematic device: all of the onscreen events are presented through the eyes of the serial killer, Frank (Elijah Wood). We witness him scalp his victims before attaching their scalps to the mannequins in the store formerly owned by his dead mother (a drug-addicted prostitute). The audience is presented with no cheap camera tricks or cliché horror tropes, in comparison to other attempts at the Point of View genre in recent offerings such as *Paranormal Activity* (2007) and the anthology film *V/H/S* (2012). We are, however, subjected to a visceral series of unembellished murders, scalplings and assorted knife crimes, depicted through a stylishly realised first-person narrative which does not allow the viewer any respite

from the events onscreen. *Maniac* is most certainly a prime example of a successful remake, which stays true to its grindhouse roots, while redefining them; at the same time, it manages to inject modern artistic flare into the tired POV genre. These intelligent cinematographic devices, along with excellent casting, help make *Maniac* one of the most striking examples of horror cinema in recent years.

In writing about the film, though, it is difficult to convey the ways in which its visual inventiveness helps distinguish it from typical slasher affairs. The film conveys atmospheric nuances through its fantastically implemented visuals and a hauntingly effective electronic soundtrack. In the opening sequence, the audio immediately sets the late 1970s/1980s horror vibe, with the use of what sounds like a vintage and electronic MIDI-esque tone. The visuals remain focused on the stalking and inevitable death of the film's first victim, before the gratifyingly retro title font appears. This opening kill sequence distinguishes *Maniac* from the traditional Hollywood slasher and does not merely glorify senseless gore, as happens in the original film (and in more recent examples of "torture porn" that American horror cinema has produced). Instead its visual inventiveness is more reminiscent of French new-wave extremist horror such as *Frontière(s)* (2007) and *Martyrs* (2008), in which scenes of torture and violence are not designed purely to shock or entertain gore-loving horror fans, but rather serve a larger philosophical purpose.

Following the conclusion of the opening sequence, the film maintains a brisk pace, as Frank quickly stalks and kills his victims. It employs a well-implemented online dating scene to play upon the audience's internalised paranoia, evoking the sensationalised concept of the omniscient online stalker. Through the first-person perspective of Frank, the viewer is forced to watch the Instant Messaging conversation between a murderer and an unsuspecting woman on a typical dating website. These visuals draw on a prevalent fear in the "real" world – that of the potentially murderous online stalker – as well as challenging the audience's preconceptions about classic horror. The typical suspense created by a purposefully concealed killer, who may pop out at any moment, is removed. Instead, we are fully aware of the killer's motives, and are forced to witness the realisation of these motives first-hand. We are present from the initial stalking of his victim, through Frank's first interaction with them, and ultimately witness their inevitable death. This

makes for a visceral viewing experience, in which the horror is almost tangible and immediate for the audience.

The implementation of Frank's brutal murders aside, the plot employs two devices to offer further insight into his character. As he goes about attaching his victims' scalps to the various mannequins in his store, we gain glimpses into the reasons behind his psychosis; each mannequin takes on the character of the deceased victim, demonstrating Frank's (clearly schizophrenic) hallucinations. His delusions that his prior victims live on through the inanimate dummies, who now converse with, as well as goad, him, help account for Frank's transformation into a deranged murderer. These sequences of delusion often reference occurrences with his abusive and sexually promiscuous mother (America Olivo). It is clearly implied that this traumatised parental relationship is the root cause behind Frank's uncontrollable urges to exact revenge upon women, in response to his deceased mother's crimes against him.

The mannequin restoration store also acts as a hub for our protagonist and his battle with his own psychosis. Within this setting, we are introduced to Anna (Nora Arnezeder), an artist who coincidentally specialises in photographing mannequins. When she asks to use the mannequins in her gallery exhibition, she begins to develop an unlikely friendship with Frank. Within this newfound relationship, Anna is positioned within the film as the polar opposite to the antagonistic mother figure. The viewer may hope that Frank's relationship with her will break the murderous cycle in which the other female victims have thus far been caught. The friendship between the two is well integrated into the film, and tortures the viewer with the possibility that Frank will be redeemed through her character's influence. It raises hopes that her immediately likeable character might be spared a ruthless death (although the grim vibe of the film suggests otherwise, deliberately provoking the viewer's emotions).

It is exceedingly rare to find a piece of cinema that positions the viewer so effectively within the mind of a serial killer. *Maniac*, however, is even more merciless in that it attempts to humanise a character who has committed some of the most graphic onscreen killings in recent cinema, by introducing a memorable and convincing female lead. Overall, the film succeeds because of Anna's presence, as the polar opposite to the ruthless mother figure. Ultimately, *Maniac* is a highly efficient cinematic work, which expertly blends grindhouse gore with art-house aesthetics, and