

FILM REVIEWS

The Monk (Le Moine)
(Dir. Dominik Moll) Spain/France 2011
Diaphana Films

The copy of Matthew Lewis' *The Monk: A Romance* (1796) currently sitting on my bookshelf is the Penguin Classics edition, which reproduces a striking illustration from a 1797 French translation of the novel. Our votary protagonist is being dragged through the air by his scalp, cassock billowing in a lightning storm. Above him his bat-winged demonic captor brandishes the contract for his soul and shakes his snaky locks in foreboding. The illustrator is clearly trying to convey some of the divine terror of William Blake, yet teetering on the brink of a total collapse into the absurd.

To me, this is what the Gothic mode is all about. The greatest Gothic fiction is that which situates itself at the precise tipping point between the grim and the ridiculous. Whatever might be said about the turgidity of his prose or the novel's pacing, Lewis is undoubtedly the master of this trick. Think of the lascivious Ambrosio looming and salivating over the sweetly-slumbering Antonia, or Agnes the imprisoned nun nursing her corpse-baby. It is 'loathsome' Lewis repeatedly tells us, with unconcealed relish.

This invigorating campness is something which I often feel gets lost on screen, especially in more recent years. To take but one example: *The Raven* (Dir. James McTeigue, 2012) is supposedly set during the "lost days" leading up to Poe's death. My fingers were crossed for opium dreams and gibbering hysteria, so imagine my disappointment at discovering the film to be an anaemic detective yarn with sub-Murdoch Mysteries production values. As a side note, perhaps the most prominent exception to this rule is Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), which is never afraid to be overwrought or veer into outright silliness. "Your precious Lucy will become a bitch of the Devil! A whore of darkness!!", Tony Hopkins-as-Van-Helsing crows. Even Dracula's sobs are done in a cod-Transylvanian accent: "bleugh-huh, bleugh-huh!". More like this, please.

To arrive at *The Monk* (2011), then, is to once again resign ourselves to a sad lack of the Gothic ridiculous. This French language version plays it utterly straight, offering us a version of Lewis' events that is very serious, and also intensely religious. "This is the most Catholic thing I've ever seen," I remarked to my viewing companions, "and I've seen mass."

The devotional nature of the film will come as a shock to fans of the novel. Lewis' Mediterranean peoples (much like those of Shakespeare, Kyd or Marlowe) exist only to add glamour and exoticism to the setting, and to confirm the prejudices of the English reader against ignorant, superstitious, greedy and lascivious Roman Catholics. The novel's Ambrosio is a holy, hypocritical sham, but then Lewis cannot really imagine any other kind of monk. We are never, I think, meant to care for this protagonist, or to see any goodness or dignity in his vocation – Ambrosio is a bear to be baited for the pleasures of a Protestant audience. The Church is almost invariably presented as a malign and oppressive force, one that steals your fiancée and locks her in catacombs.

The film version strips away this contempt to offer a complex psychomachia. The opening scene shows Ambrosio at confession with a sumptuously-dressed and worldly man (who will later, of course, turn out

to be Satan himself in the guise of a wealthy burgher). The burgher details the enormity of his predatory lusts, not stopping at incest. Unmoved and unimpressed, Ambrosio scornfully dismisses the burgher's warning about the terrible power of the flesh over the human soul: Satan has no power over us, the monk retorts, excepting that which we give him. The audience's attention is drawn to the latent pride that is to be Ambrosio's downfall, and there is a good dollop of Lewisean irony here (by the end of the film our protagonist will, of course, have committed all of these crimes he at first considers so inexplicable), but it is also made clear that it is Ambrosio's keenest desire to lead a blameless life of contemplation and thus to be worthy of God's esteem.

The film is suffused with this sense of soteriological urgency. The richly visual, ritual elements of Catholicism are present (a striking Procession of the Virgin takes place in one highly atmospheric scene), but the characters are reflective and genuine in their piety. The bustling church scene which opens the novel tells us that the sermon is a social event, an opportunity to gossip and be seen, but here anxious, pinched faces stare up at Ambrosio in the pulpit, eager to be filled with his holiness and wisdom. God is real, the devil is real, and sin perpetually looms over each terrified soul.

Lewis' Ambrosio is, at heart, a carnal creature. Seduced by Matilda (who inveigles her way into the monastery as a novice under the *nomme de guerre* "Rosario"), he gives his ardour full rein before eventually tiring of her and seeking pastures new. The film's incarnation of Ambrosio (Vincent Cassel), though, seems driven by a compulsive fascination with his own damnation. He is a pale, ascetic figure, staring at Antonia with a manic intensity; seemingly attracted more by her otherworldly innocence than her beauty.

The novel opens with a quotation from *Measure for Measure*, one of Shakespeare's most morally complex and unsettlingly ambivalent plays: "Lord Angelo is precise; / Stands at guard with envy; Scarce confesses / That his blood flows, or that his appetite / Is more to bread than stone". To Lewis this possibly means no more than that Angelo, like his own Ambrosio, is a hypocrite doomed to get his comeuppance. Yet, the film is almost more aligned to Shakespeare than it is to Lewis. It raises many of *Measure for Measure*'s intractable problems: how do we tell the difference between true virtue and seeming? Is justice about punishment, or correction? How do we legislate against human sexuality – which societies need to control, and yet is often irrepressible?

Where Cassel's ascetic, lizard-eyed Ambrosio is most like the wicked magistrate Angelo is in his despair. Having fallen prey to lust, Angelo exclaims: "it is I / That lying by the violet in the sun / Do as the carrion does, not as the flower, / Corrupt with virtuous season". This is a powerful Calvinist metaphor: God's grace (the sun) shines down on one and all, but only those creatures receptive to it benefit thereby. Reprobates, like road kill, only stink the higher. Here the character affirms belief in his own corruption as something merely factual, and beyond his power to change.

The religious moral of *The Monk* is that Ambrosio's least excusable sin is, likewise, his failure to believe in the possibility of grace. The film suggests that Pride, at its height, is not an unshakeable faith in your own excellency, but the arrogant belief that you are too terrible, too ingeniously perfidious, to be granted redemption. Yet less like Shakespeare – and more like the savage, rebellious Marlowe – the film also entertains the possibility that the protagonist really is irrevocably damned. The film's Ambrosio has a birthmark shaped like a hand on his shoulder – the devil's mark, an object of superstition to the monks who take in the foundling, and later, proof that he is the long-lost brother of Antonia, who falls victim to his unholy lusts. The scene of Ambrosio's 'seduction' by Valerio (the film's equivalent of

Rosario/Matilda) makes it seem like he has no choice in the matter either physically or intellectually – he is pounced on while in the grip of a debilitating fever.

These details add a feeling of inevitability to the proceedings, yet the final note is one of profound ambiguity. As the film's Ambrosio lies dying in a desert crevasse, he makes his pact with burgher-Satan not for personal freedom (as the novel's monk attempts) but for the restoration of the ravished Antonia to sanity and health. Is it possible to sell one's soul on another's behalf, or does this act of charity ultimately redeem our broken protagonist?

The film has much to offer besides religious edification. The characters are excellently underplayed, stripped of Lewis' ungenerous caricaturing, and the visuals are artful and striking. The filming locations of Catalonia and Andalusia provide landscapes which seem almost alien: weird scalloped rock formations and arid, empty plains. There is a continual, pleasing use of chiaroscuro: slants of blinding sunlight penetrating high windows into cool, dim interiors, making the viewer feel as if transported inside a Vermeer painting. The costumes are not the industrially dyed, machine-sewed anachronisms frequently found in films nominally set in the Early Modern period. The fabrics are dull, heavy and functional, and everyone looks heat-oppressed and desperately in need of a bath.

Very faint traces of the Gothic yet remain. The most arresting character in the film is undoubtedly Valerio (Déborah François). In a radical departure from the novel (in which his(her) equivalent is merely "muffled in a cowl"), Valerio disguises both face and voice beneath a wax mask, claiming to have been disfigured in a fire. The mask is eyebrowless and unmoving, giving the false novice a perpetual expression of sorrowful surprise. One image in particular lingers profoundly: Valerio gazing intently at a carving of a head in the recesses of the ceiling where the face has been eroded to a pockmarked nothing (in another nod to the genre, grotesques and gargoyles loom over the monastery). The assumption of Valerio's fellow Capuchins is that the young burn victim is lamenting the loss of his own visage, but the keyed-in viewer recognises the ominous foreshadowing of the razing of Ambrosio's soul.

Ultimately, this adaptation of *The Monk* is more charitable and thought-provoking than what Lewis intended, but to many viewers these qualities will not be detractors. Perhaps, then, I will be alone in lamenting the lack of silliness: O where now is my snaky-haired demon? O where my mouldering corpse-baby? Bleugh-huh, bleugh-huh.

Kate Roddy

The Awakening
(Dir: Nick Murphy) UK 2011
Studiocanal

This review contains spoilers.

London, 1921. In a darkened room, a séance begins with the sacrifice of a crow, its slit throat bled into a gold bowl, all before a veiled medium. An assorted group of people sit before him – a lone woman, a soldier and a mother and father, a locket of blonde hair before the mother. They chant “Life given, death lifted” in unison and the crow’s body is seemingly transformed into a rotting carcass. A member of the audience suffers a nosebleed and the candle before the mother extinguishes as the spectre of a blonde girl appears. But, before the ghost can speak, the curtains are pulled back and the ‘spectre’ is apprehended by the lone woman: holding the child tightly, she pulls off the blonde wig to reveal the “ghost” to be a shaven-headed boy. The police burst in and make their arrests as the woman, Florence Cathcart (Rebecca Hall), reveals to the people at the séance how the crow’s corpse was substituted, how the nosebleed was faked and how the candle was snuffed out.

After such a dramatic opening, the film steadily slows its pace as Cathcart is invited to Rookwood, a boys’ boarding school in a remote area in the countryside, by schoolmaster Robert Mallory (Dominic West). The school is purportedly haunted by the ghost of a child, a haunting which has taken a violent turn when one of the boys has allegedly been frightened to death. With her curiosity aroused, Cathcart undertakes the investigation and soon begins to discover secrets not just about the school and its inhabitants but also herself.

Through its narrative of hauntings, its period and isolated setting, high production values and acting talent (which also includes Imelda Staunton), *The Awakening* fits easily into the genre of the classic British ghost story. As a consequence echoes of *The Innocents* (Jack Clayton, 1961) abound but they do not detract from what is essentially a film about grief: the film opens with a quote from Cathcart’s book *Seeing through Ghosts* which states that “Between 1914 and 1919 war and influenza had claimed more than a million lives in Britain alone. This is a time for ghosts”. The Great War haunts the narrative as much as Rookwood’s spectre, with Cathcart in mourning for her fiancé who was killed in the trenches while Mallory suppresses his survivor’s guilt by commenting to Cathcart “They died. I lived” with a bitter resentment and, when alone, through self-harm.

The Awakening was written by acclaimed writer Stephen Volk and then reworked by director Nick Murphy. While this indicates a distillation of Volk’s authorial stamp, perhaps a more productive way of reviewing *The Awakening* is to consider it as a wider part of his growing body of work. Throughout his film, television, theatrical and fictional works, Volk has centred his narratives upon strong female characters and has often returned to the scene of the séance and the two fundamental characters that are implicit in that scenario, the clairvoyant/believer and the sceptic. While it is obvious to state that *The Awakening* clearly connects with these recurrent motifs, the séance sequence works more to establish Cathcart as a character through her beliefs and her methodology: she is presented as a strong woman, one who is clearly committed to the debunking of the supernatural through an understanding of the charlatan’s trickery and deceitful methods. Her strength and authority is further emphasised when the arresting detective tries tactfully to ask her not to order him into action in front of the constables. Yet this is all counter-balanced by the item she brings to the séance – a photograph of a soldier. When asked by the

exposed medium if the man in the picture is indeed dead she doesn't answer him directly but instead states that "This grotesque charade won't bring him back." Her response intimates an acceptance of her loss but, as the narrative progresses, it becomes blatantly apparent that she has not come to terms with it. Whether this loss motivates Cathcart into debunking séances is left ambiguous but perhaps, instead, motivates her to find a truth, as opposed to a deception, in Spiritualism.

As a rational character, Cathcart also occupies the role of the sceptic. In Volk's work, where the sceptic meets the believer, conflict inevitably arises and becomes one in which the beliefs of both medium and sceptic are called into question. This is evidenced in Volk's *Ghostwatch* (Dir. Lesley Manning, 1992) where Michael Parkinson (playing himself) repeatedly questions parapsychologist Dr Lin Pascoe (Gillian Bevan) and, in a much more blatant manner, in the acclaimed ITV serial *Afterlife* (2005 – 2006) where sceptical psychiatrist Dr Robert Bridge (Andrew Lincoln) conducts research into the medium Alison Mundy (Lesley Sharp). Of the two, as Volk has commented in interview, *The Awakening* connects explicitly to *Afterlife* through Cathcart's narrative trajectory: she begins the film as a sceptic, a debunker of that which others believe or perceive to be manifestations of the spirit world and ends as a believer. In this transition she begins as *Afterlife*'s Robert Bridge and ends it as that programme's Alison Mundy. While this may seem a superficial connection, the transition lies at the centre of both the television programme and the film for in that movement greater shifts take place: for Bridge it is the acceptance of his child's death and a steady coming to terms with the grief and guilt he feels over this death; for Alison it is the coming to terms with the suicide of her mother; for Cathcart the shift allows her to work through the grief over her lost fiancé, to confront her repressed past and finally understand what happened to her as a child. In this understanding the ghost that haunts Rookwood becomes not just a spectre of fear, but a clear echo of Cathcart's past, a figure that comes not to haunt her or punish her but to release her from her grief. With such readings, *The Awakening* is a quiet meditation on loss and mourning but ultimately becomes about its repression, with Volk commenting that "the subject of the film isn't ghosts but repressed memory, which, like ghosts, may or may not be true."

With such qualities, *The Awakening* capably functions as much as a character study of Cathcart's 'awakening' to her past and to the loss of her fiancé as much as it does a classic Gothic ghost story. Such is the extent of this that Cathcart's character – or more accurately her sustained repression – extends into and is mirrored by the straight-laced world the film depicts. Its characters are clean and immaculately dressed with shirts and blouses buttoned tightly to the neck; the boys at the school suppress their humour while their teachers suppress their sexual desires, while all of them carefully speak in controlled and measured tones. Such repression extends into the film itself as the narrative plays out in the subdued tones of late winter, bare trees and paths thick with brittle leaves, the bright sunlight serving only to make things plainer, crisper, and straighter than they should be.

Combining a high level of writing, acting and direction, *The Awakening* is a well-executed ghost story: replete with unexpected shocks, a visually disturbing ghost and a surprising narrative twist, the film can be taken as a frightening piece of horror entertainment or as a more focussed and refined exploration of grief, guilt and repression. Either way, *The Awakening* provides both with precision and eloquence.

James Rose

Contagion
(Dir. Steven Soderbergh) USA 2011
 HomeWarner Brothers

Contagion is one of those films that may have worked better as a 600-page novel, though that would of course have meant missing the opportunity to watch Hollywood stars do their best to die horribly. The 2011 film, directed by Steven Soderbergh, tracks the outbreak of a previously unknown virus, mainly from the perspective of officials in the United States and China. Researchers scramble to subdue the tiny foe, while governments attempt to contain the population's panic. Average citizens everywhere run for cover. Such an outline should reveal *Contagion* as a slavishly procedural by-the-numbers flick, and indeed there are few surprises waiting for us here. Nevertheless, Soderbergh's film is notable as a neat package of contemporary preconceptions about authority and expertise. The medical drama safely squared away, we can reflect on all the other things *Contagion* is talking about.

It's true that every generation has its pet vision of apocalypse, yet there are some perennial favourites that are never exhausted but rotate in and out of fashion. The worldwide pandemic is one such scenario. The BBC has recently dusted off both *Survivors* (2008-2010) and *The Day of the Triffids* (2009); the Will Smith version of *I Am Legend* from 2007 follows the same broad strokes as *Contagion*, including the depiction of the masses as fundamentally dangerous, infectious zombie raiders. Contemporary fiction about epidemics and eco-catastrophes speak to a general anxiety that things perhaps aren't going quite the way they should be, in the same way post-war "pod people" narratives were both the expression of anti-communism and a reaction to it. In each case, the formula — a mad dash to expose the root cause of a banjaxed society that would otherwise be running smoothly — remains unchanged. (In addition, *Contagion* tiptoes in the footsteps of the grandiose disaster flicks of the 1970s and 1990s — 1974's *Earthquake*, 1998's *Deep Impact* — offering up a star-studded buffet of potential victims.)

The *signifié* of the film's metaphorical 'contagion' is open to many interpretations, but we must consider here that a world in which the prevailing ideology has played out to its end treats change as viral, sickening, and catastrophic. Some malady is spreading; it must be contained until the danger is past; only experts can put the world back together. This is where the pandemic scenario finds contemporary expression: 'contagion' is now a well-established term of international finance. 'Stop the rot' is another pet phrase of the economic crisis, while the language of austerity here and in America suggests a treatment of bracing tonics and a visit to the sweat lodge.

Contagion's most notable theme is the full-force reaction of authorities when they are challenged from below. Included in the film's carousel of subplots is the story of internet prophet of doom Alan Krumwiede (Jude Law), styled after the likes of broadcaster and conspiracy theorist Alex Jones. Krumwiede, rejected by the Old Media, draws familiarly zany connections (detention camps, etc) between the virus's spread and various government plots. After he bests a public health director (Laurence Fishburne, looking dyspeptic) on a cable news programme, Krumwiede's popularity skyrockets. There follows an obscure meeting with a pharmaceutical executive, after which Krumwiede begins flogging a homeopathic supplement as a miracle cure. Legal investigations fail to dislodge him from the popular consciousness; when Krumwiede threatens to recommend to his web followers that they abstain from the virus's vaccine, the response from the Feds is immediate arrest.

The lesson: trust only official sources of information. All others are cranks, or in the pay of dark forces. If it is at all accurate to read *Contagion* as an apologia for technocrats, who avow that they do indeed have your best interests at heart, then Jude Law's storyline is by far the most sinister. Considering the film's context in a long-term financial illness that frequently elicits doctor-patient terminology, we have here the deliberate conflation of economics and hard science. Any idea that falls outside a narrow range of legitimacy is not only irresponsible but potentially lethal to the body politic. It is thus quite serviceable for the film to connect insurgent social thought with real-life peddlers of unscientific anti-vaccine gobbledygook. This is the purpose of Soderbergh's much-vaunted efforts at maintaining scientific accuracy in the film: the agency officials and highly skilled advisors, around whom the story pivots, come desperately close to articulating the grim pronouncement, "There is no alternative".

This coterie of scientists and policy directors all sweat and gasp and wring their hands as martial law is declared, for they genuinely consider their power as the instrument of public good (the exception being a goofy moment when some military types immediately pin the epidemic as a terror attack). And so, by means of contrast, the film's central horror rests on scenes of dutiful Americans turned looters, of youths dressed like WTO protesters invading houses, of genial Midwesterners rioting for food. The expert epidemiologist who is too generous to the rabble, throwing facemasks over poor diseased nobodies, gets infected and dies. The high-level crisis managers who shield themselves with insider knowledge are publicly embarrassed yet live to tell the tale. The Average Joes most likely to endure (Matt Damon, coasting through in Safe Mode) are those who comply, comply, comply. And since, as David Skal has pointed out, bad sex is always lurking somewhere in the depiction of the monstrous, Gwyneth Paltrow's extramarital affair initiates the outbreak in America, while her teenage daughter is repeatedly threatened with infection (cooties?) when engaging in some apocalypse-inspired heavy petting.

Though each character in *Contagion* must at some point make a moral choice, and the scope of their decisions is plausible, they inevitably skew in favour of authority. Jude Law and the unscrupulous businessmen survive, but they inherit a desolated San Francisco (Law strolls through the same plaza that's in the memorable climax of the 1978 *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* remake, another anxious study of infection, officialdom and bad behaviour). Meanwhile, the randy teenager daughter, successfully corralled, dances a prom dance with her vaccinated boyfriend in the safety of her quarantined home.

The film is most successful, however, at tapping into a very old distaste for the commonfolk. *Contagion* had already completed filming by the time protests against Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker's union-busting legislation in early 2011 reached their highest pitch, yet repeated scornful mentions of a group of Minnesotan nurses who strike during the epidemic, as well as the food riot mentioned above, stand as oblique gestures to this reawakening of liberal society in the Midwest — threatening gestures, actually. They constitute another portrait of the masses as a potential menace by the expert enclave. The only time when we feel safe is when we are cocooned in the multiple layers of the citadels of power, or in expensive car interiors, or in dimly-lit task force rooms, or in ultra-sanitary super-scientific viral research labs.

Interestingly, the film simply assumes that a disease that has the power to kill a quarter of humankind will not disrupt its economic machinery. Four or five months after it appears, the virus is defeated (spoiler alert), and things return to normal almost instantly. Even during the worst of the crisis, as mass graves are dug in the shadows of the financial districts, workers schlub into their jobs with their hand trucks and their "Ask me about..." retail aprons. The media talking heads gab away, teenagers text on their iPhones, and the world moves on, because, as it transpires, nobody really important has been lost. The existing structures remain and recapitulate their power. In a "Shock Doctrine" twist that would've sat comfortably

within Naomi Klein's reportage, the vaccinated in *Contagion* are made to wear special plastic bracelets, scanned by armed guards in order to gain entry to shopping malls or public areas — that'd *really* set off the New World Order crowd.

Then again, the technocrats are never able to uncover the exact origin of the virus, which causes them no small amount of discomfiture. We, the audience, find out, at least: the last few minutes of the film are dedicated to a painstaking yet wordless exposition of how exactly the virus entered the human population. On its own, the sequence suggests that no crisis can be managed to the hilt, that as long as 'our immune systems are a work in progress', as one character puts it, we will continue to stumble from crisis to crisis forever. Careful, however: though the ending presents itself as a repudiation of expert culture (the overweening desire to know and thus to control), in revealing the very accident of fate that the scientists cannot discern, the film unavoidably falls into a common trap: the assertion that total information awareness is just a matter of effort. This thinking has been with us for some time, and *Contagion* makes no effort to escape the trap. It thus remains utterly conventional. Its only merit is in its refusal to elevate the expert class into heroes. There are no hunky doctors bolting to the hospital, vaccine in hand; there are no implausibly fashionable lab technicians dodging explosions or killer virus clouds. Even the military, always a wild card, is superbly behaved (in this, *Contagion* is many times superior to 1995's shlockfest *Outbreak*). *Contagion* is cognisant that experts are allergic to sunlight; their greatest relish is the unseen nature of their power. Yet, finally, the film is also a cipher for the problem facing the real-life world, with its real-life class of technocrats: they know exactly what is killing the patient, but they have no idea how to fix it.

Miles Link

Paranormal Activity 3
(Dir. Ariel Schulman and Henry Joost) USA 2011
 Blumhouse Productions

In the spirit of full disclosure, I'm a late convert to the *Paranormal Activity* franchise. Perhaps this was due to having watched it during daylight hours, but on the whole *Paranormal Activity* (Dir. Oren Peli, 2007) just didn't seem to offer anything new to the horror genre or the paranormal horror subgenre. My attitude shifted somewhat with *Paranormal Activity 2* (Dir. Tod Williams, 2010), which did some interesting things in terms of narrative (being both a prequel and a sequel), particularly in how it went further in connecting the events transpiring to similar occurrences in the childhood of sisters Katie and Kristi (a back-story only hinted at in the first film). The third film, as an origin story for Katie and Kristi, effectively makes use of its period setting and heightens the series' emphasis on extensive surveillance in revealing uncanny elements within the supposedly safe and familiar family home, at the same time making strange the family unit itself.

Paranormal Activity 3 opens with a pregnant Kristi (Sprague Grayden) and her husband Daniel (Brian Boland) contentedly preparing for the birth of their son, unaware of the events that will befall them in *Paranormal Activity 2*. They are visited by Kristi's older sister Katie (Katie Featherston), who has yet to encounter her own ordeal depicted in the first film and who asks to store some boxes in Kristi and Daniel's basement. One of the boxes contains several videocassettes, home movies from their childhood. We then see the footage contained on the missing tapes (it isn't clear who is watching them), beginning with Katie's birthday party in the September of 1988. Katie (Chloe Csengery) and the younger Kristi (Jessica Tyler Brown) are children living with their presumably divorced mother, Julie (Lauren Bittner), and her boyfriend Dennis (Christopher Nicholas Smith), a wedding videographer (explaining why the family happens to have so much video equipment on hand). They seem happy enough, although Julie's mother Lois (Hallie Foote) disapproves of Dennis' lack of financial resources along with Julie's decision not to have any more children. Shortly after Katie's birthday, strange events begin to occur in the house and a curious Dennis installs video cameras throughout, trying to capture any possible evidence. At the same time, Kristi reports having an imaginary friend, the invisible Toby, whom she quietly fears. After "Toby" frightens away a babysitter and a family friend (Dustin Ingram) who tried to help Dennis in researching the phenomena and its possible connection to witchcraft, the family finds themselves increasingly isolated, with a skeptical Julie angry at Dennis and Toby stepping up his attacks on the girls.

In the film's last reel or so, however, the formula changes somewhat: unconvinced of the validity of claims made by Dennis and her frightened daughters, Julie changes her tune after the entity, with considerable flourish, finally manifests for her benefit (in a kitchen scene that manages to top the infamous "kitchen scene" in *Paranormal Activity 2*). Fleeing their home, Julie and Dennis take the girls and seek refuge at her mother's house, where they are greeted with apple pie and what they hope to be sanctuary. Unfortunately for all of them, grandmother's house proves a fool's haven and the setting for the film's obligatory shock ending, a cliffhanger that actually manages to surprise the audience and explain (somewhat) the events of the first two films.

Paranormal Activity 3 is easily superior to its predecessors. *Paranormal Activity* remained aesthetically limited by its low-budget and *Paranormal Activity 2* suffered from too many sequences of static, grainy footage obtained from closed-circuit security cameras; together, the two bear out the criticism offered by a friend of mine that these are movies in which one spends ninety minutes "waiting for a door to open". By

contrast, the third film is more cinematic and transcends the found-footage aspect that was supposedly so novel in earlier films in the series, a credit to directors Ariel Schulman and Henry Joost, responsible for the acclaimed documentary *Catfish* (2010). Scenes involving a video camera affixed to an oscillating base from a modified fan should become repetitious but instead build tension by relentlessly limiting and fixing our gaze upon the downstairs rooms (there's also a nice bit involving a babysitter and a bedsheet that shows up where it shouldn't). Succeeding in its accuracy as a period piece, *Paranormal Activity 3* is also the scariest of the three films, thanks to a series of jump scares as well as a few especially effective sequences, including the "Bloody Mary" scene and the previously mentioned kitchen scene that occurs near the end of the film.

If *Paranormal Activity 3* can be faulted for anything, it would be its abrupt ending (although this is presumably all the better to set up *Paranormal Activity 4*). The inevitability of a sequel may also explain a number of questions left unanswered at the end of the film, which enumerated here would nullify the twist of which this reviewer speaks so highly. Finally, despite its merits, *Paranormal Activity 3* deviates wildly from its trailer, which features a number of scenes not present in the film as released theatrically (including Julie being attacked by Toby, the family's house on fire, and another attack by Toby, this time on a priest who visits the house), a form of false advertising that may rub some viewers the wrong way (some of these missing scenes have been reinstated in a Director's Cut now available on Blu-Ray).

As it is, however, *Paranormal Activity 3* succeeds through its suggestion that the very places and people we consider the most safe may in fact harbour the most danger. It is the twist in this film's final act that marks this as the series entry most critical of family, materialism, and greed; in other words, we finally get some inkling of just how the members of this family are able to afford those grand homes.

Drew Beard