

## FILM REVIEWS

### **“Is this another attack?”: Imagining Disaster in *Cloverfield*, *Diary of the Dead* and *[Rec]***

***Cloverfield* (Dir. Matt Reeves) USA 2007**

Paramount Home Entertainment

***Diary of the Dead* (Dir. George A. Romero) USA 2007**

Optimum Home Entertainment

***[Rec]* (Dir. Jaume Balagueró & Paco Plaza) Spain 2007**

Odeon Sky Filmworks

In 1965, at the height of the Cold War, Susan Sontag declared in her famous essay ‘The Imagination of Disaster’ that the world had entered an “age of extremity” in which it had become clear that from now until the end of human history, every person on earth would “spend his individual life under the threat not only of individual death, which is certain, but of something almost insupportable psychologically – collective incineration which could come at any time”. Sontag went on to claim that narratives in which this fate was dramatised for the mass audience in fantastical form – like the monster movies of the 1950s – helped society deal with this stress by distracting people from their fate and normalising what was psychologically unbearable: a kind of vaccination of the imagination, if you will. If this is the case, then *Cloverfield*, in which Manhattan is destroyed by an immensely powerful sea monster, George A. Romero’s latest zombie movie, *Diary of the Dead*, and claustrophobic Spanish hit *[Rec]* are not so much pre-emptive vaccinations against probable catastrophe, but intermittently powerful, if flawed, reminders of actual calamity. In all three films some of the most destabilising events and anxieties of the past decade – including 9/11 (and the fear of terrorist attacks striking at the heart of American and European cities), Hurricane Katrina, the 2004 Tsunami, and the SARS virus– are reconfigured as genre-based mass market entertainment.

What is particularly interesting about these films is the fact that all three present themselves as a somehow more ‘authentically’ terrifying viewing experience than usual by dint of the fact that each consciously apes the style and tone of amateur video footage and of the real-life media coverage of such events. If ‘torture porn’ or ‘gornography’ has been the most notorious trope in the horror movie in recent years, then at the moment it seems as if that trend is being superseded by the emerging popularity of so-called ‘shaky-cam’ films shot from a first-person perspective and edited to look like ‘found’ footage of real-life atrocities and disaster zones. Of course, this trend is in some respects none too original. In 1980, Ruggero Deodato’s *Cannibal Holocaust* purported to be the true story of a sensation-seeking Western film crew slaughtered by murderous Amazonian cannibals. Slightly more thoughtful than some of the other Italian cannibal movies of the period (though still appallingly racist), the film’s cleverest conceit – that the bulk of the movie is footage filmed at first hand by the doomed protagonists – was also to be its most influential, as the popularity of the likes of *The Blair Witch Project* (Dir. Daniel Myrick & Eduardo Sánchez, 1999) would prove many years later. Significantly, outside the horror genre this device has most notably been recently used in the war films *Redacted* (Dir. Brian De Palma, 2007) and *Battle for Haditha* (Dir. Nick Broomfield, 2007), both of which are themselves creative responses to one of the most divisive events of recent years, namely the U.S. led “liberation” of Iraq, and it is apparent that the current crop of shaky-cam horror narratives also have their roots in contemporary global concerns.

The present popularity of the ‘shaky-cam’ movie can be seen to stem from several related factors. Foremost amongst these seems to be the presupposition that scenes edited to look like ‘real’ footage of unfolding events a truly disturbing end of the world tale seem more ‘authentic’ and better convey a sense of panic, disorder and catastrophe than footage shot with conventional staging, lighting and cinematography. Second, and just as important, is the way in which these films serve as a response to the rise of user-generated content on websites such as MySpace, Bebo, You-Tube and Google Video. As a character in Romero’s movie says, “the mainstream had vanished. Now it was just us”. There is also the fact that it’s a bit easier and cheaper to shoot footage with handheld video cameras than in the traditional way: certainly, Romero’s comments on his latest film suggest that he found the relative freedom afforded him by affordable new digital and editing technologies helped make *Diary of the Dead* his most enjoyable directing experience in years. This doesn’t mean, however, that such films aren’t as contrived as movies shot in the ‘traditional manner’ or that special effects don’t play an important role as well, as we shall see.

This is particularly true of *Cloverfield*, which is essentially a *Godzilla* movie shot entirely from the perspective of the little people on the ground below, trapped between a rampaging monster on one side, and the gung-ho military on the other. The film has much in common with the classic graphic novel *Marvels* (Kurt Busiek and Alex Ross), which re-imagined key superhero clashes in the Marvel comics universe from the perspective of the everyday New Yorkers whose city had suddenly become the venue for wildly destructive battles between god-like super beings. One of the most interesting aspects of the graphic novel was the fact that it was told from the perspective of a resolutely normal newspaper photographer whose images captured the action from a very human perspective. Similarly, *Cloverfield* is presented to the viewer as an unedited feed from a video camera found by the U.S. army in “the site formerly known as Central Park”, a *Cannibal Holocaust/Blair Witch*-style conceit which gives the film its distinctively *ad hoc* cinematography and most obvious selling point: visual and emotional immediacy. The constant movement of the camera and whip-pans left and right may also make viewers prone to travel sickness more than a little queasy, a symptom experienced by at least one of my companions during an initial viewing of the film, but as with the similar effect experienced by some viewers of *The Blair Witch Project* and Gaspar Noé’s *Irréversible* (2002), this unfortunate side effect will presumably only add to the film’s reputation as a gruelling viewing experience. It may also resemble the experience proffered by first-person perspective videogames, therefore – intentionally or not – evoking the style and atmosphere of the film industry’s most powerful rival, the videogame.

*Cloverfield*’s plot is fairly straightforward. Self-centred yuppie Rob Hawkins (Michael Stahl-David) is about to leave New York for a high-profile job in Japan, so his friends have thrown a party for him in a trendy Manhattan loft. Even before bits of the city start falling from the sky, Rob is having a bad time, due to the fact that he has recently slept with a friend, Beth (Odette Yustman), whom he then neglected to call. Excerpts from Rob’s tape of their morning-after-the-night-before bookend the main body of the narrative and intermittently pop up briefly throughout, presumably in order to give some resonance to the utterly unreasonable quest which provides the impetus for the latter half of the film. Though only around twenty minutes are spent following the events of the party, this section feel rather longer, mainly due to the fact that Rob and most of his friends seem like such self-absorbed, painfully shallow hipsters. The first eruptions of chaos are actually all the more jarring and effective, then. During the disorientating moments after the initial explosion, each confusing new clue as to the exact nature of the threat faced by our protagonists only makes the horror even more gripping (“It’s alive!”; “It was eating people!”).

The film's strongest scenes therefore are those in which it manages to capture the panic and the sheer disbelieving chaos which erupts on the streets of the city in the moments following the monster's appearance. Though never explicitly referenced (save in the anxious aside "Is this another attack?") the 9/11 reference points are obvious: prominent New York landmarks are angrily rent asunder by the mysterious aggressor (conveniently, the head of the Statue of Liberty lands on the same street as our protagonists), and in the aftermath of the first wave of destruction, a long stream of dust-covered survivors attempts to flee to safety on the other side of the Hudson (a sequence also seen this year in the anaemic Will Smith vehicle *I Am Legend*). After roughly the half-way mark, the monster's increasingly lengthy manifestations inevitably erode some of the novelty, as does the fact that the narrative evolves into a dishearteningly implausible and conventional one from the moment that Rob decides to save Beth who is trapped in the ruins of her apartment building uptown, thereby leading his friends away from safety and into even more danger. Clearly, we're meant to view him as a hero, but instead, given the scale of the destruction around him, Rob's actions seem both selfish and deeply implausible, and the 'friends stick together' vibe central to the film is, like most of the protagonists' behaviour, oddly unconvincing.

Key to the fear evoked by *Cloverfield's* monster is the fact that its actual shape is unquantifiable for most of the movie. The creature is both a rampaging giant and, like Murnau's Count Orlock, is also, a bringer of pestilence and disease. One of the film's cleverest conceits is to have the monster shed hundreds, perhaps thousands of secondary creatures, man-sized insect-like terrors which pounce upon unsuspecting passers-by and have an infectious bite which rapidly proves fatal. Indeed, one of the best scenes in the film is that in which one of the few truly likable characters in the whole movie – the laconic Marlena (Lizzy Caplan) – suddenly and graphically succumbs to her symptoms after being bitten by one of these creatures. The creature's very indefinability is what makes it such an effective antagonist: at times it looks like a kind of weird giant salamander, at others like something out of Lovecraft. Our final glimpse of the creature – during a fight with the military in central park – is both the most complete, and paradoxically, the most disappointing. *Cloverfield's* rampaging beast was undeniably terrifying when viewed in glimpses and quick, disbelieving flashes, but close up in the light of day, like most movie monsters (and most night time fears), it just seems rather silly.

Whilst we never do quite find out what the creature in *Cloverfield* actually is, problems or classification don't pose a problem in *Diary of the Dead*, the fifth and weakest so far of Romero's 'Living Dead' series. Despite the fact that 2005's *Land of the Dead* seemed ripe for a sequel, the celebrated director has chosen to go back to year zero and reconfigure his work for a new audience. The film's protagonists (and 'directors', for, as the title indicates, the film is a mock-video diary of an unfolding zombie outbreak) are a group of college students whose self-conscious mastery of technology and new media is ultimately of little help in ensuring survival against great odds. Indeed, by the end of the movie it seems clear that the almost pathological urge to record events displayed by his callous directorial amanuensis Jason (Joshua Close) is in fact perhaps symptomatic of a certain psychotic detachment from reality. Given that this is a Romero film, there is no shortage of interesting and provocative ideas here. It's just a shame that neither the cast nor ultimately the film itself do them justice.

It all starts amusingly enough, as news footage of a zombie attack is followed by an extract from the dodgy-sounding low-budget horror movie "The Death of Death" which Romero's protagonists are filming in woods just outside Pittsburgh (a nice touch); their inept mummy-movie footage allows Romero to make a few sly digs at some of the recent cultural additions to the zombie mythos by those who would seek to usurp his throne, particularly the moment when the youthful director of the film observes that "Dead things don't move fast!" Once the first indications of catastrophic events begin to emerge in the

form of garbled TV and radio transmissions, as in Romero's earlier films, it becomes clear that both the forces of law and order and the scientific community are completely unable to cope with the escalating crisis, and the students decide to flee the city and head for the country mansion of one of their classmates. What follows is a rather episodic, uneven narrative which generally fails to live up to Romero's previous films, although there are just enough hints of the old genius left to remind us that at his best, he is one of the most thoughtful and insightful horror directors of all time.

An early indication the film's heavy-handed philosophising and contrived plotting comes in the scene in which the group decide to go to the local hospital (surely the very worst place to be during a zombie outbreak?). As his friends wander the eerily deserted and blood-splattered halls in search of medical assistance for one of their number, Jason (who, like fellow cameramen Hud (T.J. Miller) in *Cloverfield* and Pablo in *[REC]* is barely glimpsed by the viewer at all) decides to recharge his camera. There follows an utterly ridiculous scene in which he is attacked by a zombie whilst plugged into the power supply, and refuses to relinquish his camera in order to defend himself properly because, as he puts it, in a statement that sums up his whole character "If it didn't happen on camera, it's like it didn't happen at all". While the sentiment is key to understanding the film, which is to a large extent Romero's rather despairing attempt to understand the technology-obsessed denizens of 'Generation Y', the scene itself is so contrived, and the statement expressed in such a flat manner, that the essential truth of what Romero is trying so hard to say here is all but lost. It doesn't help that the students are accompanied on their travels by their alcoholic Professor Ridley Wilmott (a terribly over-the-top performance by Philip Riccio) who, in between taking bracing nips of Scotch from his silver flask, is prone to making portentous, nail-bitingly clunky statements such as "I remember the war. In wartime, killing comes easy."

There are strong echoes of Romero's earlier zombie films here, but unfortunately, they serve mostly to highlight the inadequacies of *Diary of the Dead*. Romero devotees will be unsurprised to learn that the most capable, rational character in the whole film is a young woman, Deb (Michelle Morgan), whereas most of the men in the film fail to cope with events particularly well. The exceptions, again unsurprisingly, given Romero's earlier films, are a well-armed and organised group of African-American men – gang members who have created their own unofficial militia because, in the words of their leader, "For the first time in our lives we have the power, because everyone else left". The echoes of the sorely inadequate Government response to Hurricane Katrina are unmistakable, and are only further reinforced when, slightly later on in the film, the students are stopped by a National Guard patrol and robbed of the supplies just given to them by the militia. The scene in which the students encounter the gang members is perhaps the best in the entire film, not only in its wider, real-world connotations, but also because it contains a genuinely nerve-racking zombie attack whose effectiveness is never again recaptured. One can't help but think that had Romero followed his more radical instincts and created an entire film in which the effect of the zombie crisis upon an already marginalised African-American community was explored instead of focusing upon privileged, whiny white college students, he might well have come up with something much more interesting.

There are a few undeniably effective moments here (the sight of a group of gently flailing zombies floating like corks in an indoor swimming pool, or the scene in which the group arrive at Deb's family home to find that they're rather too late) and a couple of laugh-out-loud scenes (one featuring a zombie clown, and another a deaf Amish farmer), but it's all too little to late. By the time the remaining survivors have holed themselves up inside a suspiciously *Resident Evil*-style mansion only, inevitably, to find themselves picked off one by one, most viewers will have stopped caring. \*\*\*\*SPOILER BEGINS\*\*\*\* Like Hud in *Cloverfield*, Jason too dies while filming events, although because he has shown such

reluctance to help his companions lest he miss something onscreen (in contrast to Hud's relative heroics) one feels that he's gotten what he deserved: his obsession with making a record of all that has happened around him has ultimately and inevitably cost him his life. \*\*\*\* SPOILER ENDS\*\*\*\* In the film's final bleak moments however, Romero does manage to create an image which aptly encapsulates his feelings towards the modern age. The last survivors end up barricaded inside the mansion's panic room, unable to leave yet able to view the zombie hordes outside through the room's extensive CCTV system. A bleaker and more despairing view of the inadequacies of the information age you'll be hard pressed to find, but it's just a shame that the rest of the film fails to live up to this resonant concluding image.

2007 Spanish film *[REC]* is, rather like *28 Days Later*, a zombie movie in disguise. As in David Cronenberg's *Rabid* (1977) we're dealing here not with the reanimated dead, but with live people who have been infected with a lethal strain of rabies which rapidly turns them into aggressive and extremely infectious psychotics. Once more, everything is shot from a first-person perspective, although this time, the conceit is accounted for by the fact that the film is meant to be footage shot by a local news crew doing a report on shift workers. As young reporter Ángela (Manuela Velasco) and her cameraman Pablo hang around the local fire station, ill-advisedly hoping that something interesting will happen, reports come in that an old lady has fallen ill in a nearby apartment block and needs to be rescued. Ángela and Pablo duly accompany the firemen to the scene, only to find that the elderly woman in question is both entirely irrational and possessed of almost superhuman strength. Once she takes a bite out of a policeman's artery, the film really kicks into high gear. Rather than ease the situation, the Barcelonan authorities decide to contain the outbreak by sealing off the building from the outside, which means that, as the film progresses, and resident after resident succumbs to the mysterious disease and turns on the others, things become increasingly desperate for our protagonists. *[REC]* is one of the best zombie (or rather, pseudo-zombie) movies I've seen in years, a genuinely claustrophobic viewing experience in which the use of shaky-cam footage truly adds to the tension in a way that ultimately outclasses even *Cloverfield*. At just under 80 minutes, the taut running time and rapid pace mean that, despite the fairly familiar opening scenes, the film never becomes tedious, unlike the meandering *Diary of the Dead*.

As Ángela and the others become increasingly desperate to escape the apartment building, the tight close-ups of our absolutely terrified protagonists and unsteady footage of rabid attackers suddenly breaking loose make for gripping viewing. Those looking for narrative complexity or character development will not find it here, for *[REC]* is the cinematic equivalent of a triple espresso: a jolting wake-up call which one should not linger over for too long. Indeed, secret coward that I undoubtedly am, I could barely bring myself to watch the insanely claustrophobic final ten minutes of the film, in which the directors make the most effective onscreen use of night-vision since the climax of *The Silence of the Lambs* (Dir. Jonathan Demme, 1991). It is also at this point that the film takes a narrative turn into (possible) supernaturalism which will confuse most viewers, and profoundly irritate others. Nevertheless, the film remains an undeniably effective and thrillingly entertaining viewing experience. Furthermore, it also confirmed my suspicions that, along with drinking alcohol, losing one's virginity, and deciding to take a shower, carrying a video camera should be added to the list of things NOT to do if one wishes to survive to the end of a horror film.

So what next for shaky-cam horror? Given the popularity of digital video with emerging film makers, it seems likely that we haven't seen the last of this growing subgenre. *[REC]* has already been the subject of an American remake scheduled for release in October, and the team behind the original have just announced that there will be a sequel. Similarly, there has been talk of a sequel to *Cloverfield* as well, perhaps consisting of footage of the monster's attack shot from a different perspective. Furthermore, films

such as the low-budget pseudo-documentary serial-killer flick *Head Case* (Dir. Anthony Spadaccini, 2007) will continue to exploit the immediacy of ‘first-person’ perspective footage to evoke a more ‘authentic’ sense of horror and dread. Whether there will be many more genre-related disaster films shot in this style, only time will tell. What seems clear is that films in which fictional and fantastic catastrophes are evoked from an ever more ‘realistic’ perspective will be popular for as long as the feeling persists that in the real world, horrors of an even more disturbing nature have been permitted to flourish. As ever, horror and the gothic are in these instances able to encapsulate real-life fears and anxieties more effectively than any news report or politician’s sound bite. The “age of extremity” described by Sontag so many years ago lingers still, except that now, for better or worse, we can watch it all unfold in front of our very eyes, again and again.

***Bernice M. Murphy***

***Night of the Demon* (Dir. Jacques Tourneur) UK 1957**

Columbia Tristar 2002 (released as “*Curse of the Demon* and *Night of the Demon*”)

Sceptics have always been given a hard time in horror movies. Whenever a character dismisses supernatural happenings as stuff and nonsense, it is fairly certain that before too long he or she will meet with either a rude awakening or a sticky end – or both. As that supreme rationalist Sherlock Holmes liked to say, “When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth,” and this is a maxim which horror film-makers have taken to heart, even if Holmes himself (unlike his creator) firmly believed that the supernatural was the impossible, and that human nature, rather than hocus-pocus, lay behind even the most uncanny events.

One of the most determined sceptics to appear on the screen is Dr. John Holden (Dana Andrews) in Jacques Tourneur’s masterly *Night of the Demon* (1957). “I’m not open to persuasion,” Holden informs Dr. Julian Karswell (Niall MacGinnis) during their celebrated encounter in the Reading Room of the British Museum. To which Karswell pointedly replies, “But a scientist should have an open mind.” Holden, however, despite claiming that he will consider evidence of the supernatural, has already decided that it is all so much hogwash, and so, by the immutable laws of cinema, his dogged investigation of Karswell will lead to the inevitable rude awakening.

*Night of the Demon*, while generally acclaimed as one of the great horror movies, continues to inspire debate, with some commentators criticising the playing of both Dana Andrews and Peggy Cummins in the lead roles. To some extent, this is justified: Andrews does appear to be sleep-walking through the film, though his very stolidity actually suits the character of Holden, at least in the first half of the film. Later on, however, when he should be reduced to a trembling wreck at the thought of being roasted by the Fire Demon, Andrews acts as if he is simply dealing with another lowlife in one of his *noir* movies: “Siddown and shaddup,” is (more or less) all he says to Karswell at the film’s climax. Even his assertion that he now believes in the supernatural lacks any great conviction. Criticism of Cummins, who plays the role of Joanna, niece of the recently immolated Professor Harrington, seems less well-founded, given that her part mainly requires her to unquestioningly advocate the case for the supernatural and to issue dire warnings to Holden. To a large extent then, any shortcomings in the lead performances can be attributed to the script rather than to the actors themselves.

If the lead roles are underwritten, the same can hardly be said of Julian Karswell, who is without doubt one of the great screen villains, brought brilliantly to life by Niall MacGinnis, and made all the more frightening by being supremely human rather than supremely evil. Not only does Karswell arrange Hallowe’en parties for the neighbourhood children (a direct and very clever inversion of the scene in M.R. James’ original story, ‘Casting the Runes’, in which Karswell deliberately terrifies the kiddies with a grotesque magic lantern show), but he only uses his powers after polite appeals have failed, and seemingly with some regret. He may end up ruining the Hallowe’en party just to prove a point, but one suspects he probably felt sorry about it later. However, the real masterstroke by screenwriter Charles Bennett was his decision to portray a warlock who is as frightened of the forces he can summon, but not completely control, as any of his victims, thereby adding immeasurably to the sense of dread so ably evoked in the film by Tourneur’s deft use of light and shadow and the fluid camerawork which were his trademarks.

The principal area of debate inspired by *Night of the Demon* is, of course, the decision to show, from the very beginning of the film, the Demon itself in all its fire-breathing fury. Admirers of Tourneur's subtly suggestive work with legendary producer Val Lewton have taken the view that such an obvious manifestation of the supernatural robs the film of any real suspense and ambiguity, a view which was shared by both Tourneur and Bennett. Others, such as John Carpenter, have argued that, while subtlety is all very well in its place, in a monster movie, it is "absolutely essential" to see the monster. If one accepts that both viewpoints are valid, the question that emerges is not so much *whether* the Demon should have been shown, but *how* it should have been shown.

What seems reasonably clear is that both Bennett and Tourneur favoured an approach which was essentially faithful to James' story (in which the Demon is sensed and felt, but not seen), while at the same time accepting that, from a cinematic point of view, some sort of visual manifestation was necessary. Certainly, as Tony Earnshaw has demonstrated in his excellent study, *Beating the Devil: The Making of Night of the Demon* (reviewed by Darryl Jones in Issue One), the Demon was present in the script from the very beginning, and its basic design, by Ken Adam, was approved by Tourneur. Nonetheless, it seems fair to deduce that not only did Jacques Tourneur have no intention of utilising the Demon in the way that producer Hal Chester ultimately did, but that he never conceived of *Night of the Demon* as a 'monster movie' in the first place. Chester, however, no doubt inspired by the box-office takings of such films as *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953) and *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* (1956), seems to have thought of it as nothing else, and one gets the definite impression that, had the budget allowed, he would have been quite happy to have the Demon play dominoes with Stonehenge and stomp the British Museum to dust.

On the whole, the Demon can be said to have aged quite well, even if one accepts that it is not always shown to best advantage. The decision to present it as 'a monster' of at least twenty-four feet in height seems regrettable (there being no good reason why a demon shouldn't be small), and it is in the long shots that it looks least effective. Furthermore, the decision to accompany its appearance with a sound effect which strongly resembles a sofa with badly-oiled casters being dragged across a floor is unfortunate to say the least, giving the impression that the Demon is some sort of mechanical prop being wheeled into place by an unseen gang of special effects men. The close-ups of the Demon, however, are still powerful, particularly the mid-close-up in which it leans forward, talon outstretched to grasp its victim. How might Tourneur have constructed the Demon scenes? Perhaps through use of shadow, cutting to quick close-ups of a talon or an eye or something scaly (a visual interpretation of James' partial descriptions of the Demon), intercut with the extremely impressive smoking footprints seen when Holden is being followed through the wood, and ending with a brief shot of the Demon leaning forward to grasp its victim. Perhaps, but alas, we'll never know; indeed, as Dr. Holden rather fatuously observes at the close of the film, "Maybe it's better not to know," a position which would have appalled Sherlock Holmes but one which leaves us free to enjoy *Night of the Demon* as it is, imperfections and all.

The Region 1 DVD from Columbia Tristar includes both the full British print and the truncated U.S. version, the latter cut by Chester from 95 minutes to 82 minutes to allow it to be featured on double-bills (under the title *Curse of the Demon*). Comparing the two versions is instructive, in a depressing kind of way, and certainly serves to disprove the maxim that "less is more". Not only does one get considerably less of Niall MacGinnis (his key scenes with his mother have been ruthlessly excised), but the actual narrative structure has been altered, with the famous scene where Holden senses something strange in the corridor of his hotel actually being moved back one day to precede, rather than follow, Holden's and

Joanna's visit to Karswell's stately pile. Distribution problems have meant that the long-rumoured and much-anticipated Region 2 50th Anniversary Edition of *Night of the Demon* has as yet failed to materialise, but for those who can't wait, region-free versions of dubious legality can be found on-line.

*John Exshaw*

***The Orphanage (El Orfanato)* (Dir. Juan Antonio Bayona) Spain/Mexico 2007**  
Optimum Releasing

*The Orphanage* is the first feature length film by Spanish director Juan Antonio Bayona, ‘presented’ and produced by the better known Mexican director Guillermo Del Toro, who has made successful films in Spain -*The Devil’s Backbone (El Espinazo del Diablo, 2001)* and *Pan’s Labyrinth (El Labertino del fauno, 2006)* and America (*Blade II, 2002* and *Hellboy, 2004*). Bayona’s debut feature shares some thematic concerns and broad interest in the imaginary world of children with Del Toro’s recent Spanish films; however, it updates these ideas to put a contemporary spin on the old-fashioned haunted house genre.

The film’s central protagonist is Laura (Belén Rueda), who has returned with her doctor husband Carlos (Fernando Cayo), and young son Simón (Roger Príncipe) to the orphanage in which she grew up. She plans to reopen the facility for the treatment of physically and mentally disabled children. Simón, who was adopted by Laura and Carlos and has AIDS – neither of which he is aware of – requires regular medication, but otherwise appears to be a normal healthy child, with a vivid imagination and two imaginary friends. At first Laura enjoys showing Simón her former playground, but when she takes him to the small cove nearby, his exploration of a cave uncovers a new and apparently imaginary friend. This new presence in Simón’s life introduces him to five more ‘imaginary’ companions who live in the orphanage and his behaviour quickly begins to change, becoming distant and argumentative. At the orphanage’s grand re-opening – a masked party for the children who will be treated there – Laura has an argument with her son, who then disappears. While searching for Simón, Laura has a disconcerting encounter with a masked child and ends up locked in a bathroom. When she is found and realises Simón is still missing, Laura panics and starts a fruitless search party that ends at the cove. With her son’s disappearance lengthening, the closure of the orphanage and the police’s unsuccessful search, Laura begins to unravel. After six months, she continues to insist that Simón is still alive and, fearing that the house itself has something to do with his disappearance, invites a medium to visit despite Carlos’ scepticism. When the medium discovers the trace of a traumatic past event, involving children from the orphanage, Laura convinces Carlos – who has decided to sell the house and try to move on – to let her stay and solve the mystery, delving back into her own past to try and find out what has happened to her son.

From the wonderful opening credits, featuring children’s hands ripping off sections of ornately decorated wallpaper to reveal the names of the principle cast and crew, *The Orphanage* establishes itself as a quality horror film, with psychologically motivated characters and a well-constructed narrative. Indeed, it bears significant resemblance to the kind of horror recently exemplified in films like *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999) and *The Others* (Alejandro Amenábar, 2001), which highlight attention paid to atmosphere and a narrative that suppresses vital information until the final moments. There are moments where the influence of these films, *The Others* in particular, seems to be in danger of overwhelming *The Orphanage*, particularly in the mysterious appearance of an old woman claiming to be a social worker, and in the design of the house itself. Nevertheless, these generic resonances are successfully embedded into the narrative and visual design of the film, and as such the repetitious themes and images are deployed with intelligence, rather than out of laziness. The particular reflexivity and propensity for the horror genre to repeat itself, whether in narrative or imagery, is after all one of its key pleasures. Overall the film manages to use its more familiar elements to great effect, holding its scares in balance with the emotional life of the characters.

The narrative takes its structure from the literary tradition of the Fantastic, whereby there exists more than one explanation of events, thus providing a narrative hesitation between the real and the supernatural. This central aspect of the film, which mostly concerns Laura's state of mind – offering the viewer uncertainty between seeing her as mad, or believing in the existence of ghosts – is well balanced, making the conclusion deservedly affecting. The real strength of the film lies in the characterisation of Laura and Belén Rueda's performance as the latest in a long series of investigating women within the horror genre, to which Laura adds an interesting dimension as a representation of motherhood. Through these means the film interrogates its central theme concerning the relationship between mother and child. Our access to Laura throughout the film ensures alignment with her during the deterioration of her mental state and Rueda's performance rewards this attention by successfully incorporating elements of hysteria and strength, embodying the central dilemma offered by the plot, and thus making it very difficult decisively to place her as mad. Laura is certainly not a passive heroine, and her experiences evoke a significant amount of sympathy.

The complicated nature of the plot brings many different elements into the film, and in reflection makes it seem almost as though the filmmakers were working from a checklist of terror. Even so it works very well – I freely admit to spending a great deal of time peeking through my fingers and even shrieking with fear – as the scares are woven into the texture of the film from very early on, almost acting as signposts for what is to come (in particular the image of a scarecrow at the front of the frame as the children play in the opening flashback to Laura's childhood). In this way the horror gradually builds up so that the last section of the film has an atmospheric and emotional intensity that is at points almost unbearable.

Whilst many of these elements provide a welcome relief from the blatancy of many contemporary horror films, particularly in terms of actual scariness, *The Orphanage* is not without its flaws. The ending is potentially overly sentimental, and the appearance of a deformed child in the plot echoes a current trend for deformity – as seen in the recent cycles spawned by the remakes of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Dir. Marcus Nispel, 2003) and *The Hills Have Eyes* (Dir. Alexandre Aje, 2006) – which over-literalises aspects of monstrosity. However, these criticisms can be countenanced to some degree: the issue of deformity is certainly far more sensitively handled than in other recent examples, and the sentimentality of the narrative is part of a structure working from the beginning and plays to the film's interrogation of the relationship of parents to their children and their own childhood. In the current climate of horror which overwhelmingly consists of flaccid slasher remakes and unpleasantly brutal but repetitive fare, *The Orphanage* succeeds in using horror to interrogate some interesting narrative and thematic tensions, whilst remaining a refreshingly atmospheric and genuinely frightening film.

*Lucy Fife*

***Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (Dir. Tim Burton) USA/UK 2007**

Warner Home Video

The onscreen marriage between horror and the musical formats has been a difficult one, and the most memorable examples of genuinely unsettling musical moments have tended to occur in otherwise family-friendly fare – the eerie Hallowe'en sequence in *Meet Me in St Louis* (Dir. Vincente Minelli, 1944); Gene Wilder's 'Wondrous Boat Ride' in *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (Dir. Mel Stuart, 1971); and, of course, Margaret Hamilton's Wicked Witch of the West and her flying monkeys in *The Wizard of Oz* (Dir. Victor Fleming, 1939). The most complete fusions of the two genres have often been comedic in tone; see, for example, *Little Shop of Horrors* (Dir. Frank Oz, 1986), *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Dir. Jim Sharman, 1975) and *Cannibal: The Musical* (Dir. Trey Parker, 1996). More straight-faced fare has tended to fall flat, as Joel Schumacher gamely proved with *The Phantom of the Opera* (2004). Nonetheless, Schumacher's film of Andrew Lloyd Webber's stage-show seems to have jump-started a renaissance of sorts for the horror musical, with rock operas proving especially popular – *Repo! The Genetic Opera* (Dir. Darren Lynn Bousman, 2008) is shortly due for release, and a remake of Brian de Palma's *Phantom of the Paradise* (1974) is reportedly in the offing. The most successful horror musicals to date, though, have come from Tim Burton stable – first, as writer/producer of stop-motion classic *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (Dir. Henry Selick, 1993) and now as director of *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (2007), an adaptation of Stephen Sondheim's dark and gory take on the fabled and vengeful coiffeur.

In the 160 years or so since the character of Sweeney Todd made his first fictional appearance in the penny dreadful *The String of Pearls*, the tale of the murderous barber who dispatches his clientele via a customized barber's chair has undergone various re-imaginings on stage and screen, but the well-known revenge plot wasn't introduced until Christopher Bond's 1973 play. Sondheim's stage musical and Burton's film also prioritise this retribution narrative, opening as Benjamin Barker (Johnny Depp) returns to London after a fifteen-year stint in an Australian penal colony. Unjustly punished for a crime he didn't commit, Barker has changed his name to Sweeney Todd, and comes bearing a grudge against the dastardly Judge Turpin (Alan Rickman) whom he holds responsible for his transportation and separation from his wife and daughter, and also Turpin's greasy accomplice, Beadle Bamford (Timothy Spall). Todd quickly relocates to his old stomping ground on Fleet Street, where he encounters Mrs Lovett (Helena Bonham Carter), purveyor of the worst pies in London. She updates him on the fate of his family; his wife has been driven to poison herself, while Judge Turpin has claimed Todd's daughter Johanna (Jayne Wisener) as his ward. Todd is now hell-bent on revenge and determined to be reunited with his child. Soon, a run-in with Adolfo Pirelli (Sacha Baron Cohen), a rival barber who threatens to expose Todd's real identity, inspires him to take bloody action. Faced with the prospect of disposing of Pirelli's body, he and Mrs Lovett hatch their opportunistic plan to take advantage of Todd's razor skills to improve the quality of the meat that goes into her pies, all the while hiding this truth from Pirelli's young assistant Toby (Edward Sanders) to whom Mrs Lovett has taken a shine. Young Toby proves a useful asset once her pie shop becomes the toast of the town, and is especially adept at getting rid of a mysterious beggar woman (Laura Michelle Kelly) who persists in hanging around. Meanwhile Anthony (Jamie Campbell Bower), a young sailor who had accompanied Todd on his voyage home, has fallen in love with Johanna, and (unaware of Todd's paternal link to the girl) enlists the barber's help in freeing her from Turpin's grasp. Thus, the scene seems set for Todd to fulfil his plan; but this being a revenge tragedy, the film builds to its inevitable and blood-soaked conclusion in which practically everybody ends unhappily.

*Sweeney Todd's* Grand Guignol excesses certainly mark a return to Burton's more recognisably gothic worldview than his recent output of remakes (*Planet of the Apes*, 2001; *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, 2005) and whimsical fare (*Big Fish*, 2003). The film also ranks amongst his most visually-arresting work, practically employing a monochromatic palette throughout – from the ashen faces and dark eyes of Todd and Mrs Lovett, to the washed-out, sepia tinged interiors and the rain-soaked, claustrophobic streets of London (“a hole in the world like a great black pit / And the vermin of the world inhabit it”, as Todd views it). This makes the flashes of arterial spray that accompany each swipe of Todd's blades a real shock to the senses, further heightened by the sickening sound of bones crunching as they plummet from Todd's barber's chair into Mrs Lovett's basement *en route* to the meat-grinding machine. Of course, this sensory onslaught is further achieved in the union of the film's striking visuals with Sondheim's songs and brooding score, and the film presents a number of memorable set-pieces: a bravura, dizzying trip through the streets of London to deposit Todd at Mrs Lovett's pie shop; a cheery montage of Todd disposing of his hapless customers while singing of his long-lost daughter; and Mrs Lovett's fantasy of retiring to the seaside with Todd, the only sequence in the film that is invested with any real brightness. The decision to cast non-professional vocal artists in the main roles really pays off in the case of Depp's Todd, garnering him his third Oscar nomination in five years, and adding another string to his bow as the most versatile actor currently working in Hollywood. Although his voice is certainly not a polished one, this enhances his characterisation of Todd, making him that bit rougher around the edges and (as many critics have noted) Depp manages to come off sounding a bit like David Bowie. In particular, his rendition of 'My Friends' – an ode to his razors with which he has just been reunited – stands as one of the film's most chilling moments. Bonham Carter, to be fair, actually has a more difficult task in the role of Mrs Lovett, and though she gamely tries to master the character's intricate vocal arrangements in her solo efforts, her voice is sometimes a little small, and often risks being drowned out by the orchestration itself. She does better when paired with other characters – in particular, with young Toby on the affecting 'Not While I'm Around'; and with Todd himself in 'A Little Priest', a cheery little ditty about cannibalism.

In its combination of extreme visuals with introspective and playful musical numbers, *Sweeney Todd* is that rare beast: a horror musical that takes itself just seriously enough, in which the juxtaposition of bloodshed and show-tunes is not designed to be incongruous. The film provides a relentless sensory onslaught from its stylised opening credit sequence to its final tableau, accompanied each step of the way by a series of tunes that worm their way into the viewer's consciousness. Admittedly, with its maniacally melodramatic plotting and gleeful transgression of taboos, Burton's macabre tale does not make for a subtle film; but it is masterfully executed, and probably one of the most beautifully-shot films about a vengeful mass murderer you're likely to see this year.

***Jenny McDonnell***

***30 Days of Night* (Dir. David Slade) USA 2007**  
Icon Home Entertainment

Post-9/11 and post-*Buffy*, the North American vampire has been rendered strangely toothless, and has been reconfigured as a quietened, even domesticated presence, lacking any predatory inclinations and genuine menace – Richard Roxburgh’s Dracula in the awful Hugh Jackman film *Van Helsing* (Dir. Stephen Sommers, 2004) is testament to the sterile, jaded and two-dimensional replication of vampires recently produced by Hollywood. However, a recent spate of adaptations from graphic novels has re-instated serious credibility into the horror and gothic genres, with the appearance of the likes of Frank Miller’s and Robert Rodriguez’s *Sin City* (2005); the much anticipated *The Dark Knight* (Dir. Christopher Nolan, 2008); *Watchmen* (Dir. Zack Snyder: currently in production); and most recently *30 Days of Night*, which has injected some much-needed new life into the vampire genre. Directed by David Slade (who also helmed the controversial *Hard Candy* in 2005) and adapted from the 2002 graphic novel of the same name by Steve Niles and Ben Templesmith (published by IDW Publishing), *30 Days of Night* translates the original story to the screen in all of its sanguine, dark, and violent glory. The vampire-as-villain is back, and in spectacular, visceral and brutal form. The UK DVD release is particularly worth investing in for hardcore vampire fans, containing, as it does, eight interesting making-of featurettes as well as excerpts from the graphic novel. The companion short *30 Days of Night: Bloodtrails*, which traces the origins of the film’s vampires back to their home city of New Orleans, has also been released as a separate volume.

Set in Barrow, Alaska, where each year the sun sets for thirty days, the film traces the story of Sherriff Eben Oleson (Josh Hartnett) and his estranged wife Stella (Melissa George), who come upon The Stranger (Ben Foster). He forewarns them of a calculated invasion by a pack of vampires, led by the vicious Marlow (played by the fantastic Danny Huston), which duly begins once the sun sets. With no possibility of communication with the outside world, limited power and food supplies, and vampires waiting at every turn (with no daylight to thwart them in the seemingly endless Alaskan winter), eight survivors led by Eben attempt to survive the onslaught of the bloodthirsty invaders as they comb through the wreckage of the town; at the same time, the townspeople must face personal conflicts and challenges in increasingly cramped living conditions, as children try to protect elderly parents, and quarrelling lovers heal their fractured relationships. The premise is therefore rather similar to that of the 2005 Swedish vampire movie *Frostbitten* (Dir. Anders Banke), which is also set in an isolated community besieged by vampires during the month of eternal midnight (see interview and review in our October 2006 issue)

The film successfully manages to resurrect the vampire as a figure of primal sensuality. These vampires do not belong to a romanticised, Ricean tradition of individual beings invested with rational thought or verbal interplay. Only Marlow retains any form of linguistic nuance (using both English and an ancient vampire language based on tribal and guttural sounds, which is surprisingly convincing) while the vampiric collective communicate through knowing glances and nods, and high pitched, intimidating screams, often replicating the cry of hyenas. This detail reinforces the group's depiction as an animalistic pack driven by primal instinct; they are a gluttonous, excessively violent force of nature that carry out acts of perverse carnage without remorse - picking off, decapitating and spiking victims in gloriously nasty detail. The intensity of this evil is clearly evoked from the first vampire attack, when local Gus (Grant Tilly) is devoured and decapitated. Without resorting to the woeful CGI effects which sorely marred the other major vampire movie of the last twelve months, *I Am Legend* (Dir. Francis Lawrence, 2007), the monstrous nature of the vampires is further evoked in the film’s striking special effects and use of

make-up: their two rows of yellowed jagged teeth, blown-pupils and elongated, talon-like fingernails reminding the audience that not all vampires on film have (or need) the beauty of Anne Rice's Louis (Brad Pitt) in *Interview With The Vampire* (Dir. Neil Jordan, 1994). The film makes their otherness even more apparent in their seemingly unstoppable nature. In keeping with recent trends in postmodern vampire fiction and film, the 'rule book' has been re-written and reinterpreted, so that no garlic, crucifixes or boundary restrictions can harm them; the only limitation that continues to apply is an aversion to sunlight and Ultra Violet light. God too has been disregarded, as Marlow clarifies to a whimpering victim: "God? [looking skyward and tilting his head around at the carnage] No God!"

Although the film displays a sense of novelty and inventiveness in its characterisation of its vampires, elsewhere it pays homage to modern horror classics. It incorporates the atmosphere and despair present in John Carpenter's similarly snowbound and claustrophobic remake of *The Thing* (1980), while the disturbing vampire child is clearly inspired by George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), in which a bloodstained zombified child murders her mother with a trowel. The film descends into a cat-and-mouse game of hide and seek, which successfully heightens the tension until the next inevitable bone-crunching attack on a blood-gargling victim. Slade also retreats to some familiar cult vampire territory in the use of images of burnt and scarred vampires, which recalls Kathryn Bigelow's *Near Dark* (1986), and provides a welcome reminder of past classics that warrant due credit.

Overall, the film relies on the presence and relish of Danny Huston's Marlow in order to progress the narrative, but beyond the majesty of the vampire pack, the film does falter somewhat. In particular, although the characters of Eben and Stella are the only ones provided with any back-story, the performances of Josh Hartnett and Melissa George fail to compel, and crucially they lack any on-screen chemistry. Structurally, the countdown towards sunrise appears jagged and uneven; it dislocates the timing and frequency of the horrifically violent clashes which feel as though they have occurred in a single night, and as such, leave the audience wondering why there has been no squabbling over food rations or cabin fever. The climax revisits the age-old solution to overcoming vampire invasion, calling upon the necessary heroism and sacrifice of Eben to overthrow Marlow's crew in a brutal, bone-shattering finale, temporarily suspending supernaturalism in favour of sheer physical brutality and force, but ultimately providing only a temporary closure which permits the vampire's continued existence, while suspending finality enough to facilitate a sequel.

Slade's rejuvenation of the vampire legend proves a thoroughly entertaining watch, reinstating faith in the genre which has suffered tremendously in the advent of CGI and poor remakes of superior films. By returning to the graphic novel, Slade has effectively relocated vampires from the page to the screen, allowing actions, movement and physicality to evoke sentiments of fear and otherness where other, bigger-budgeted fare, has failed. Let's hope this film will inspire a more dynamic and original approach for vampire productions to come, so we do not have to suffer more of the current direct-to-DVD dredge on offer *à la* *Lost Boys: The Tribe* (Dir. P.J. Pesce, 2008). A thoroughly refreshing bloody treat!

***Sorcha Ní Fhlainn***

***Doomsday* (Dir. Neil Marshall) UK/USA/South Africa 2008**  
Rouge Pictures / Intrepid Pictures

Given our increasingly uncertain times, it is not surprising that films such as *28 Days Later* (Dir. Danny Boyle, 2002), *Land of the Dead* (Dir. George A. Romero, 2005), *The Host* (*Gwoemul*) (Dir. Joon-ho Bong, 2006), *28 Weeks Later* (Dir. Juan Carlos Fresnadillo, 2007), *I am Legend* (Dir. Francis Lawrence, 2007), and *Cloverfield* (Dir. Matt Reeves, 2008) are all drawing audiences to the cinema. Their fictional apocalypses, rampant viruses and infected monsters allow for a safe confrontation with our global fears, secure in the knowledge that in these cinematic worlds humanity can overcome all adversity. It would seem then that it would be easy to locate Neil Marshall's third film, the post-apocalyptic fantasy *Doomsday*, within this current trend for its antagonist is the fictional Reaper virus. Being blood-borne, Reaper has the necessary qualities to suggest real-world parallels with Ebola, SARS, HIV, and perhaps even BSE. Such anticipated parallels imply that *Doomsday* has the same potential as Marshall's previous film, *The Descent* (2005), in which the director deftly merged entertaining action and scenes of appropriate horror with a narrative that was preoccupied with abjection and motherhood, and where the spilling of blood meant something. Unfortunately, in *Doomsday*, the spilling of blood is simply the spilling of blood.

The film begins on 3rd April, 2008, Glasgow, Scotland where the first signs of the Reaper virus have begun to manifest themselves. Black and white images of the infected, their skin bloated and blistered, are intercut with flashes of molecular structures and newspaper headlines. As the infected become more grotesque, so the headlines become more sensational. Over all this is the doom-laden voice of Dr Kane (Malcolm McDowell), steadily narrating the montage with fact and poetic reflection. Seventy-eight days later and Scotland is put under quarantine. A containing wall is built around its perimeter, effectively sealing it off from the rest of the world. The uninfected population gathers at the military patrolled border in an attempt to flee the virus. Amongst them is a man who shouts out that the end of world is nigh, a mother who clings to her daughter, and a hooded teenager who is slowly working his way through the crowds towards the barricades and armed soldiers. Before he can reach them, his hood is pulled down and he is revealed to be infected. Without hesitation he is shot by a soldier, his death shown in all its gory detail: the camera lingers first upon the boy's hand which explodes as bullets pierce it and then upon his convulsing body as more bullets hit. His infected blood sprays in unnatural quantities across the clean, bright faces of the uninfected before cutting back once again to his bullet-riddled body. It is an unpleasant moment that quickly defines the film's visual agenda – excessive, almost comic-book violence that renders the symbolically charged blood as nothing more than a means for presenting graphic and brutal depictions of violence against the oppressed. In this instance the oppressed respond accordingly and charge the barricades as the soldiers shoot into the crowds. More bodies explode as many are shot down. Amongst all this bloody carnage, the mother drops to the floor with her daughter, shielding her against the gunfire with her body. But it is too late. A stray bullet has taken out her daughter's right eye.

*Doomsday*'s opening sequence recalls the tenement block assault that began George A. Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), where the disaffected corralled into a claustrophobic space, the infamous exploding zombie head is substituted for the infected teenager's exploding hand and the SWAT team are replaced with the British military. In both films attempts at containing the pandemic end in panic and death, and the forces of control are overrun by the forces of chaos. It would seem then that whatever measures are taken, the chaotic will always find a way and, in *Doomsday* it does. Twenty-seven years later the Reaper

virus breaks the confines of the Scottish borders and manifests itself within central London. Fearing another pandemic, the Prime Minister, John Hatcher (Alexander Siddig) orders Major Sinclair (Rhona Mitra) of the Department of Domestic Security to hand-pick a team of soldiers and, with selected medical personnel, enter into Scotland in an effort to find a cure.

This mission, unsurprisingly, allows Sinclair to ‘find herself’ for she is, of course, the girl who lost her eye during the film’s opening sequence. Sinclair has grown up to be a distanced orphan and matured into a masculine female, an attractive but lethal soldier. With controlled force, she is an effective assassin, one who takes measured risks and gambles the lives of others in order to get the job done. In this respect, Sinclair is of the Ripley / Sarah Connor mold of Action heroines – rough, tough and beautiful – but whereas Ripley and Connor’s heroics are tempered with an emotional depth, Sinclair lacks any sense of characterisation. She is simply a highly trained and highly effective soldier who has a traumatic connection with the past. Similarly, with such masculine qualities it would be very easy to draw comparisons between Sinclair and Sarah (Shauna Macdonald), from *The Descent*. Both are born out of a violent situation and respond by replacing their femininity with a tough masculine exterior. Sarah’s narrative descent constructed her as a female immersing herself in abjection as a means of coping with the trauma of losing her only child, ironically constructing her character as she devolves into a primitive state. Sinclair on the other hand simply battles her way through the narrative, killing and killing and killing in increasingly efficient and brutal ways in order both to complete her mission and to propel the narrative forward.

Such is the suffocating extent of Sinclair’s masculinity that she functions, quite explicitly, as a female version of Snake Plissken (Kurt Russell) from *Escape from New York* (Dir. John Carpenter, 1981): both are combat veterans, both talk briefly and in grave tones and both are missing an eye. They even share narrative events, particularly a sequence where both are forced into a gladiatorial arena where they fight to the death with medieval weapons. In both instances, Sinclair and Plissken are the victors, each deftly terminating the opposition with a certain brutality that only these post-apocalyptic heroes seem to possess. The parallel with Plissken suggests a further criticism of *Doomsday*: the narrative seems to be more a collection of the ‘best bits’ from other films than an actual original screenplay. To this effect, *Doomsday* can be read as a virtual ‘reworking’ of Carpenter’s film that is interspersed with scenes or set-pieces influenced by other films. These include *The Warriors* (Dir. Walter Hill, 1979), *The Road Warrior* (Dir. George Miller, 1981) *Excalibur* (John Boorman, 1981), and *Knightriders* (Dir. George A. Romero, 1981), whilst Marshall himself cited *Zulu* (Dir. Cy Endfield, 1964), *Metalstorm* (Dir. Charles Band, 1983) and the work of Terry Gilliam as influences upon him whilst he wrote and directed the film. As a result *Doomsday* is more a collection of ideas and images than a fully realised narrative: there are the *Mad Max*-esque punks led by the psychotic Sol (Craig Conway), whose bodies are adorned with multiple piercings and tattooed with radiation symbols. They revel in extreme violence, vaudeville style performances and cannibalism. In contrast to these aggressive people is the Arthurian-inspired community under the leadership of Dr Kane. Moving up into the safety of the countryside, they have used the remnants of Scottish Heritage sites as their homes, regressing into the past as opposed to Sol’s army who have progressed into a dystopian future.

This basic sense of opposition is compounded by the introduction of a subplot involving the discovery of Cally (Myanna Buring), found locked in an underground cell; Sinclair soon finds that she is sister to Sol and daughter to Dr Kane and that father and son are engaged in a war for dominion over Scotland. With the emergence of this second storyline, it is assumed that the threads of the film’s plot will now move steadily and inexorably towards this final showdown but it does not. Instead, this potentially enhancing

plot line is mentioned, considered and then rejected in favour of more gory violence between Sinclair and assorted psychopaths. \*\*\*\*SPOILER BEGINS\*\*\*\* In fact Sol and Kane never actually meet each other at all for the duration of the film. Instead, they stand miles apart in their separate little domains, shouting degrading comments about each other but never actually doing anything about it. Perhaps predictably it will be Sinclair and Sol who will meet for the final showdown: as Frankie goes to Hollywood's 'Two Tribes' plays over the soundtrack, Sinclair and Sol engage in a car chase to the Scottish border which recalls the climatic chase of *Road Warrior* and allows for a considerable amount of vehicular and bodily carnage to take place before concluding with the decapitation of Sol. As for Sinclair, there is sequel potential for she concludes *Doomsday* by opting to stay behind. Picking up Sol's severed head, she drives back into the derelict city and confronts the remains of Sol's army. With her gun on her hip, she throws down the head and the soldiers cheer. Their new leader has emerged out of the trails of the wasteland. It is perhaps no coincidence then that Sinclair's forename name is Eden. \*\*\*\*SPOILER ENDS\*\*\*\*

Such an analysis suggests that Marshall's film is without merit but this is not necessarily the case; for *Doomsday* can be viewed in one of two ways, either as a mindless but highly entertaining and effective horror/action film or as a questionable third feature from a director who showed great promise as an emerging British genre talent. As a piece of action cinema, Marshall delivers the prerequisites extremely effectively and with great directorial command. The sense of his talent still lingers as the film contains some extraordinary images: a contemporary soldier, gun in hand, stands silhouetted before a medieval knight, the apocalyptic wasteland overrun with herds of cows and a steam train pulling out of the future city and into the pastoral past of the Scottish countryside. These are all powerful moments but they are lost in the noise and violence of the narrative, suppressing the sliver of originality and creativity that is clearly evident within these images. \*\*\*\* SPOILER BEGINS\*\*\*\*One of the film's more satisfying moments is the revelation that there is no cure. Instead, those that have remained alive within the walled confines of Scotland were simply naturally immune to the Reaper Virus. This subversion is truly apocalyptic – that only by some genetic chance will some live and some die \*\*\*\* SPOILER ENDS\*\*\*\* It further suggests there is another darker, more sombre and reflective *Doomsday* quietly mumbling in the grain.

With the film now on general release and with his name attached to multiple projects from multiple genres (*Conan the Barbarian*, *Eagle's Nest*, *Drive* and *Sacrilege* to name a few), it will be interesting to see which direction Marshall chooses to go: towards the bright but light thrills and delights of blockbuster cinema or back to the darker and more cerebral grounds of horror?

**James Rose**

***The Mist* (Dir. Frank Darabont) USA 2007**  
Dimension Films

Stephen King is renowned for his prolific production of accessible, easy-to-read horror fiction. His early novels revolutionised the way in which the genre was perceived, helping horror novels make the leap from low rent, cheap paper-back publications to the profitable realms of mainstream fiction. As a reader, I have always had something of a love/hate relationship with King's work. On the one hand, the quality of his early novels cannot be denied. *IT* (1986) ruined clowns for me forever (but it was worth it) and *Carrie* (1974) made me eternally wary of the quiet girl in the class. On the other hand, King has frequently produced some decidedly sub-standard fare, such as *The Tommyknockers* (1987), *Bag of Bones* (1998) and most of his more recent novels, which tend to spend 600 pages on character development only to have endings that cannot possibly live up to such interminably long build-ups.

However, the one area of horror writing in which Stephen King consistently excels is short fiction, as seen in collections such as *Night Shift* (1978), *Nightmares and Dreamscapes* (1993) and, more recently, *Everything's Eventual* (2002), all of which illustrate his skill at producing thought-provoking and effective horror in a few short pages. One of his best is 'The Mist', a truly disturbing tale of the end of the world originally included in the collection *Skeleton Crew* (1985), which haunted me for weeks after I first read it as an admittedly impressionable teenager. It has now been adapted as a feature film by Frank Darabont, who is no stranger to King's writing, having previously directed *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) and *The Green Mile* (1999).

I approached the film version of *The Mist* with some trepidation. Films based on King's novels and short stories have never really worked out well, generally suffering heavily from film producers' desire to make horror films 'audience friendly'. While movies such as *Carrie* (Dir. Brian de Palma, 1976) and *The Shining* (Dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1980) are renowned genre classics, poor King adaptations by far outweigh the good. The dreadful *Lawnmower Man* (Dir. Brett Leonard, 1992) is a prime offender: a minor short story about an encounter between a demonic gardener and man who loves his lawn was bizarrely turned into a rip-off of *Flowers for Algernon*; indeed, the only similarities between story and film are the title, and the fact that both involve a gruesome death involving a lawn mower. Most adaptations of King's work have been mediocre at best, then. However, like Mikael Håfström's *1408* (reviewed in the third issue), *The Mist* manages to buck this trend.

*The Mist* begins with a storm battering a small Maine town (King's favourite fictional setting) and wreaking some real havoc on the residents' homes. The film's protagonist David Drayton (an impressive turn from Thomas Jane) surveys the damage to his lakefront home, and, following a brief altercation with a neighbour, he and his young son go into town to buy supplies, leaving his wife behind in the house. As they leave, a mist begins to rise up across the lake and ominously drifts to shore. After watching army vehicles hurrying to a military base which lies above the lake, father and son arrive at the store and begin to stock up on groceries. By now, the rising mist has covered the town in an all-pervasive cloud. As the shoppers watch, an injured man staggers out of the mist and into the store, roaring at those watching to close the doors and yelling that something in the mist has attacked him.

From this point on, *The Mist* develops into a tense, stomach-churning adventure tale, but one which deftly manages to personalise the horror by keeping the focus of the story on the people trapped in the store rather than on the creatures in the mist. The monsters instead act as a barrier separating the stunned

townsfolk from their previously safe and comfortable lives, replaced now with an uncertain future. If King's novella had been written after 2001, the 9/11 interpretations would surely abound (as they did for his 2005 novel *Cell* which also featured a sudden apocalyptic calamity). Regardless, the decision to adapt the story for the screen at this juncture does seem particularly timely, and the film repeatedly taps into contemporary North American and global anxieties. King's original novella and Darabont's interpretation both lead the viewer to the conclusion that no matter what the external threat, humanity will always react in a primitive manner, resorting to violence and irrational religious impulses rather than employing logic and common sense. The true horror in *The Mist* comes when the people trapped in the store rapidly turn to religious extremism. In this, they are led by the insane Mrs. Carmody (Marcia Gay Harden) a fundamentalist preacher who had previously been the town joke but whose Old Testament ways now seem much more appealing to the townspeople as they seek to find a way in which to deal with their plight. As the horror of the situation continues to unfold with no hope in sight, they eventually offer up a human sacrifice to the beasts in the mist. Only David and a few others maintain their rationality, and in doing so become the targets of fundamentalist anger and fear. This follows in the tradition of other post-apocalyptic films such as *Day of the Dead* (Dir. George A Romero, 1985) and post-nuclear drama *The Day After* (Dir. Nicholas Meyer, 1983) which depicted the events following a nuclear war. Indeed, it could be argued that *The Mist* provides a commentary on the current growth in religious rhetoric espoused by world leaders such as George W. Bush and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in their reactions to similarly unseen and external threats: the bogeymen of terrorism and imperialism that function as their own beasts in the Mist.

Darabont's screenplay follows King's original novella almost to the letter, and his assured direction and focus upon character and atmosphere ably demonstrate that, in the hands of the right director and screenwriter, King's stories can be translated accurately and effectively to the screen. In fact, Darabont's film manages to improve on his source material, by taking its bleak conclusion and expanding it to become what is possibly the best and most disturbing five minutes I've ever witnessed in a movie. Furthermore, Thomas Jane does a great job of portraying a concerned father who has to confront an even greater threat than the tentacled beastie that lurks outside their safe haven. However, the film is stolen by Harden's portrayal of a religious fundamentalist who, following the collapse of conventional morals and thinking, has finally gained authority over those who once ridiculed her, and revels in exacting petty revenge in the face of a devastating, yet unseen, threat.

*The Mist* is a must-see for fans of Stephen King and the horror genre, providing both scares and psychological jumps that will have you thinking back on it for days after, much in the same way the novella did. Surprisingly, *The Mist* was a flop in the US, the tone of the film apparently not going down well with a home-grown audience. The bleak tone of the film may not have been what an American audience wanted at a time when their news media is filled with images of war and violence, instead preferring bland and predictable horror films such as the *Prom Night* remake (Dir. Nelson McCormick, 2008) and the umpteenth 'reimagining' of a Japanese horror films. However, *The Mist* is one of the most accomplished horror films released in the past decade, for, rather than relying on cheerleaders being stalked by guys in hockey masks, it suggests instead that the real monster might lie behind the eyes of the person standing next to you in Tesco.

***Rico Ramirez***