

## FILM REVIEWS

### TWO ACTS TO GRIND: *DEATH PROOF*, *PLANET TERROR* & THE 1970s REVIVAL

***Death Proof* (Dir. Quentin Tarantino) USA 2007**

Dimension Films/Rodriguez International Pictures/Troublemaker Studios

***Planet Terror* (Dir. Robert Rodriguez) USA 2007**

Dimension Films/Rodriguez International Pictures/Troublemaker Studios

It's been business as usual in horror movie-land this year, what with all the sequels and remakes (too many to count); unfortunate tourists who (fingers crossed) hope just to end up in a spooky hotel (*1408*) rather than a torture chamber (*Hostel: Part II*); genetically-modified beasts (*The Breed*; *Black Sheep*); and paranormal activities from creepy ventriloquist's dummies to Biblical plagues (*Dead Silence* and *The Reaping*). But perhaps the most dominant trend in this year's crop of horror films has been the ongoing obsession with the 1970s. Arguably the best horror film of 2007 (David Fincher's *Zodiac*) was not obviously a horror film at all, but a throwback to that great 1970s subgenre of investigative journalism films (such as *All the President's Men*); and the most notorious film of the year was the 1970s-inspired *Grindhouse*, the double-feature by Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino which aimed to recapture the titular cinematic experience of grotty exploitation flicks for a modern multiplex audience, rather than the drive-in and midnight movie theatres they would have played to in the 1960s and 1970s.

In April, *Grindhouse* made its US debut as a three-hour feature, comprising a double-bill of Tarantino's *Death Proof* and Rodriguez's *Planet Terror*, complete with deliberately abrupt cuts and missing reels; grainy footage to suggest decaying film stock; and fake trailers directed by a veritable who's-who of contemporary horror directors, all of whom had major movie releases of their own this year. Rodriguez added fake trailer *Machete* to his duties as *Planet Terror* director; Rob Zombie (director of another 1970s throwback, the *Halloween* remake that took advantage of the Labor Day weekend to top the US box office) contributed *Werewolf Women of the SS* (featuring a relatively-restrained turn from notorious scenery-chewer Nicolas Cage as Fu Manchu); Eli Roth took time out from coming up with his 'original' idea of using girls instead of guys as the focus of *Hostel: Part II* to put together his fake trailer for slasher-flick Thanksgiving; and best of the bunch was Edgar Wright's *Don't* (a near-perfect recreation of the kind of inexplicable and demented Euro-horror that populated the shelves of the earliest video stores; it featured a cast of many of his regulars from TV's *Spaced*, *Shaun of the Dead* and this year's *Hot Fuzz*, which played something like *Bad Boys 2* meets *The Wicker Man*). All in all, the *Grindhouse* project had the makings of a fascinating experiment in filmmaking, an attempt to replicate a subgenre of cinema and the now-lost experience of viewing it, but infamously the film failed at the US box office. Executive producers Harvey and Bob Weinstein took evasive action, repackaging the film as two separate feature-length instalments, re-instating the missing reels and dumping the fake trailers. In Europe, then, the film became the single-greatest disappointment of 2007 even before it arrived on these shores. But how much more disappointing it proved when the first feature-length half arrived in the shape of Tarantino's *Death Proof*, an irritating, masturbatory mess of a film that seems to have been made with only one audience in mind: Quentin Tarantino.

*Death Proof* is a film in which very little happens – twice. The first half of the film introduces us to the first group of ‘The Girls’ (the kinds of characters that should be bumped off within the first ten or fifteen minutes of an exploitation flick, making way for the main action) – Arlene (Vanessa Ferlito), Jungle Julia (Sydney Poitier), and Shanna (Jordan Ladd). They drive around, dangling legs precariously out of car windows, shooting the breeze and planning a girls-only trip to Shanna’s father’s cabin. Eventually, they end up in a bar, where they lead Eli Roth on and politely decline to comment on Tarantino’s embarrassing extended cameo as Warren the bartender, and bitch about other girls, primarily Pam (Rose McGowan) who, in turn, bitches about them to Stuntman Mike (Kurt Russell). After The Girls consume a lot of alcohol and talk a lot of what Tarantino seems to think is his trademark dialogue, *Reservoir Dogs* is fast becoming a very distant memory, and we’re not even at the halfway point. First, Arlene has to give Stuntman Mike a lap-dance before Pam can ill-advisedly accept a lift home from the tee-total, slightly weird but apparently harmless Stuntman. Stuntman Mike, however, is a classic stalk-and-slash killer who uses his specially-modified stunt car in place of a blade; he quickly dispatches the hapless Pam before tracking down the rest of The Girls and running their car off the road, dismembering and annihilating them in a multi-angle orgy of carnage. Fifteen months later, Stuntman Mike is on the road again; Abernathy (Rosario Dawson), Kim (Tracie Thoms) and Lee (Mary Elizabeth Winstead) are a new group of Girls who drive around, dangling their legs out of car windows, shooting the breeze and planning a weekend off with their stunt-lady friend Zoë Bell, recently arrived from New Zealand. Stuntman Mike has picked the wrong bunch of girls to mess with this time: two of them are stunt-drivers, fans of *Vanishing Point* and well-able to handle a stick-shift; and one of the others is Rosario Dawson (the fourth doesn’t really figure, as they just use her as collateral to borrow the car that they want to test-drive). Attempts to run these Girls off the road only get them mad, intent on getting their revenge on the man who has such disregard for a 1970 white Dodge challenger (let alone the women within). \*\*\*\*SPOILER FOLLOWS\*\*\*\* In what is presumably supposed to be an example of Girl Power, they track Stuntman Mike down and spend the last few minutes of the film beating to a pulp the not-so-tough-now-are-ya? Stuntman, who is, it transpires, just a weak, whiney coward after all; and the credits roll after a vintage freeze-frame. \*\*\*\*SPOILER ENDS\*\*\*\*

For the first half of the film or so, Tarantino does at least follow through on the idea recapturing the grainy look of a 1970s exploitation flick and transplanting it to the present day (indicated by the inclusion of mobile phones, text messaging and iPods). But at the midpoint of the film, two key scenes seem to drag the film and its *mise en scène* into the present day. The first is the visceral multi-angle repeat of Stuntman Mike’s murder of the first car-load of girls; a sequence that is practically voyeuristic in its individual views of each girl’s demise and shot with such visual flair that it serves as a telling reminder that this is a product of 2007. The next key scene occurs shortly afterwards, when the second group of girls are introduced: for a few minutes, the film turns from grainy colour to black and white; when it returns to colour, all the scratchy jumpiness of the opening half has disappeared, leaving a pristine print for the remainder of the film. It’s unlikely that any change of reels in a 1970s grindhouse cinema could ever have produced so drastic an improvement; and it seems as though Tarantino suddenly realised the folly of trying to recreate the grindhouse experience for an entire feature, and gave up on the gimmicky sleaziness of the opening scenes in favour of a more polished visual style.

This is the least of its problems, though, and in order fully to capture the spirit of the kind of 1970s exploitation flick it to which it aims to pay homage, *Death Proof* should have been driven by a sense of narrative urgency. Instead, the first half of the film is languorous, weighed down by turgid and

unmemorable dialogue; and by the time Stuntman Mike finally starts going about his business of carnage, the film has already become a bloated irritant that is not eased any by the second half's mirrored structure, scenario and dialogue. Admittedly, things pick up when Zoë Bell and co begin their motoring hi-jinx with some very impressive and highly ill-advised stunt-work atop a speeding car, and the comedy *volte face* of the final minutes may raise a smile in some quarters, but it's too little, too late to banish the tedium of all that has gone before. At least Kurt Russell looks as though he's having fun throughout, but in truth the character of Stuntman Mike is actually another of the problems of the film. An all-too-knowing glance at camera as he sets off to dispatch Pam and then the other Girls indicates that we should recognize his status as a cult figure, but the character is so thinly drawn that Russell has nothing much to work with that can actually justify such a tag. It's enough, apparently, that Tarantino thinks Stuntman Mike is a ready-made icon, without actually bothering to write him that way. From the opening shot of feet on a dashboard to the casting of Uma Thurman look-a-like (and erstwhile stunt double) Zoë Bell, ultimately *Death Proof* emerges as a vehicle for Tarantino's ever-increasing self-indulgence; and fails either to sustain the experiment of recreating the down-and-dirty spirit of the 1970s or to succeed as a film on its own terms.

*Death Proof* has underperformed at the box office, and proved such a disappointment on all fronts that the prospect of shelling out again for Rodriguez's instalment did not seem a particularly appealing one; but what a pleasant surprise *Planet Terror* proved to be when it made an appearance as the closing feature of this year's Horrorthon festival at the Irish Film Institute. In contrast to the dull, flat and fundamentally pointless *Death Proof*, *Planet Terror* is unashamedly silly, overblown fare: but crucially, it remains more aware of its own rules as an act of homage to the exploitation genre and the grindhouse experience, even coming prompted by the release of an experimental biological weapon which turns people into zombies. A selection of stock characters and their back-stories are introduced in the opening stages of the film: go-go dancer Cherry Darling (Rose McGowan) who wants to make a change for the better; her mysterious ex-boyfriend El Wray (Freddy Rodriguez); grizzled Sheriff Hague (Michael Biehn); even-more-grizzled local restaurateur J.T. Hague (Jeff Fahey); Dakota Block (Marley Shelton), on the run from her initially-domineering, subsequently- zombie husband William (Josh Brolin); renegade scientist Abby (Naveen Andrews); and a large group of supporting players (including a turn from Tom Savini as Deputy Tolo). Some gross-out hospital procedures and zombie attacks later, Cherry has lost a leg (to be replaced by the end of the film with a machine gun) and the motley crew of survivors have been assembled and are ready to battle past the zombies into the military base that houses the bio-weapon, and attempt to put things right.

*Planet Terror* is not without its faults: in particular in the early stages, there are moments when the pace lags a little under the weight of introducing such a broad array of leading characters, and the cameos by Bruce Willis and (of course) Quentin Tarantino in the military sequences are complete misfires – as are the appearance of standard Tarantino-inspired in-jokes (such as Red Apple cigarettes and close-ups of feet) which prove merely to be an irritating reminder of the self-indulgence of *Death Proof*. But ultimately, *Planet Terror* just about succeeds because it stays true to the form that it sets out to replicate. Rodriguez maintains a consistently grainy visual style throughout, building to the film's funniest gag involving a missing reel and the omission of salient exposition; likewise, the tone, plotting and characterization remain gleefully exaggerated throughout, allowing him to poke fun at the excesses of the exploitation film while simultaneously adhering to its rules. Fundamentally, Rodriguez's over-the-top exaggeration of an exploitation film manages to fuse the necessary elements of comedy and horror that

the *Grindhouse* experiment inevitably called for; and more importantly, he lets the audience in on the joke. In this, at least, it succeeds where *Death Proof* failed.

***Jenny McDonnell***

***Halloween* (Dir. Rob Zombie) USA, 2007**  
Dimension Films

Famously, not a drop of blood was spilled onscreen during John Carpenter's finest film, *Halloween*, which was released in 1978 and helped spawn the slasher genre which would dominate American horror cinema for the next decade. Predictably, the same cannot be said of Rob Zombie's latest cinematic abomination (following the dreadful double whammy of *House of a Thousand Corpses* and *The Devil's Rejects*), a pointless, witless remake which makes brain-numbingly explicit all that was left chillingly unsaid in the groundbreaking original, and as a result is more often unintentionally hilarious than terrifying.

The original Michael Myers ('The Shape') frightened audiences and intrigued critics because he was a genuine enigma, a soulless killing machine spawned amidst the happy families and orderly surroundings of a seemingly idyllic suburban neighbourhood. The opening sequence, in which "*Psycho* unites with the Halloween sequence of *Meet Me in St. Louis*" (as Robin Wood has memorably phrased it), remains one of the most dramatic in modern horror cinema; moreover, it established from the outset the impossibility of ever knowing what motivated such a young child to commit bloody murder. By way of contrast, given the deeply dysfunctional background of Zombie's young Michael Myers, one would almost be amazed had he not grown up to be a serial killer. Zombie's greatest mistake is to spend almost half the film's running time showing us just *why* his leading character became a brutal monster, in the process utterly divesting this iconic figure of any shred of genuine menace. He makes us sit through thirty minutes of painfully unsubtle set-up before we even get to Myers' first murder. It's akin to a remake of *Jaws* setting the scene for a spot of human-chomping by painstakingly explaining first that the Great White's parents had been killed by fishermen and that he had been bullied as a sprat by all of the bigger fish. If only someone had gotten to him in time!

Here, the reasons for Michael's psychosis are blindingly obvious. This being a Rob Zombie movie, Michael's mother (Sheri Moon Zombie) is a stripper (in one of the few clever in-jokes, we're told that she works in 'The Rabbit in Red', a reference that fans of the original will recognise). His sister Judith (Hanna Hall) is a sexually-precocious, foul-mouthed teen, whilst his mother's boyfriend Ronnie (played by William Forsythe) is an abusive, leering thug who sits round the house all day drinking beer and watching television. Michael himself is a chubby, blonde, lank-haired ten-year-old who looks more pasty than menacing. Less than five minutes in, though, he's dissecting a pet rat, wearing a silly-looking clown mask and screaming obscenities at his headmaster, so we know this kid's got issues from the start (presumably Zombie just didn't have time to include scenes of fire-starting and bedwetting). However, he does seem to love his Mom and his baby sister, Boo, so he's not all bad, even if he has just beaten a bully to death with a branch. Nevertheless, when Judith refuses to take him trick-or-treating so that she can fool around with her greasy-looking boyfriend, Michael descends into complete madness, and decides to carry out some bloody trick-or-treating of his own.

This marks the end of the first act of the film; the second heralds the entry of Malcolm McDowell as Dr Sam Loomis, whose shameless chewing of scenery makes Donald Pleasance's performance in the original seem positively restrained. First seen in an appalling wig and groovy 70s threads, Dr Loomis is Michael's court-appointed psychiatrist, and the next, even more ill-advised segment of the film depicts their relationship over the months which follow. So we get scenes of young Michael making silly-looking

masks, fidgeting his way through tape-recorded interviews, and asking his mother (now looking quite respectable and non-stripper-like, so it seems that the murders, though tragic, have at least straightened her out) when he can come home. We're clearly meant to be gaining some sort of sympathy for this poor, deranged child, but the fact that he gets chubbier and whinier in each successive sequence doesn't help, and even another (distinctly Hannibal Lecter-like) explosion of violence involving a fork doesn't really liven things up that much.

By the time little Michael has grown up – literally, and in all directions, as he's now played by ex-WWF star Tyler Mane, who is 6'8 and weighs about 250 pounds – the audience will probably be wondering how he managed to work out so much if he's in such a small cell all the time. Have they been conducting medical experiments on him on the sly? Is it a *really* elaborate mask? The fact that the adult Michael Myers is here a gigantic hulk of a man capable of punching through walls and breaking steel shackles with his bare hands also means that one of the most effective tricks of the original – the way in which Myers would suddenly just *appear* in the edge of the frame – is invalidated: you can see, and hear, and *smell* this guy coming three blocks away. The inanity of the asylum sequences – which seem to be a kind of extension of those contained in the little-known US TV version of the original film, added to bulk up the original running time – can be perfectly summed up by the most jaw-droppingly ridiculous exchange of the entire film (an accomplishment in itself): a scene in which Loomis actually tells Michael that he's his *best friend*. That sound you just heard may well be Donald Pleasance rolling in his grave.

Naturally, Michael escapes, and the final section of the film – the one which bears most resemblance to the structure and content of the original – can begin. Michael returns to Haddonfield to catch up with his little sister (how he discovered her whereabouts whilst mutely confined to an asylum remains a mystery, of course), and the body count begins to rise even further, despite the fact that Loomis is in hot pursuit, helped by bad horror film regular Brad Dourif as Sheriff Brackett. The new Laurie Strode (Scout Taylor-Compton) – who here wears glasses to show that she's more intelligent and repressed than her slutty cheerleading friends – is slightly better than expected, but her performance is still nowhere near as affecting as that of Jamie Leigh Curtis, whose shy, wary hesitancy made a character who might otherwise have been a boring goody-two shoes immensely likable. For about ten minutes or so, the film moves along pretty well, but tellingly, this is actually because this section contains a number of scenes which are virtually shot-for-shot facsimiles of sequences from the original film, such as the classic moment where Myers silently dons a sheet before murdering Laurie's friend Linda and her boyfriend Bob. Crucially, we don't get nearly enough time to know Laurie, her friends, or the streets of Haddonfield themselves, so when the murders do begin, they're not so much suspenseful as they are predictably gory retreads of material handled better elsewhere.

Having gone to such pains to establish Michael as the sadly damaged result of a deeply dysfunctional background, and therefore more sad than bad, *Zombie* changes tack completely in the final reel and allows Loomis (as in Carpenter's original) to rave about the fact that he is the embodiment of absolute evil, and ultimately a creature of supernatural rather than human providence. This worked – just about – in Carpenter's film because it was made clear to us that Michael's initial acts of violence were a shocking eruption of disorder in an otherwise orderly world. Here, Michael is so obviously the product of a troubled childhood environment that he cannot suddenly be castigated as a hulking spawn of demonic evil without completely cancelling out the ham-fisted efforts at psychological realism attempted earlier.

Still, despite having all the tawdry ingredients of the typical Rob Zombie film – strippers, murderous poor white trash, dead cheerleaders, heavy metal, lots of bare breasts, unconvincing 1970s settings and repetitive, pointless gore – this is probably the best of his (admittedly rather woeful) film-making efforts to date, because it does, very occasionally, show an odd spark of narrative coherence and wit amongst all the fan-boy ultra-violence he condescendingly doles out for his core audience of cinematically-illiterate seventeen-year old metal-heads. Some of the in-jokes are nicely handled, and it's pleasant to see such a wide selection of 1970s horror talent (including the likes of Ken Foree, Brad Dourif, Udo Kier, and Dee Wallace) briefly on the big screen again. Nonetheless, the film is still a complete mess, and further testament, as if any were needed, to the sheer pointlessness of the Hollywood remake factory. The real horror here is not Michael Myers, but the fact that this film was made at all: one can only hope that the boogeyman disembowels those responsible before they can dredge up a sequel.

*Bernice M. Murphy*

***Hostel: Part II* (Dir. Eli Roth) USA, 2007**

Lionsgate

Since bursting onto the scene with *Cabin Fever* (2002), Eli Roth has emerged as a director who pays homage to the great horror filmmakers of the late 1970s and early 1980s, appealing to hardened devotees of classic 1970s horror cinema and introducing younger viewers to that golden age of splatter and slasher films. The surprise success of *Cabin Fever* (picked up by Lionsgate at the Toronto Film Festival after a ferocious bidding war) led to the green lighting of a number of other Roth projects. The fledgling director was granted a budget of five million dollars to develop and shoot *Hostel* (2005) under the tutelage of Quentin Tarantino who encouraged him to make low budget horror films in order to establish his name as a horror filmmaker during a time of reawakened public interest in the genre. Subsequently *Hostel* made a killing at the box office and on DVD. This year saw the release of *Hostel: Part II*, which promised to be a bloodbath of a sequel that would further fuel the ongoing debate regarding the apparent popularity of so-called ‘torture porn’ (or ‘gornography’) in horror cinema. However, it seems that the initial success of *Hostel* (which infamously depicted the buying and selling of torture victims by wealthy sadists seeking perverse thrills) was something of a double-edged sword for Roth. Sequels are a daunting task for any screenwriter, and in Roth’s case, this reprise of the original is more a messy montage of gory death scenes probably written out of the first film than a coherent, intelligent and thought-provoking screenplay. The surprising depths of the original, which are only truly revealed upon multiple viewings and exposure to Roth’s insightful and entertaining commentaries on the DVD, simply do not repeat themselves in the sequel, despite the hopes of Roth’s passionate fan base.

The film begins where *Hostel* left off, revealing that the only survivor of the events of the original is suffering from post-traumatic stress and paranoia. His paranoia is justified; he dies just moments later in an unintentionally hilarious scene at the breakfast table. In again featuring this character, the scope of *Hostel: Part II* could have been opened up, and the viewer might have been forgiven for expecting a continuation of the events of the first film, but this is not the case. Instead the film merely retreads the same ground as *Hostel* but reverses the original’s premise (which focused on three sexually-starved guys) by introducing three new female protagonists – Beth (Lauren German), Whitney (Bijou Phillips) and Lorna (Heather Matarazzo) Like their predecessors, the trio are persuaded to travel to Bratislava for a spa weekend by the alluring Axelle (Vera Jordanova). At the Hostel, the group is gradually split up, and one by one the girls are snatched by members of the Elite Hunting Group (the corporation who provide the torture victims and location) and subjected to various methods of torture. \*\*\*\*SPOILER FOLLOWS\*\*\*\*The formula of the original film is closely replicated: both the promiscuous and the more chaste members of each group are dispatched, and in each case an arrogant American survives (the smug Paxton in the original film, and wealthy Beth here). \*\*\*\*SPOILER ENDS\*\*\*\* However, the build-up to each torture sequence is simply too long and laden with expectations of extreme gore that more often than not are not met. The editing is very uneven and the quick cuts employed by Roth compromise the subsequent cycles of set-up and follow-through; and crucially, we do not see much of the victims or their injuries. The only notable exception is the scene when one victim is sliced open while she is suspended upside down over a naked woman in a bath. Here, the editing is slow and graphic, but the lack of continuity (mere spatters one minute, Glastonbury mud-bath levels the next) proves infuriating and plain daft. Instead of leaving the viewer hungry for more, the film descends into tedium.

On some levels, Roth could be accused of borrowing his concept from Tarantino’s *Kill Bill*, but by spreading his story over two ‘volumes’ rather than one interesting instalment, he leaves the audience

disappointed with such a drawn-out plot and a lack of finality in the story. The film attempts to illustrate the corporate nature of torture and offers minor character resolutions which at least prohibit innumerable sequels (a fate which far too many horror franchises propagated in the 1980s, including *Nightmare On Elm Street* and *Friday the 13th*), but it also simultaneously counteracts the plot and narrative as it is forced to extend itself to outdo its original. Tellingly, although *Hostel: Part II* is only the second instalment (in comparison to the usual eight or nine movie chapters seen in the 1980s horror movement), Roth's film is already tired, a mere parody of history's and popular culture's most infamous villains, with little imagination left by the time of the inevitable 'twist' ending and genitally-abusive climax.

Much to the joy of Fangoria and ComicCon fans at conventions around the US earlier this year, Roth promoted the film as gorier, nastier and sicker than the original "only this time with girls!" Despite the highlighted gender differences (which actually have no significant impact on the film at all), it fails to build upon the political subtext which many critics detected in the original. If his first film can be regarded as a cinematic vision of Abu Ghraib-inspired horror in its echoes of the kinds of horrific abuses seen in the widely-publicised photographs of US Military personnel sexually humiliating and sadistically dominating Iraqi inmates, Roth's sequel could have provided a further platform for debate on the continued practice of so-called 'extraordinary rendition' and the global network of torture. This is, after all, a film about torture, about sick and debased sexual desires and the terrible misuse of physical force. Yet, Roth's clichés only serve to offend the viewer rather than genuinely provoking thought. The deaths and torture scenes featured here include a (literal) blood bath *à la* Countess Elizabeth Bathory; the castration of a very generously-endowed male victim; and a cannibal dining slowly on his living victim's leg-flesh while enjoying some classical music and a glass of wine (a nice Chianti, I presume...). Such unimaginative homage to the deeds of infamous horror icons are so lazy as to imply not only that Roth did not bank on a sequel being made, but also that he hurriedly had to complete the screenplay in order to capitalise on the original's unexpected success. The resulting film is simply quite dull and, worse still, even lacks the gross-out factor Roth has come to depend on to appease his core audience.

What will also particularly disappoint such fans is the fact that Roth had three specific plot moments when he could have altered the all-too-predictable arc of the script and genuinely surprised viewers. At each turn, however, he fails to seize his chance. One scenario in particular, which involves a complete about-turn in a lead character's motives, could have been more fleshed out in a much more satisfactory manner. \*\*\*\* SPOLIER FOLLOWS\*\*\*\* It is ultimately revealed that the Slavic Hostel is running an international killing auction on each of its guests (a kind of murderous eBay), and that the winners of the auction are drafted into this world of club membership and must be tattooed and contracted if they wish to participate in the murder. Those who fail to murder the victims they have bought become prey themselves because they have broken their contract \*\*\*\*SPOLIER ENDS\*\*\*\*. What is illustrated here is a world full of victims – torture victims, economic victims and emotional victims – in which the Almighty Dollar is the key to salvation. Perhaps Roth can relate to this after the release of the film. He has already scrapped plans for a third instalment, claiming he has no interest in pursuing the project any further, an impulse that may in part be motivated by the fact that *Hostel: Part II* holds the record for being one of the most pirated films available on the internet and lost over twenty five percent of its international box office before its cinematic release; and since making its cinematic debut, it has been slated by both critics and fans alike. For any director, this truly is the stuff of nightmares....

***Sorcha Ní Fhlainn***

*Night of the Eagle* (Dir. Sidney Hayers) UK, 1962  
Optimum Home Entertainment, 2007

A minor masterpiece of British horror cinema, Sidney Hayers's *Night of the Eagle*, though less well-known than Jacques Tourneur's *Night of the Demon*, may fairly be considered a companion piece to that 1957 classic of the supernatural. Made in 1962 and based on Fritz Leiber's novel *Conjure Wife* (first published in 1943, and filmed the following year as *Weird Woman*), *Night of the Eagle* tells the story of Professor Norman Taylor, a medical college lecturer who, as the saying goes, appears to have it all: a brilliant career, a happy marriage, a beautiful home, a nifty two-seater, and handsome as hell to boot.

When we first meet the professor (played by Peter Wyngarde), he is intoning the words "I Do Not Believe" as he inscribes them on a blackboard for his students, the objects of his disbelief being the supernatural, witchcraft, superstition, and the psychic, all of which, he says, demonstrate "a morbid desire to escape from reality" which can only exist in an atmosphere of belief. After nailing his colours to the mast in such uncompromising fashion, it is quite clear that Professor Taylor, like his fellow sceptic Dr. John Holden in *Night of the Demon*, is well on course for a rude awakening.

Although Taylor remains oblivious to it, his recent appointment and likely promotion has stirred resentment within the faculty, and in particular amongst the faculty wives, whose favourite pastimes appear to be malicious gossip and games of bridge liberally sprinkled with spite. Taylor's wife, Tansy (Janet Blair), is well aware of the bad vibes attracted by Norman, and is doing her best to deflect them by means of voodoo ritual, having become convinced of its efficacy during a recent trip to Jamaica. But when Taylor discovers a shrivelled-up spider and then a charm pinned inside the lapel of one of his jackets, he goes through the house, amassing a pile of ritualistic fetishes which he then forces Tansy to burn, despite her claim that she will not be responsible for what happens to him if she is made "to give up her protections."

Needless to say, things start going horribly wrong almost immediately. Norman receives a heavy-breathing 'phone call from one of his students, and is nearly run over by a van on his way to work. He is then accused of assault by the student, Miss Abbott, and threatened with a gun by her would-be suitor, a surly oaf named Jennings. Having managed to demolish the case against him, Taylor returns home, during a heavy rainstorm, to find that a tape-recording of one of his lectures has been posted to him anonymously. Despite Tansy's fears, he starts to play the tape. Suddenly, the 'phone rings again, the electricity fails, and strange sounds are heard, including a screeching and beating of wings outside the house. But when Taylor opens the front door, there is nothing to be seen...

In addition to the obviously similar title - why *Night of the Eagle*, instead of *Conjure Wife*, if not to suggest some kinship with *Night of the Demon*? - Hayers' film also centres on an aggressive rationalist forced to reconsider his position, while the tape-recording of his voice serves much the same function as the runes in Tourneur's film, being passed from person to person and attracting all sorts of disagreeable attention from things that go screech in the night. And, interestingly, the climax of *Night of the Eagle*, in which Margaret Johnston's witch is crushed by a falling stone eagle, is virtually identical to the fate suffered by the original Karswell in M.R. James's *Castling the Runes*, making one wonder if Leiber had the latter story in mind when writing *Conjure Wife*.

While stylistically Hayers may lack the subtlety of Tourneur, his hammer-and-tongs approach is well suited to the material, ensuring that the pace never slackens as Taylor is rushed headlong into his confrontation with the Unknown. Particularly memorable are the sequences in which Tansy returns from the sea in a catatonic state; her attempted murder of Norman, in which she betrays Flora's possession of her; and the attack of the eagle itself, bursting through a heavy door in its pursuit of Taylor, a remarkably effective piece of trickery considering the date of the film and its obviously limited resources.

The performances, too, are first rate. Wyngarde, who had scared the hell out of audiences the year before as the ghostly Quint in Jack Clayton's *The Innocents*, is perfectly cast as Taylor, a man just a little too successful, a little too handsome, a little too suave, for his own good. (Dammit, the man wears silk shirts, and suits that don't look ... well, they look foreign, if you know what I mean. And that oh-so-tasteful signet ring on his little finger – rum, you know, decidedly rum.) Wyngarde portrays Taylor's growing sense of unease and panic with great conviction, culminating in the famous shot when, cowering in his classroom, he staggers back against the blackboard, inadvertently rubbing out the word "Not" from his original declaration.

Janet Blair, whose previous films had mainly been undistinguished Hollywood musicals, also gives a marvellous performance, her large, expressive eyes and thin lips perfectly conveying the combination of dottiness, anxiety and determination of the loyal-until-death (and beyond) Tansy. Margaret Johnston is splendidly frustrated and deranged as Flora, uttering the line used as the film's American title ("Burn, witch, burn!") with a venomous relish which makes one regret that she made so few films in her distinguished career. The only disappointment with regard to the cast is the criminal waste of Kathleen Byron; so terrifying as the sex-crazed Sister Ruth in Powell and Pressburger's *Black Narcissus*, in *Night of the Eagle* her role doesn't even amount to that of a red herring. Reginald Beckwith, seen overindulging in the funny-voice department as the medium in *Night of the Demon*, is considerably more restrained here, which is not a bad thing.

While the whodunit structure of Hayers' film mitigates against Johnston creating as memorable a figure as Niall MacGinnis's Karswell (whose villainy is on display from the very beginning, and whose motivation – fear – is more intriguing than Flora's petty spite), in one important respect *Night of the Eagle* may be said to be superior to *Night of the Demon*, and that is in the depiction of its protagonist. Whereas Holden is finally convinced that Karswell's supernatural powers are real and acts accordingly in order to save his own life, at no time does one believe that this is a man whose most cherished convictions have been overturned and who now feels the devil breathing down his neck; indeed, Holden seems too dull and unimaginative to feel anything, let alone real fear. Taylor, on the other hand, is a much more emotionally engaging – and engaged – character, and is properly put through the wringer. Afraid first for his wife, then for himself, his beliefs are finally shattered as he is reduced to a dishevelled wreck hiding in his own classroom. In short, Norman Taylor is made to feel fear, and in a good horror film, fear is the key.

**John Exshaw**

***Peeping Tom* (Dir. Michael Powell) UK, 1960**  
Optimum Home Entertainment, 2007

There is a regrettable sleight of hand practiced by certain script-writers to explicate character motivations and psychologies within their fictions. When blind alcoholic Mrs Stephens (Maxine Audley) offers compulsive filmmaker/killer Mark Lewis (Karl Boehm) the prescient advice that “All this filming isn’t healthy” (as only an imbibing blind person interpreting the psycho/sexual motivation and consequence proposed by cinema can), it is a cautionary warning needlessly signposted. Audience members, lured into the theatre because of *Peeping Tom*’s lascivious title, or dutifully attending because of Michael Powell’s association with it, would undoubtedly have to be blind or perceptively negligent not to register the line’s thematic importance. The script is littered with such wearisome dialogue, seemingly burdened with the task of offering nothing more than smug irony or witty allusion, prompting no further reflection beyond duly noting its presence. Indeed, during the production of the film, Michael Powell was supposedly convinced he was making his masterpiece, and it would seem that as a consequence, the entire project was dutifully misshapen, bent on conveying in word and image a self-contained, reflexive and depressingly controlled narrative that requires nothing from its audience outside of bearing witness.

Of course, having been pulled from cinemas by cautious distributors, *Peeping Tom*’s original theatrical run of just five days didn’t afford many discriminating patrons or passive entertainment junkies the opportunity to sample for themselves a film deemed “vile” and “sick” by those critics lucky enough to have seen it. Indeed, the savage response from said critics was so unanimous and extreme that it all but ended director Michael Powell’s long-standing reputation and career, “forcing” him towards early retirement and a spell in Australia (poor man). The film practically disappeared, and legend has it that it might well have continued to languish in obscurity but for the intercedence of Martin Scorsese, who in 1979 gave \$5,000 out of his own pocket to bankroll a new print. Scorsese then duly wielded his influence to have the film shown at The New York Film Festival, knowing that all he was going to get in return for his charity was a print of the sick flick for himself and the dubious honour of having “Martin Scorsese Presents” written above the poster. God bless you, Marty.

Mark Lewis (Karl Boehm) is the peeping tom of the title – property owner, scooter licence holder, duffel coat wearer, professional focus puller, cine-enthusiast, murderer of women, and owner of one of those director chairs that has your name written on the back; the list is endless. Mark sublets rooms in his family home at a very reasonable price, but running a property is just not enough. He is employed as a focus puller in a film studio by day and also earns some pocket money moonlighting as a photographer of saucy pictures evenings and weekends. In any spare time left to him, Mark is compelled to complete a documentary of his own making. Principle photography is on-going and relentless, and supposedly documents Mark’s enquiry into aspects of fear which requires him to film certain women who suffer a curious paralysis brought on by narrative causality, when Mark turns his murderous weapon upon them. The weapon in question – a concave mirror with a camera mounted on a tripod with its middle leg extended, housing a customised knife – is obviously the result of hours of trial-and-error product research and development and has nothing to do with any Freudian subtext of an assaulting or penetrative gaze, via a displacement of sexual desire...The genesis of Mark’s psychosis, it seems, can be found in the traumas of his childhood, when he was subjected to the continuous surveillance and sadistic harassment of his scientist father, who was characteristically negligent of the contingencies such experiment, folly, and perversion incur. Part of this obsessive surveillance involves Mark submitting to being filmed by his

father, who is played by none other than Powell himself, in just one of the film's innumerable and laborious examples of self-reflexivity. Throughout the course of the film, adult Mark begins a tentative romance with the girl downstairs, Helen Stephens (Anna Massey), who lives with her mother, the aforementioned blind alcoholic seer, Mrs. Stephens. The film wrings a fairly tepid drama from these three main characters' interactions and also boasts a rather unremarkable police investigation that intermittently surfaces, presumably to propel the drama towards its inevitable conclusion.

### **“I like to understand what I'm shown”**

*Peeping Tom* is a dissatisfying and somewhat depressing film but not necessarily because of its seedy locations, scenes of violence, or fatal denouement, in which Mark turns his murderous weapon upon himself and films his own suicide (presumably, the ultimate example of the film's self-reflexivity). Rather, the most dissatisfying thing about *Peeping Tom* is the ever-present suspicion that the work is fractured in concept and execution, and is not in fact a work ahead of its time, as so many people have claimed, but one that is hopelessly out of step with its time. *Peeping Tom* was, of course, made when there seemed a growing schism in popular British cinema, marked by the emergence on one side of the free cinema movement with its *cinéma vérité* aspirations, and on the other by the box-office success of such frivolous fare as the *Carry-On* films, Dirk Bogarde's "Doctor" series, and Hammer's gothic horror cycle. While it could be argued that Powell's aesthetic had always operated tangentially to popular British cinema, defining itself in opposition to dominant notions of realism, it could also be argued that, unlike a lot of Powell's other films, *Peeping Tom* fails to manifest the extraordinary and fantastic within a plausible verisimilitude. The film suffers from its multiple cross purpose ambitions, the most glaringly obvious being Powell's desire to make a supposedly modern-day horror film that reveals the latent complicity between the spectator and certain acts of terror, and his wish that said diatribe would prove popular with said audience (i.e. "Don't you feel guilty about all this voyeurism in cinema but isn't this a classic movie?")

The film also fails to engage convincingly with its subject matter or its audience because it attempts to marry too many disparate components and styles together. Its cornucopia mix of murder, gallows humour, psychology for beginners, and farcical elements (those movie production scenes are painful to watch) evince an air of desperation. Powell's desire to shock his audience is undermined by his clawing desire to entertain and dazzle them. The film's internal incongruities are manifold; playing the pained nuance of psychosis against a piano score that cues the emotional content of a scene as if it were counterpoint to a pantomime, or incongruously pairing Karl Boehm's Mark (all nervous Peter Lorre in *M*) and Anna Massey's Helen (all golly and gosh Cliff Richard wholesomeness), are just two examples of the film's muddled approach and conceit. *Peeping Tom*'s most compelling moments are silent and oblique; moments in which Mark rubs his lips against the lense of his cine-camera, or holds his hands before him as if he were either framing a scene or imagining a lover opposite him are gestures writ large that subtly convey a chasm between small inner thoughts and the available modes of imaginative expression.

Unfortunately, the self-reflexivity of *Peeping Tom* hinders such imaginative or interpretive dynamism operating elsewhere in the film, be it in the script, the acting, the framing, or the editing. As such, *Peeping Tom* becomes purely illustrative. When Mark screens a silent home movie for Helen (which stars a young Mark, tormented by his father), her compulsion to "understand" what she is viewing necessitates her asking a series of questions which Mark obligingly answers. Ignoring any elaboration of how this scene is

edited, and how Powell shifts the audience from a primary to a secondary spectator (from looking at a home movie to watching Mark and Helen looking at a home movie), the information parlayed between the two characters is obviously used as a cohesive narrative device that contextualises Mark's psychological dysfunction. More significantly, while the visual grammar of home movies is comparatively small compared to commercial cinema; in partnership with the piano score, Powell's decision to supplement the purely visual aspects of this silent home movie with Mark and Helen's running commentary, and his decision to cut away from this footage to capture their reactions, are deliberate attempts to mask the arbitrary continuity of this "home" movie in favour of the grand and controlling narrative of commercial/professional cinema, and as such, are efforts to minimise any ambiguity, misunderstanding, or personal interpretation that arise when audiences view such raw primary data.

Regrettably, *Peeping Tom* is not really interested in its audience's desire for, or inclination towards, understanding via personal interpretation. For Michael Powell, *Peeping Tom* may well have been a personal artistic triumph, despite it being a commercial failure, but like any number of films before and after it, it provides an audience with little more than incidental viewing; how appealing a prospect or satisfying an experience that is depends on each person.

There are many historical contexts that might allow for an appreciation of *Peeping Tom* beyond an arbitrarily positive or negative review. Its socio-cultural place within British cinema up to and following its brief 1960 appearance coupled with the vitriolic scorn the film provoked from contemporary critics bears remarking on, by somebody else, some other time, some other journal, take your pick. Undoubtedly, the matter-of-fact thematic inclusion of child abuse and sexual perversion within a genre where murder is commonplace brought the film certain notoriety in its time, and has lent credence to many subsequent proposals regarding *Peeping Tom*'s distinguished status as a film that is "ahead of its time" – an accolade which in itself displays an unsophisticated notion of artistic worth which flatters our present-day notions of sophistication and taste. Since resurfacing from obscurity 27 years ago, the film has been dutifully catapulted into the canon of cinema masterpieces, a dubious honour bestowed upon films curiously grouped in tens and hundreds, by those who have nothing better to do with their time. Simultaneously, *Peeping Tom*'s ascendancy up the cultural ladder is in no small part because the film apparently lends itself as co-operative cadaver for dissection under certain film theorists' microscopes, who seem bent on charting the mechanisms and implicit meanings of cinema's incessant "gaze". Given the argument's assertion that all cinema engages with issues of spectatorship, the attention bestowed upon *Peeping Tom* in this regard seems hopelessly arbitrary and over-determined, but that's film theory for you.

Curiously, though perhaps not really all that surprisingly, the extras on the DVD replicate many of the film's original assumptions about its audience. As one would expect, the extras (which include two featurettes, an introduction by Martin Scorsese, and an interview with Thelma Schoonmaker) bandy the usual trite laudatory proclamations about *Peeping Tom*'s ahead-of-its-time status; its brave subject matter; its "astonishing" self-reflexivity; its influence on a generation of film makers (plus Brian de Palma); its brave tackling of themes of violence and audience complicity; and so on and so forth. Fittingly, for a film as stiflingly controlled as *Peeping Tom*, author Ian Christie's feature commentary maintains an absurdly deliberate pace as though didn't want to give too much of the plot away, and bless him, frequently presumes to describe on-screen action as if it were an aid for the visually impaired. Needless to say the perceptively negligent are catered for also; Michael Powell would have approved.

**Paul Cronly**

***The Mind Benders* (Dir. Basil Dearden) UK, 1962**  
Optimum Home Entertainment, 2007

Now, here's a curiosity. Made by a notable British director, Basil Dearden, and with a cast headed by a major British star, Dirk Bogarde, *The Mind Benders*, an unsettling Cold War horror movie, is rarely seen, seldom discussed, and often, I think, forgotten. Unjustly, though – while the film is far from perfect, it certainly merits its new DVD release, and I was very glad to see it.

Set amongst a group of Oxford scientists who conduct experiments on human isolation and sensory deprivation, the film opens with the suicide of project leader Professor Sharpey (Harold Goldblatt), a great scientist and, we are told, a leading left-winger, pacifist, and CND activist whose experiments in an isolation tank have reduced him to a kind of zombie, devoid of free will. Naturally, the potential of these experiments as a brainwashing tool captures the interest of the government, who send in their own military scientist Major Hall (John Clements) to investigate; it also attracts the attention of unspecified foreign powers, to whom Sharpey seems to have been selling secrets. Hall oversees a new experiment on Sharpey's colleague Dr Longman (Bogarde), which succeeds in turning him from an uxorious family man to a philandering misogynist.

Bogarde is excellent, as is Mary Ure as his doting, pregnant wife, but what's really chilling about this film is Clements's underplayed performance as Major Hall, the very embodiment of stolid Englishness – a kind of bland, upstanding normality which contrasts brilliantly with Bogarde's twitchy sneering – who is nevertheless willing to conduct unethical, inhuman scientific experiments in the name of the national interest. This is no phallic, megalomaniacal mad scientist of the Frankenstein/Quatermass variety but apparently a fundamentally decent man able comfortably to live with the ethical blankness required of the Cold Warrior. This is symbolically adumbrated in a wonderfully effective scene where Hall wanders through the dreaming spires of Oxford and then cuts behind them to a square of Modernist labs in which Sharpey and Longwood conduct their experiments. Now, in 1962, cricket matches and psychological torture all exist on the same continuum of Englishness.

The film's serious flaw is in its pacing. What should have been a tight, nasty little number is at least twenty minutes too long. While the experiment itself, with Bogarde floating in an isolation tank, hallucinating and screaming, is terrifying, the film takes ages to get there. Those scenes meant to establish the domestic idyll of the Longwood marriage seem languorous and out of place, as if they had meandered in from a Douglas Sirk melodrama. The closing part, in which Longwood recovers his former personality when he delivers his own baby son, is simply a cop-out, conveniently glossing over the film's many troubling themes through a reinstatement of family values.

That said, *The Mind Benders* serves as a welcome reminder of a time when there really was a British film industry, and when even its generic product could offer an audience worthwhile moments. A couple more of those moments, to close: who can resist the lure of Wendy Craig as a Bohemian good-time girl in a catsuit? An amazing piece of casting, you might think, but it works, somehow. Best of all, this is a film that actually made me shout at the television, "Bloody hell, it's Roger Delgado!" Yes, that's right, *Dr Who* fans: the original and genuine Master has a cameo role as a scientist with the wonderful name of Dr Jean Bonvoulois. Hooray!

***Darryl Jones***

***The Host (Gwoemul)* (Dir. Bong Joon-ho) South Korea, 2006**  
Optimum Asia

Many aspects of the premise of *The Host (Gwoemul)* will be familiar to viewers of a number of cinematic genres. As a 'monster movie' it draws from East Asian influences such as *Godzilla (Gojira, 1954)*, as well as Hollywood outings such as *King Kong (1933)* and *Creature from the Black Lagoon (1954)*. Similarly, as an ecological parable, it is reminiscent of Larry Cohen's *The Stuff (1985)*, in which an occurrence of toxic waste causes an ecological disaster that is played out with gleeful B-Movie absurdity. Finally, *The Host's* individual take on instances of monstrous terror is also indicative of its links with the work of Steven Spielberg, in particular *Jaws (1975)*, *Jurassic Park (1993)* and *War of the Worlds (2005)*, an influence that is further apparent in the film's portrayal of varying types of dysfunctional families, from which children are cut off. The related trope of the child in peril is a mainstay of Spielberg's work; it is also at the centre of Bong Joon-ho's film.

*The Host* focuses on the Park family as they are thrown into a battle to rescue Hyun-seo (Ah-sung Ko) who is abducted by a mutated amphibious monster that emerges from the Han River. After Hyun-seo's capture, the disparate family are brought together to mourn their loss, but her father Gang-du (Kang-ho Song), Grandfather Hie-bong (Hie-bong Byeon), Uncle Nam-il (Hae-il Park) and Aunt Nam-joo (Du-na Bae) are reunited only to be quarantined by draconian government officials in biohazard suits. Gang-du soon receives a mobile phone call from the missing Hyun-seo, who is trapped (surrounded by corpses) in the creature's lair in the sewers of the Han. They escape in a desperate bid to save her, and are pursued by the inefficient yet heavy-handed authorities, who instigate widespread panic by circulating the lie that the creature and the family are contaminated with a virus, thereby adding to the public's existing fears over the SARS outbreak.

This reference to SARS is one of many aspects of the film that reflects its aspiration to offer a critique of contemporary Korean society. The creature has spawned and mutated due to the dumping of formaldehyde into the water system under orders from an American scientist working in South Korea (a premise that is drawn from an incident in February 2000 in which Albert McFarland, a mortician employed by the US Forces in Korea (USFK), directed his staff to dispose of 120 litres of embalming fluid down a drain at a US Army base at Yongsan in the centre of Seoul). There are also signs of a revolutionary spirit when Nam-il uses the Molotov cocktails that he learnt to make as a student demonstrator to battle the creature. Another prominent criticism can be seen in the depiction of the state authorities who are without exception portrayed as totalitarian, opportunistic and (in part due to American influence) corrupt. In these ways, *The Host* functions as a socially-informed monster horror, in which the creature acts as a catch-all metaphor for whatever social injustice the viewer chooses to give primacy.

This social awareness adds a layer of cultural commentary to *The Host*, but it also proves effective as an aesthetically-accomplished genre movie, which boasts impressive cinematography, editing and special effects and has an outstanding score. However, there are some other aspects of the film that are spectacularly and jarringly unnerving, and which relate to the codes and conventions of the horror genre. One of these is the often bizarre tonal shift employed by Bong Joon-ho, who seems to revel in not letting the audience settle into generic comfort zones. For example, after a well-delivered and fast-paced opening sequence in which the creature wreaks havoc after emerging from the river (reminiscent of the

introduction of the invaders in Spielberg's *War of the Worlds*), the next scene involves an absurd depiction of the grieving family as they meet at a shrine to the victims of the creature. They begin by crying together, before writhing on the floor of the mourning centre and punching and kicking one another in a fit of histrionics as the media gleefully film and photograph them. What begins as pathos quickly becomes ridiculous, a satirical portrait (almost a self-contained comedic sketch) of the media's appetite for recording the grief of those affected by mass trauma. \*\*\*\*SPOILER BEGINS\*\*\*\* Later, the Grandfather makes an emotional plea that Gang-du's siblings be tolerant of their dim-witted brother, only to be killed because of the hapless Gang-du's inability to count in a scene that mixes a balletic slow motion action scene with cartoonish slapstick. \*\*\*\*SPOILER ENDS\*\*\*\*

These tonal shifts help generate an unsettling yet intriguing feeling that the narrative may not follow the generic conventions of the monster movie, and it is in the disavowal of such conventions that *The Host* is at its most effective. \*\*\*\*SPOILER BEGINS\*\*\*\* For example, the impetus behind much of the plot is the need to save the vulnerable Hyun-seo from the lair of the monster, a driving force that is a mainstay of so many popular dramas as to appear mundane. When she is seemingly killed in the last act of the film and is held in the arms of her family, it is palpably easy to imagine an impending *denouement* in which she regains consciousness, thus fulfilling the quest that fuels the narrative and restoring balance to the disrupted family dynamic. *The Host* offers no such resolution, instead killing off Hyun-seo and in the process offering a challenge to the absurdities of narrative closure and the 'Hollywood ending' on which we are weaned. \*\*\*\*SPOILER ENDS\*\*\*\*

However, this refusal to follow generic narrative conventions is not merely a means of making the film stand out from the crowd; rather, the brutality of the film's resolution draws attention to the notion of responsibility and consequence that can be traced back to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). As in Shelley's novel, the creature is born out of man's disregard for nature and it is significant that it is an arrogant scientist that engenders the beast. This is further accentuated when the creature is stirred by onlookers at the banks of the Han River who throw fast food and beer cans into the water in order to attract its attention. Once provoked, the creature's wrath is mighty and it is demonized by the public and the authorities, becoming a scapegoat for the wrongs of the world. Director Bong Joon-ho has stated that the creature's aggressive behavior results from the fact that it is in pain from the effects of the chemical mutation. The scene in which the lake-siders throw garbage at their discovery is reminiscent of the angry mob scenes in numerous cinematic adaptations of Shelley's novel; in each case, the arrogance of man leads to the destruction of innocent lives: just as Frankenstein's creation kills the beatific William and Elizabeth, the child and new bride of the Frankenstein clan, the creature kills Hyun-seo. Perhaps the most significant link to *Frankenstein* though, is the central theme of responsibility that runs throughout both *The Host* and *Frankenstein*. Just as Victor turns his back upon his family to indulge in his obsessions, refusing to answer the letters and pleas from Elizabeth, the family of *The Host* also struggles to maintain their responsibilities to others. Each character is challenged to face up to the threat of the creature's relentless hunger (itself born out of an irresponsible act) and must also begin to try and fend for others in a dangerous world. For example, one of the most touching elements of the film involves Hyun-so taking a vagrant child under her wing after his brother is killed by the beast, an act that lies at the moral centre of the film and underlines the concept of facing up to the social discrepancies that are depicted throughout. Whereas in many other monster-themed films the creature seemingly comes from nowhere to attack an unwitting populace, the 'monster' of *The Host* comes from within society itself.

Significantly, the last scene reveals that Gang-du has become the guardian of the vagrant child and that he is also now responsible for the shop formerly run by his father. The film ends with him turning off a television showing the US media's response to the crisis and sharing a meal with his new son, metaphorically turning his back on media spin and connecting now in human terms. Tellingly, although others seem to have deserted the Han, Gang-du's home and business remain and it seems that he refuses to abandon his link to the river and perhaps the creature itself. In this way, although much of the film concerns the attempts of society to expel the creature as scapegoat, its closing moments underline the plea for acceptance and the scrutiny of social injustice and ultimately suggests that the by-products of blinkered individualism are monstrous to behold and thoroughly resilient.

*Keith McDonald*

**1408 (Dir. Mikael Håfström) USA, 2006**  
Dimension Films

*1408* is that rarest of cinematic creatures: a post-1980 Stephen King adaptation that's actually quite enjoyable. The film, based on the eerie short story of the same name from King's 2002 short-story collection *Everything's Eventual*, is directed by Swede Mikael Håfström, and marks an improvement on his previous English-language effort, the distinctly unimpressive Jennifer Aniston vehicle *Derailed* (2005). *1408* is, for the first hour at least, a gripping and unnerving viewing experience which provides a couple of good scares and an intriguing, if somewhat less than original, premise.

The title refers to the number of a hotel room in the fictional New York-set Dolphin Hotel (add the numbers together to see the less-than-subtle result). Mike Enslin (John Cusack) is a burnt-out novelist who makes a dubious living churning out spurious guides to the supernatural with titles like "Ten Haunted Bed and Breakfasts" and "Ten Haunted Lighthouses". When he receives a mysterious postcard bearing the simple message "Don't enter 1408", he promptly becomes unhealthily fascinated by the room; and after the ubiquitous microfilm-viewing scene (apparently required by law in films of this type), he inevitably discovers that guests may check in to Room 1408, but they don't check out. 1408 is, you see, the most haunted hotel room ever, the site of countless murders and suicides, and as such completely irresistible to a man who is desperate to prove – or rather disprove – the existence of life after death following the death of his young daughter. King fans have been here before, of course, with room 237 of *The Shining*'s Overlook Hotel, and in some respects, it could be said that Room 1408 is the cosmopolitan (yet pedestrian) cousin of its more illustrious predecessor, even briefly featuring an axe-wielding maniac as in Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) which similarly, of course, focused on a tortured male writer. *1408*, however is a rather more wry, conventional film, the success of which rests largely upon the immensely likable performance by Cusack, who is the only person onscreen for much of the running time. It is also at times quite funny, particularly in the opening scenes in which the tedious life of the jobbing writer is outlined, with a decidedly unglamorous book-signing sequence proving particularly amusing.

Once he arrives at the Dolphin, and manages to bluster his way past Mr Olin, (Samuel L. Jackson), the hotel's manager, who is understandably reluctant to allow any more deaths in the room on his watch, Enslin and his trusty tape recorder sceptically settle in for the night. Needless to say, the deeply-dated wallpaper and bad carpet are not the only horrors he'll be exposed to over the next few hours. The rest of the film is mainly an extended chamber piece, in which the increasingly terrified protagonist is subjected to all manner of supernatural torments all aimed at making him commit suicide (only the least horrifying of which is a demonic clock radio which repeatedly plays The Carpenters' 'We've Only Just Begun' at full volume). Though the film inevitably descends into over-the-top theatrics, there are some undeniably effective moments here, and many of the most unnerving things about *1408* are also the most simple. There is a door that cannot be opened; a malfunctioning air conditioner; a crying baby next door; and a clock which doesn't so much tell the time as provide a countdown to madness. The most effective scene of all involves one of Enslin's increasingly desperate attempts to communicate with the outside world by waving out the window. The pay-off is as jolting as it is agreeably bizarre, and yet it is also one of the simplest optical tricks in the entire film.

Inevitably, Enslin must confront his personal demons during his time in the room, despite the fact that the only apparent escape route is death. After a while, then, the film basically becomes one of those typically Hollywood big-budget morality tales in which great personal trial is the only way to come to terms with terms with immense grief (the Puritans have a lot to answer for). Nevertheless, Cusack carries the whole thing with style, and his abrasive, sarcastic protagonist helps draw us into the action. Similarly, in what is basically an extended cameo, Samuel L. Jackson does much to help create a sense of atmosphere before we even enter the room. Ultimately, while this film certainly doesn't reach the heights of either *Carrie* or *The Shining* in the ever-expanding league of King adaptations, it is still considerably better than the likes of *Dreamcatcher* or *Maximum Overdrive*, which also inspire thoughts of hell, but for rather different reasons...

***Kelly Grant***

***Black Sheep* (Dir. Jonathan King)** New Zealand, 2006  
Live Stock Films / New Zealand Film Commission

Given the famous ratio of sheep to people in New Zealand, it was perhaps only a matter of time before *Black Sheep* came along, a film that pits infected zombie-sheep against the human population they so greatly outweigh. Inevitably, Jonathan King's debut film has garnered comparisons with the early work of Peter Jackson, previous holder of the title of New Zealand's comedy-horror splatter king after the trio of *Bad Taste* (1987), *Meet the Feebles* (1989) and *Braindead* (1992), before coming of age with *Heavenly Creatures* (1994) and transforming himself into the awards-magnet behind the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001-2003). Certainly, King seems intent on trying to capture the offal-laden spirit of Jackson's demented earliest work, even collaborating with renowned effects house Weta Workshop which has developed hand-in-hand with Jackson's career; but ultimately, *Black Sheep* falls short, and fails to conjure up enough shocks or gross-out humour to function as a successful comedy-horror. Crucially, there's only so much mileage to be derived from the central gag of the sheer innocuousness of zombie-sheep, and the film really struggles to stretch this premise out to a lean 87 minutes.

The film opens with an apparently idyllic scene in rural New Zealand; a panoramic shot of the landscape reveals a flock of sheep, which are being herded by young Henry Oldfield, his father and childhood friend Tucker. Watching on is Henry's older brother, Angus, unable to take part in the bloke-ish bonding because of his callipered leg. Angus promptly demonstrates his resentment for this fact by killing, skinning and stringing up the carcass of Henry's pet sheep, Dudley, and draping himself in the dead animal's pelt. Young Henry is suitably upset when he encounters this sight, but things are made considerably worse when the brothers receive word of their father's death in a farming accident moments later. Cut to fifteen years later, and the adult Henry (Nathan Meister) finds himself trapped in a taxi on a country road, surrounded by a flock of sheep and suffering an 'ovino-phobia'-induced panic attack while trying desperately to get his therapist on the phone. He's en route to his childhood home to finalise the sale of his half of the family farm to Angus (Peter Feeney), who has grown up to be an aggressive and mercenary pioneer in the agricultural sciences, spearheading research into the genetic modification of more profitable sheep, the fruits of which he is about to reveal to potential investors. Angus has not contended with the arrival of Grant (Oliver Driver) and Experience (Danielle Mason), a pair of meddling animal rights activists intent on exposing his methods. They promptly steal one of the failed experiments and inadvertently unleash the ur-zombie-sheep on the flock. Grant is promptly bitten, and begins to transform into a sheep-human hybrid, and the rest of the flock gradually become infected. Meanwhile Henry and Tucker (Tammy Davis) team up with Experience to uncover the sheer extent of Angus' dastardly dealings (which involve a 'unique' method of combining sheep and human DNA) and attempt to put things right and avoid the same fate as Grant.

Clearly, there is scope here for an effective social satire on scientific experimentation, but this issue remains muddled throughout the film because of King's attempts to poke fun at two extremes of the debate: Angus's disregard for the ethics of genetic modification (and idiosyncratic interpretation of animal husbandry); his cohorts' careless disposal of biohazardous waste material in a sinkhole on the farm; Grant's rejection of vegetarian ideals once he begins transforming into a sheep-human hybrid (and his lingering guilt that the meat he eats "wasn't even organic"); and Experience's New Age beliefs and her environmentalist concerns about the role played by animal flatulence in the depletion of the ozone layer (an elaborate fart-gag at the film's climax puts paid to *that* particular concern by revealing the

effectiveness of methane in dispatching zombie-sheep). Instead, the film seems to tread a careful middle-ground that seeks to restore to farm-life the more traditional Henry, who is opposed to both Angus' agricultural sciences and Experience's favoured organic farming. The problem with the attempt at mercilessly lampooning both scientific carelessness and misguided environmental activism is that it effectively undermines any real coherence to the satire and to the related cultural commentary that seems inherently to underpin a film (however comedic) that takes genetically-modified zombie-sheep as its subject. Admittedly, King attempts to undermine such readings of the film in a particularly telling moment, when Experience's appeal to Tucker for support in her conservationist campaign falls on deaf ears. Her efforts, as she puts it, "to deconstruct the colonialist paternalistic agrarian hierarchy that disenfranchises the Tangata Whenua and erodes the natural resources of Aotearoa", reflect precisely the kinds of discourses that the cultural critic might seek within the film; but these are exactly the kinds of interpretative categories that King's script seems determined to dismiss.

All of which would be fine, if the film managed successfully to poke fun at these to any real effect; but this simply isn't the case, and all too often it relies on hackneyed jokes and unfunny one-liners (when one character starts transforming into a sheep-human hybrid, for example, he refers to another as a "baaaaaaa-stard"). Tone, pacing and action sequences all fall flat, so that by the time the infected flock of sheep finally start chowing down on Angus's business associates, the resultant frenetic massacre fails to make up for the tedious build-up to what is essentially a one-note gag. The resolution, too, is all-too-easy, restoring order to the farm; to the lines between man and sheep; and to Henry's addled mind. In the end, *Black Sheep* just doesn't have the courage of its convictions to poke fun at *everything*, and fails to prove sufficiently inventive or outrageous. The New Zealand comedy-horror crown still remains safely in the care of Peter Jackson, at least for now.

***Jenny McDonnell***