

***Pet*, dir. by Carles Torrens** (Orion Pictures/Samuel Goldwyn Films, 2016)

Stories of captivity have become uncomfortably familiar in recent times, with names like Ariel Castro, Wolfgang Priklopil, and the notorious Josef Fritzl infiltrating the cultural consciousness as legitimate monsters, far surpassing those of even Stephen King's wildest imagination. Cinematic representations of such ordeals need to be handled with sensitivity, perhaps most successfully accomplished by Lenny Abrahamson, who directed Brie Larson's Academy Award-winning turn in *Room* (2015). The plot focuses on the aftermath of confinement, as a mother tries to integrate her son into the world he never knew existed following their escape after spending years in a garden shed.

Lately, the horror genre has seen several high-profile films grounded in diverse scenarios of detention, but principally structured as psychological thrillers. Key entries in this subcategory include Fede Alvarez's taut home-invasion shocker *Don't Breathe* (2016), which depicts thieves trapped during a botched robbery, ultimately discovering an even more disturbing incarceration. Alternatively, Dan Trachtenberg's *10 Cloverfield Lane* (2016) trades on the paranoia of imprisonment, as the protagonists survive the fallout of an apparent chemical attack in an underground bunker. Lastly, in a critically lauded return to form, M. Night Shyamalan's *Split* (2017) details the seizure and internment of three young women by a man with dissociative identity disorder. The girls must contest with their captor's multiple personalities even when, in a signature twist from the director, they take a turn for the supernatural. On foot of this comes *Pet* (2016) from Carles Torrens — whose sole other feature credit is the forgettable haunted-house yarn *Apartment 143* (2011) — which anchors its story of captivity in the prison that is toxic relationships.

*Pet* follows Seth, a mild-mannered animal-control worker played by *Lost* (2004-10) and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy's (2001-03) Dominic Monaghan. Seth is a seemingly harmless soul who lives aimlessly on the fringes of society with little in the way of meaningful human companionship — his job at the pound shows that he is more at ease interacting with dogs, greeting them as people and even comforting a dying German Shepherd. This characterisation of his life is accurately introduced in the film's dreamy opening image of a tropical beach. This peaceful establishing shot is interrupted by a beeping alarm clock, evoking the John Donne verse 'no man is an island', and establishing Seth as a loner about to be abruptly roused from his routine solitude.

On the bus one day, Seth recognises an attractive woman as a former schoolmate and now waitress named Holly (Ksenia Solo). Here, Solo's petite frame, silky blonde hair, and

piercing blue eyes code her as an ethereal figure of delicacy and innocence, particularly when juxtaposed against Monaghan's unconventional leading-man looks. This is a significant scene in *Pet* in terms of exposition and cinematography, as it serves to calibrate the audience's perceptions of the characters; Seth's point-of-view perspective is associated with the 'threat' of the male gaze, which simultaneously emphasises Holly's vulnerability. Although Seth awkwardly tries and fails to arrange a date with Holly, he remains undeterred, and scours her social-media profiles, compiling information about her assorted predilections. This parasocial cyber-stalking not only modernises the dating paradigm, but its colloquial designation as 'creeping' further portrays Seth as a sinister outsider, who pursues Holly with flowers and unsolicited visits to her workplace, only to find his advances squarely rebuffed.

In a subversive development, Holly is revealed to have slaughtered her friend Claire — played by *iCarly* (2007-12) staple Jennette McCurdy — for sleeping with her boyfriend Eric (Nathan Parsons). Claire materialises intermittently as a mental construction of Holly's unresolved emotional baggage, returning as a devil on her shoulder to haunt her with the spectre of her guilt. Having evaded justice for this crime, Holly has acquired a penchant for the exhilaration of indiscriminate killing. After reading details of her secret activities in her journal, Seth abducts Holly, holding her in a cage in a dank disused basement in an effort to halt her hostilities and assist in her rehabilitation. From here, the film tracks each party's struggle to assert dominance over the other.

Seth is first to state his authority as Holly grasps his trouser leg from her pen, calmly explaining that they must 'establish some boundaries'; he evaluates her outburst and concludes that 'this doesn't work'. However, while he gains control over her freedom of movement, Seth immediately inherits a duty of care, feeling obliged to tend to Holly's basic needs, of which food, for example, becomes a crucial strategic battleground. Holly's threat of suicide triggers Seth to call her bluff by restricting her diet, a tactic which she later adopts, bidding to starve herself. This refusal to eat fortifies her position by deepening Seth's attachment to her. These daily encounters give Holly an opportunity to enact new charades, accelerating the growth of the couple's relationship and reinforcing their artificial rapport.

This power play fuels *Pet*'s engaging storyline, and continues to swing back and forth throughout. The hierarchy of domination, and the internal logic of each of the pair's evolving ties, progresses from rigidly distinct to increasingly multifaceted, having transitioned far past besotted suitor and object of desire. It is following the kidnapping that each configuration of their bond — including prison warden and inmate, resentful partners, and accomplices to

surly security officer Nate's (Da'Vone McDonald) eventual murder — revolves around Seth and Holly's co-dependency. The reversal of this dynamic underwrites the final form of their toxic link, as Seth assumes the role of ever-present therapist-cum-sponsor.

Solo delivers a consistently convincing performance as Holly, deftly shifting her facade to accommodate her various personas, from helpless victim, to coldly detached, to teasingly flirtatious. Holly's range of interchangeable presentations discloses a complex being, who exploits her feminine wiles to toy with Seth's affection and sexual attraction for her. This deception extends her persona beyond simply that of the seductive *femme fatale* of *film noir*, into one governed by pathological jealousy, callousness, and manipulation, in ways that are reminiscent of Rosamund Pike's Amy Dunne in *Gone Girl* (2014). Although Monaghan is certainly satisfactory overall, Torrens' direction of his character is sometimes uneven, specifically when Seth laughs after Holly's ex-boyfriend Eric punches him. This instance seems jarring, as his bloody grin says villainous masochist, contradicting his previously shy demeanour and functioning only to add weight to the plot's misdirection. Monaghan's line delivery also carries a laboured quality at times, through his over-accentuation, which, combined with mediocre sound mixing, imbues his dialogue with a disconnected timbre. His gesticulations are highly expressive, however, especially during Seth's anxious contemplation of Holly's request that he amputate a finger as a token of devotion, authentically exhibiting a man buckling under the stress of his dilemma.

What begins as a dark account of unrequited love soon becomes a microcosm of the penal system, raising economic questions about the value of correctional facilities as an effective method for punishing criminality and minimising recidivism. Additionally, *Pet's* thematic thread that highlights creatures in enclosures initially garners sympathy for Holly, who labels her relationship to Seth as one of 'ownership', with her functioning purely as his 'pet,' which potentially provokes moral anxiety regarding the use of isolation not only in jails, but also for the ethical treatment of wildlife. The detrimental impact of such seclusion is foreshadowed as Holly refers to the self-injurious behaviour of captive great white sharks, describing how the creature 'bashes its brains against the glass every time', before doing likewise herself. Indeed, cinematically, such issues have gained prominence in public discourse primarily in the wake of the damning indictment of SeaWorld in 2013's *Blackfish*.

Overall, *Pet* is a worthwhile psychological thriller, the major strength of which lies in the narrative twist chiefly facilitated by its co-lead actors. The casting of Monaghan and Solo inverts deeply ingrained assumptions about appearances, beauty, and the perceived predatory

nature of men — the latter neatly suggested through the image of a spider in its web after Holly's snatching. In conjunction with clever editing, the selection of these actors reveals how easily an individual's physical allure can bias a spectator's position of objectivity and neutrality, and how quickly the viewer can assign criminal culpability based on incomplete evidence. Tonally, the film is grim and bleak, and competently photographed with a gritty, urban aesthetic utilised across its few sets. Fittingly, it is essentially devoid of any humour, barring the unintentionally amusing moment where an astonished Nate asks Seth, 'are you stabbing me?' as he repeatedly does so.

*Pet* culminates with Seth repositioned as Holly's detainee, exposing the vicious cycle of toxic relationships. Here, he is equal parts tragic and pathetic, as a close-up shot divulges that he has sacrificed a second digit out of loyalty to his keeper, suggesting that the inescapability of this type of psychic bondage persists beyond the bars. The stark price he pays endeavouring to recondition Holly represents Seth as the definitive white knight bound by outmoded notions of chivalry. Tellingly, he does not speak in this closing scene, becoming more like an animal than Holly, who relied on her persuasive rhetoric to preserve the balance of power from inside her cage. Now, Seth's sole purpose is to be a sounding-board for Holly's problems; his dishevelled hair, scarred face, and clouded eyes tell a tale of frustration as he is tortured from listening, while his dogged lack of insight suggests that some people will, indeed, do anything for a pretty face.

*Gavin Wilkinson*