FILM REVIEWS

(Please note that reviews may contain spoilers)

***He Never Died* (Dir. by Jason Krawczyk)** USA/Canada 2015
Alternate Ending Studios

> *And the Lord said, 'What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength; you shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.'*
>
> –Genesis 4. 10-12

When it comes to entertainment, the only thing more commercial then sex is violence. And in the thousands of years since the Bible documented its first slaying, this seemingly insatiable desire to watch or read about homicide seems to remain unquenched. From *Midsommer Murders* (1997-present) to *Memento* (2000), and from *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) to *Silent Witness* (1996), there's nothing more commercially profitable, it seems, then depicting a good murder. Tapping into primal and animalistic instincts, the representation of murder draws upon a sense that the human condition is to be fundamentally flawed, and suggests that such universal emotions as greed, jealousy, lust, and pride motivate a significant number of murders.

The Old Testament figure of Cain, supposedly the first murderer (of his brother Abel), was forever cursed to 'be a fugitive and a wanderer of the earth' for all eternity.[1] Cain's story of fraternal betrayal and antagonism is one commonly represented in films such as *Bloodline* (2005), *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead* (2007), *We Own the Night* (2007), and the Broadway musical *Blood Brothers* (1983-present). Jason Krawczyk's latest offering, *He Never Died* (2015), however, tells a very different tale. Cain is depicted here as a fallen angel, and as strangely devoid of remorse or a desire to do penance for the murder he has committed. Instead, trapped in the body of an ex-mafia henchman struggling with dependency issues, which later turn out to be quite a nasty addiction to human flesh, the immortal Cain is consumed with a nihilistic indifference to both his past and present deeds. Neither fully embracing the potentiality of his inhuman power nor atoning for his murderous actions committed over two millennia ago, Cain (Henry Rollins) — or Jack, as he refers to

[1] Genesis 4. 10-12.

himself — occupies a liminal space between life and death. Castigated and anathematised, Jack's millennia-long existence on earth is bereft of meaning; life is an endless pattern of boredom and angst, while death is what happens to other people. However, following an unsolicited visit from the product of a misbegotten liaison years before the film's action begins, Jack is forced to confront both his own humanity and morality via his estranged daughter, Andrea (Jordan Todosey).

Compounded by his nihilistic and apathetic view of humanity as nothing more than a meat by-product, Jack, the 'fugitive and wanderer of the earth', we see him literally rise from his nightmarish slumber, revealing his scarred back where wings once grew. While the trope of the fallen angel is one which has claimed a dominant place within the horror genre (see, for example, *The Prophecy* (1995), *Dogma* (1999), *Constantine* (2005), *Gabriel* (2007), and *Legion* (2010)), what is striking about *He Never Died* is its sheer nihilism. Invoking a number of horror tropes such as vampirism and zombiism, without actually developing or investing in generic conventions, it documents a period in the life of a damned individual whose demons both literal and figurative seek to torment and fragment him, as his nightmares reveal a soul in the throes of hellish battle. Though rich in theological references, *He Never Dies* is decidedly lacking in faith. Zombie narratives such as *28 Days Later* (2002), *Dawn of the Dead* (2004), and *Fido* (2006) frequently integrate religious conventions and paraphernalia such as last rites and biblical quotations, and here they proliferate, yet signify nothing in terms of Jack's faith. They are simply the trappings of past lives lived on earth. An ancient bible, a golden chalice, and a trunk full of relics festoon Jack's modest apartment, but they mean nothing to him, as God's absence is more pronounced than his existence. And while this film is laden throughout with biblical references, what is striking is just how Krawczyk's dark comedy seeks to downplay Jack's divine origin, and prefers instead to present a character in the throes of a crippling existential crisis, exacerbated not only by depression and ennui, but by his lack of faith in a God who has long forgotten him.

Having led a series of lives as a soldier, carpenter, and thief, to name but a few, Jack has finally forgone any attempt to integrate or assimilate into society. He now spends his time sleeping, playing bingo, and resisting the urge to tear the limbs from mortal beings and devour their flesh, a desire he keeps at bay with small measures of human blood 'dealt' to him by unscrupulous medical students. Neither zombie nor vampire, the reason for Jack's dependency on human flesh is never quite made explicit, nor are we told what kind of monster he is exactly; rather it is implied that his cravings are more a symptom of his

immortality than a means of sustaining it — an interesting move which seems to emphasise his liminality through lack of categorisation.

Set in the present day, *He Never Died* tells the tale of a man struggling with life, caught in a miserable cycle of addiction, dependency, withdrawal, and crippling boredom. Existence is painful and immorality inevitable. As the audience is teased with momentary insights into who (or rather what) Jack is, for the first twenty minutes of the film, his life resembles that of a Woody Allen character. Mundane details of his daily routine, such as playing bingo by himself in a rundown community hall, or rising unsteadily from his demonic slumber to pay his rent to his eccentric land lady, accentuate the banal, prosaic monotony of his existence.

However, things take a decidedly abrupt turn when his stridently modern teenage daughter Andrea seeks to disrupt this monotony, forcing him to interact with mankind, as he is cast into the uncomfortable role of 'dad'. Yet behind the traditional estranged-father plot, replete with cringe-worthy exchanges about sex, there lie several other narratives, through which Jack's true character is revealed as his demons, terrestrial and celestial alike, seek to do battle. Although the admittedly wayward plot is primarily driven by a search to find his daughter after she is kidnapped — which, in turn, is principally motivated by his slightly shoehorned, would-be love-interest Cara (Kate Greenhose) — the larger and more interesting battle is with his own sins, as he is endlessly tormented by visions of what appears to be the devil, and as his addiction to human flesh slowly begins to consume him.

Positioning hell as an eternity on earth, *He Never Died* is nihilism at its finest, punctuated with great moments of dark humour, emanating primarily from Cain's stony responses to humanity, which he finds infinitely boring. Yet he is not overtly despondent, but rather apathetic, as he indifferently observes the plight of those around him, as if they are nothing but flies caught in a web. This sentiment is underscored in the final sequence of the film, when an exasperated Cara asks 'what could possibly be more important' than the life of his daughter. And while it seems that his murderous rampage to find the kidnapped Andrea is at odds with this nihilism, the fact that, once he finds her, he must be begged by Cara to save her life, rather than take that of her captor, signifies a certain ambivalence within Jack towards his daughter.

That said, as a brooding and sombre tale of a man equally at odds with his immediate mortality, in the guise of his daughter, and within his ongoing immortality, the film never gives in to its own asperity, as gallows wit haunts each frame, softening the blow of Cain's apathy towards mankind. *He Never Dies* is a film which even seems to defy its own internal

narrative and generic conventions, repeatedly thwarting the expectations (regarding brooding heroes, fallen angels, the undead, and reluctant fathers alike) it has built up for the audience. In one exchange with Cara, she asks John what the Civil War was like, and he answers, with more than a hint of chagrin, 'I don't know, I was in China …'.

Sarah Cleary

***The Hallow* (Dir. by Corin Hardy)** Ireland/United Kingdom 2015
Fantastic Films/Occupant Entertainment

The Hallow is Corin Hardy's first full-length feature. Hardy comes from a background in short films and music videos and, as a first major work, *The Hallow* makes a promising debut. With the economy in recession, the last ancient woodland in Ireland is, the film tells us, under threat. A reluctant specialist is sent in to survey and evaluate the forest for development. He and his family are met with resentment and anger when they move into an isolated farmhouse to complete the work, but things go from bad to worse when they encounter a primordial, legendary evil.

Joseph Mawle plays Adam Hitchens, the troubled environmental scientist who reluctantly finds himself surveying the wood. Bojana Novakovic is his long-suffering wife Clare, who is struggling to support her husband, make habitable their lonely and dilapidated new home, and care for their newborn child. The small cast is rounded out by Michael McElhatton as Colm, an agitated local farmer who repeatedly pressures Hitchens to stay away from the wood, and Michael Smiley as a sceptical Belfast-born *garda* (police officer), trying to keep the peace. Unlike many movies referencing Irish myth, which often rely on leprechaun or banshee figures, such as the *Leprechaun* franchise (1993-2014), *Scream of the Banshee* (dir. by Steven C. Miller, 2011), or *Red Clover* (dir. by Drew Daywalt, 2012), this film was actually made on location in Ireland with the support of Bord Scannán na hÉireann, adding to its authenticity as it presents Ireland, not as a stereotyped commodity, but as a place with an all-too-real heritage.

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that Hitchens's inability to recognise anything in the landscape that doesn't fall within the realm of the objectively scientific has dire consequences, resulting in his falling victim to malign influences, leaving the viewer to judge whether he is responsible for his own actions or not. His increasingly febrile activity exacerbates pre-existing tensions provoked by the small family's physical and cultural isolation, and quickly condemns them to peril and flight. Hardy and Felipe Marino, the

screenwriters, show great originality in creating the film's imaginative combination of myth and popular science. They evoke folklore surrounding the Irish Sídhe or faery folk, while simultaneously employing the infectious *Ophiocordyceps Unilateralis* fungi as an ingenious biological vector for spiritual, mental, and physical change, as dark liquids and tendrils invade and infect, subverting the body and overpowering the mind. The design work by Ivan Manzella and the Nolan Studio therefore utilises varied motifs and visual references from vegetation, moulds, and fungal sources, resulting in what Noël Carroll calls '[c]reatures with combinatory natures', anomalous figures that violate cognitive categorisation, mixing decaying plant and animal, human and fungi.[1] These evocative prosthetic visual cues are reinforced through the use of other agents such as deliquescent slimes and unnaturally invasive roots, which spread infection and damage, wrecking home and technology.

These representations suggest that what the family confronts is something which, given the chance, will relentlessly claim the entire human world for itself, spreading decay and decomposition — a force that's ancient, driven, and much more active than we can fully perceive in our short lives. In spite of the best efforts of the cast and crew, however, there are some issues with the narrative which probably derive from the staging of the plot progression or running-time constraints. At times, characters lose authenticity due to their apparent lack of cognisance regarding their situation. They act as if unaware of information and experience gained with difficulty in earlier scenes, and then make poor decisions and perform actions which make little sense, and serve no purpose other than to create situations of peril to propel the plot. This plotting makes frightened characters into little more than puppets, who counter-intuitively take needless risks, such as fleeing the relative safety of their home into the night. Some sequences are, moreover, edited together to convey urgency and action, yet lack clear intent and structure, making them frenetic set-pieces that could be from almost any film, such as a chase that takes place almost entirely in the dark, a scene where the family are forced to defend their home, and an all-too-predictable sequence in which they inadvertently wreck their only transportation. This tendency toward cliché can, at times, make the story and characters difficult to invest in emotionally.

Specifically, the film is told from Hitchens's point of view, and though Mawles does his very best with it, the protagonist is often distant, a preoccupied environmentalist who doesn't always seem to engage with other characters or comprehend the dangers gathering around him. In contrast, Novakovic's Clare is immediate, vibrant, and proactive, a devoted

[1] Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Human Heart* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 43.

mother who goes further than she thinks she can in defence of her family, producing an engaging character who simply doesn't get enough screen time and who might have been a better channel into the narrative for the audience. The Hallow itself, a fungus that preys on humans, threatens the protagonists on two levels; it attacks the core of the family both by abducting their baby and by destabilising their identity as a family unit via infection and theft. It assimilates and takes individuality away, and Hitchens is left fighting himself as much as the Hallow. This dual menace is symbolically potent, yet only the child-focused dynamic really gathers momentum in the narrative, as the remoteness of some of the characters curtails the amount of empathy they can realistically elicit.

Equally disappointing is the fact that the screenplay makes very little use of actual folklore, which means that, as supernatural agents, the Hallow appear to rely on animalistic instinct and reaction rather than on any overt intelligence. This effectively makes them variants of the zombie archetype, and therefore a physical rather than intellectual threat, a decision which limits them significantly, since no great guile or craftiness can really be attributed to them. While they are cunning, they lack deviousness. The script misses a real chance to reflect the malicious and articulate psychologies so often seen in the Sídhe's dealings with humans in Irish folklore, and consequently narrative opportunities to demonstrate how such ancient creatures could be overwhelmingly manipulative and breathtakingly evil are missed. The Hallow are frightening, but in an infectious, assimilative way rather than as capricious, malevolent beings. This is a real pity and is compounded by the fact that such menacing characters are at their most powerful when only glimpsed; unfortunately, simply too much becomes visible during the climax, further reducing the potency of any horror they can evoke.

Nonetheless, the cast delivers finely tuned performances, especially Novakovic. The screenplay, by director Hardy and co-writer Marino, is supported by excellent and effective music from James Gosling. The design elements of the production are split between the family's convincingly mundane everyday domesticity and the more fantastical aspects of the narrative, providing a strong visual counterpoint. Creature design by Manzella (*Prometheus*, 2010; *Byzantium*, 2011) shows considerable imagination and resourcefulness, and is skilfully realised in prosthetics by the John Nolan Studio, brought to startling life through the creature choreography of Peter Elliot and performers Conor Craig Stephens, Joss Wyre, Sean Tyrell, and James Meryck.

The Hallow owes much to legendary special-effects artists Ray Harryhausen, Dick Smith, and Stan Winston (indeed, these icons receive a dedication in the film's end credits),

and as a 'creature feature' it fares well enough. Nonetheless, while it has some great performances, original ideas, wonderful design, and does have moments of tension, overall the unrefined handling of the story means that *The Hallow* has missed a significant opportunity to breathe new and imaginative life into ancient myths.

Gerard Gibson

The Witch **(Dir. by Robert Eggers)** USA 2016
Parts and Labour/RT Features/Rooks Nest Entertainment

The Witch is the directorial and script-writing debut of Robert Eggers, previously production designer on *Hansel and Gretel: Witch Hunters* (dir. by Tommy Wirkola, 2007). Having been told New-England folk tales as a child, Eggers used historic documents, witness statements, and trial transcripts from the era of the Salem witch trials to capture the mood, strangeness, and otherworldliness of folk stories, evoking the horror fiction of Arthur Machen or Algernon Blackwood. The film is a tale of rural horror in the vein of such titles as *The Witches* (dir. by Cyril Frankel, 1966), *Blood on Satan's Claw* (dir. by Piers Haggard, 1971), or *Black Death* (dir. by Christopher Smith, 2010). Expelled from a Puritan colony in the wilds of New World America in the 1600s, William — a devout and unyielding man — and his family are ostracised from their brethren. Forced to start anew in the wilderness, they have no idea of the evil that waits for them in the deep woods.

Anya Taylor-Joy plays Thomasin, the intelligent and faithful eldest daughter of William (Ralph Ineson) and Katherine (Kate Dickie). Her younger brother Caleb (Harvey Scrimshaw) focuses his affections on her for lack of other company. Their younger twin siblings, Mercy and Jonas (Ellie Grainger and Lucas Dawson, respectively), run wild, playing in the forbidden woods and talking to the farmyard animals, ominously declaring the goat, Black Phillip, their 'King'. While Taylor-Joy and Ineson are the actors most frequently exposed to the camera's prolonged scrutiny, the cast as a whole deliver natural, realistic, convincing performances of great skill and subtlety, as the characters struggle with each other, their situation, and forces beyond their control.

Undefined events in the Puritan colony have made the tight religious community reject William and family, and the film suggests that the family's preoccupation with sin may be too extreme even for their notoriously pious brethren. Their intolerance has made William, Katherine, and their children exiles in the New World, reduced to eking out an existence from a wild and hostile landscape. When things go awry, in a series of events that strongly recall

the Salem witch trials themselves, chaotic accusations and dire tragedies are triggered by a complex combination of theological, psychological, economic, agrarian factors, all of which appear to be catalysed by the interference of the supernatural.

Eggers's screenplay therefore implies that faith, when focused only on sin and wretchedness, quickly becomes just another form of idolatry. With its scarves and bonnets, its binding corsets and heavy floor-length dresses, the film makes visual and symbolic links to other contemporary forms of religious stricture and intolerance. The garments and head-cloths bind the wearers, burdening them, insulating them from their own senses and from nature.

In contrast, the Witch herself is, from what we see of her, completely unbound, unfettered by any inhibition. This antagonist is seen more in effect than on screen, and is all the more potent for that. We are presented here with a traditional, unapologetic archetype, most commonly depicted in literature from the sixteenth to the mid-twentieth century. The Witch portrayed here is stereotypically parasitic, embodying chimerical, powerful forces that prey on others, particularly the vulnerable members of society like children, using them brutally as resources and utilities to achieve her own occult ends, and thriving on division, hysteria and fear. Symbolically, in works by writers from Nathaniel Hawthorne and Shirley Jackson to Roald Dahl, the Witch has long metonymised a volatile, dissonant set of political and social forces, representing the control and exploitation of the populace by the select few, privileged with secret knowledge, yet also denoting the demonisation of individuals considered outside the accepted social order. Eggers's narrative introduces wider philosophical and political resonance through choices in visual design and casting, making clear that the titular character is as much a part of the colonial expansion as the family she preys on. The threat to the family isn't an unknown shamanistic threat, native to the land they've colonised or taken. The glimpses of the antagonist reveal someone who might easily have shared passage from Europe with them, subtly gesturing towards the colonists' own problematic history and indiscriminately predatory nature.

While the film evidently strives in many respects for historical accuracy, Eggers has allowed himself some effective artistic licence in depicting the animals that are central to the action. Accounts of the time most commonly associate witches' familiars with cats, dogs, and toads, but *The Witch* moves in other, visually menacing directions, referencing figures derived from the Celtic, Nordic, and Latin traditions, all visually linked by blood.[1] While the

[1] Michael D. Bailey, *Historical Dictionary of Witchcraft* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2003), pp. 48-49.

goat, represented here by the threatening figure of Black Philip, was apparently seldom seen as satanic in American or English folklore in the seventeenth-century, it was a common pan-European symbol of power, sexuality, and occult evil. According to Charles Thompson, it appeared most vigorously in France, though W. C. Hazlitt's *Dictionary of Faiths and Folklore* does mention undated English satanic associations, which arguably could have occurred after ideas had been assimilated from other countries.[2] In addition to Black Phillip's frightening performance, *The Witch* also features a notably unnerving hare, a bold and visually potent filmic image which may or may not be the Witch herself. In Europe, the hare, from antiquity, had been a sacred animal, facilitating divination, as well as functioning as a symbol of fertility and a creature linking present and future. While it had positive associations in medieval Christianity, by the 1600s the hare had taken on a singularly sinister aspect, and was considered a terrible omen, most notably featuring in the curious 1662 confessions of Scottish witch Isobel Gowdie.[3]

The hare and goat are therefore potent representations of an animalistic otherworld, agents of the spiritual hinterland to which the family have exiled themselves — a realm where things cannot be taken at face value, where words and ideas can take on a powerful life of their own and can become dangerously real. Much use is also made of the bleak forest landscape, once a rich, verdant setting, but for the family, all vitality has been withdrawn. Instead of enjoying New-World fruitfulness, they must battle through tangled thicket and sodden copse, the portrayal of their trial made all the more effective by editing which articulates a Freudian symbolism linking hair and branch. The long, intertwined hair of the Witch twists and forks like roots and branches; her untrained tresses reference vigorous, uncontrolled growth and the willingness to objectify and exploit others in pursuit of a personal agenda. At the same time, rotting crops and decaying corn make sly visual allusions to Linnda Caporael's theories citing hallucinogenic ergot contaminating food supplies as a possible contributory factor to the Salem hysteria.[4]

Throughout the film, cinematographer Jarin Blaschke makes remarkable use of limited natural light, with scenes lit by flat, overcast daylight or by candlelight, adding to the sense that we are watching something genuine unfolding on screen. Craig Lathrop's highly realistic production design provides a believable setting, and is complimented by Linda Muir's authentic-looking costumes, with the hand-sewn heavy corseted dresses, bonnets,

[2] C. J. S. Thompson, *Mysteries and Secrets of Magic* (London: Studio Editions, 1995), pp. 140-41; and W. C. Hazlitt, *Dictionary of Faiths and Folklore* (London: Bracken Books, 1995), p. 278.
[3] Emma Wilby, *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2010), p. 43.
[4] Linnda R. Caporael, 'Ergotism: The Satan Loose in Salem', *Science*, 192:4234 (April 1976), 21-26.

jackets, and hose all visually contributing to the psychological accretion binding the protagonists to their fate, as mentioned above. Editing by Louise Ford is precise, skilful, and transparent, heightening the tension, and helping to create the supernaturally permeable world the family have entered, each cut making us wish we'd seen both more and less. Mark Korven's music is haunting and melodic, full of tension and dread, with period instruments giving it an effective voice, both beautiful and terrible. Together, these elements present a powerful, convincing evocation of time and place, with dialogue, costumes, lighting, and acting persuasively adding to the sense of reality and dread.

Overall, *The Witch* is an unconventional, original, conceptual horror, focusing more on spiritual and psychological chills than on violence and gore. While blood and splatter are sparse (though occasionally very effectively employed), this is more than made up for by the pervasive fear, and high levels of tension and shock conveyed in the film. The ideas and powerful images will stay with the viewer, some of which, though simple, are highly original, even unique, a quality which is rare indeed. Eggers's film raises central questions about the fear of the Witch, the history of which long predates Christianity, and implies that its most likely sources were psychological and anthropological rather than religious, born from societal unease and anxiety.[5] As always, the Witch raises her head in times of trial, and, with the current economic situation and terrorism casting a long shadow, this film has great timing and potency.

Gerard Gibson

[5] Wolfgang Behringer, *Witches and Witch-Hunts* (Malden: Polity, 2004), p. 48.

***Crimson Peak* (Dir: Guillermo del Toro)** Canada 2015
Legendary Pictures

Crimson Peak was in danger of confounding audiences before it even reached cinema screens. Alarmed by reports that potential viewers were expecting a horror film (a concern not eased by the fact that early trailers marketed it as a haunted-house movie), director and co-writer Guillermo Del Toro felt it necessary to manage expectations, tweeting in October 2015, '[o]ne last time before release. *Crimson Peak*: Not a horror film. A Gothic Romance. Creepy, tense, but full of emotion …' He was right to be concerned. *Crimson Peak* did not resonate with the public at large. Indeed, as *Variety* reports, it 'fell flat' at the box office, 'proving too niche for mainstream crowds', and disappointing viewers 'looking for a traditional horror film'.[1] As *Crimson Peak*'s heroine, aspiring author Edith Cushing (Mia Wasikowska) notes of one of her own creative efforts, '[i]t's more a love story with a ghost in it. The ghost is just a metaphor.' Yet at the same time, expectations in this regard are also subverted by the fact that the most intriguing romantic relationship in the film is that between Edith's mysterious new husband and his *sister*, rather than him and his new bride. *Crimson Peak* is, therefore, actually the tale of two very different love stories, both laden with gothic overtones.

Crimson Peak positions itself firmly within a familiar gothic tradition from the outset, and proudly displays its allusions to the classical gothic's greatest literary and cinematic hits, paying visual, narrative, and thematic homage to the likes of the Bluebeard story, Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839), Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817), Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938), and to films such as Peter Medak's *The Changeling* (1980) and Alfred Hitchcock's *Notorious* (1946), to name just the most obvious influences. The basic premise is also a familiar one. Edith is an earnest and imaginative American heiress, the only child of widower Carter Cushing (Jim Beavers) a no-nonsense construction magnate based in Buffalo, New York. As noted above, Edith, whose first name evokes American turn-of-the-century novelist and ghost-story writer Edith Wharton (her last name is presumably an allusion to Hammer-Horror stalwart Peter Cushing), has serious ambitions to be a writer. However, her life is upended by the arrival of English Baronet Sir Thomas Sharp (Tom Hiddleston) who initially tries (but fails) to convince Carter to invest in

[1] Brent Lang, 'Box Office: *Goosebumps* Tops *The Martian*, *Crimson Peak* Falls Flat', *Variety*, 18 October 2015 <http://variety.com/2015/film/box-office/box-office-goosebumps-the-martian-crimson-peak-1201620792/> [accessed 7 October 2016].

the mining machine he believes will resurrect his family fortune, and then turns his attentions to wooing Edith. Despite her initial reluctance to be swayed by Sir Thomas's considerable charms, and the fact that her father distrusts the aristocrat so much that he hires a private detective to dig up incriminating documents (thereby causing a romantic impasse conveniently resolved when Carter's head is gruesomely smashed in by an Giallo-style black-gloved assailant), Edith quickly finds herself wedded to a man she loves but barely knows.

Edith leaves American modernity behind for her new husband's ancestral home in Cumberland, officially known as Allardyce Hall (the name is yet another genre reference, this time to the malign summer home featured in Robert Marasco's 1973 novel *Burnt Offerings*), but unofficially dubbed 'Crimson Peak' due to the rich red clay that the house is, literally and metaphorically, built upon. The hall is a once-splendid ruin with a massive hole in the roof. There are no servants save for a rickety old retainer, and thanks to subsidence and lack of money for the estate's upkeep, it is sinking into the ground. There's also another (very literal) red flag for the new bride: when it snows, the land around Crimson Peak appears to *bleed*.

As has briefly been noted elsewhere, the narrative structure of *Crimson Peak* closely resembles Joanna Russ's checklist of the plot points found in the then-popular 'Modern Gothic' romance paperbacks, outlined in her classic 1973 essay, 'Somebody's Trying to Kill Me and I Think It's My Husband'.[2] We have here, for example, a 'large, lonely, brooding house' (generally, as here, with a name, like Thornfield or Manderley) in an isolated location; a young, orphaned, and inexperienced heroine; and of course, a brooding, older 'Super-male' to whom she is 'vehemently attracted' and, usually, 'just as vehemently repelled' (Edith's first, accurate, impression of Sir Thomas is that he is 'a parasite with a title').[3] Then there is also the inevitable presence of what Russ describes as the '*buried ominous secret*' (italics in original), which in this instance is also intimately connected to the Super-male's relationship to another staple character type, the '*The Other Woman*', the heroine's double and her opposite, who is often, amongst other things, beautiful, worldly, glamorous, and openly sexual, as well as 'immoral, promiscuous, criminal or even insane'.[4]

The 'other woman' here is Sir Thomas's older sister Lucille, played with scenery-gnawing relish by Jessica Chastain. Lucille is essentially a mash-up of Mrs Danvers, the first Mrs de Winter (both from du Maurier's novel), and Poe's Madeline Usher, simultaneously

[2] See Maria J. Pervez Cuevo, 'The Return of Gothic Romance', 26 March 2016 <https://mjpcuervo.com/2016/03/26/the-return-of-gothic-romance/> [accessed 6 October 2016]; and Joanna Russ, 'Somebody's Trying to Kill Me and I Think It's My Husband: The Modern Gothic', in *To Write Like A Woman: Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 94-120.
[3] Russ, p. 96.
[4] Ibid.

family member and housekeeper, sister and lover, accomplice, and protector. Eased into Buffalo high society by Sir Thomas's good looks and obvious social graces, the siblings seem charismatic but intriguingly austere when attending a ball or other evening function, but del Toro, revealingly, presents them as looking downright vampiric in natural daylight. This is particularly evident when Sir Thomas and Lucille meet with Edith in a park shortly after their first encounter. Sir Thomas wears dark glasses, while, in one of the film's most striking visual conceits, his unnerving sister is explicitly framed — by both the vividly contrasting dresses worn by the two women and some typically on-the-nose dialogue — as the elegant but sinister 'black moth' destined to prey upon Edith's beautiful but possibly doomed 'butterfly'. Indeed, the Sharp siblings *are* vampires of a sort — 'Honeymoon Killer'-style financial leeches who travel the world targeting vulnerable but wealthy young women.

More generally, the film foregrounds from the outset a preoccupation with ideas related to the importance of *seeing* and *not seeing.* Edith wears glasses, but only some of the time, and although she prides herself on 'keeping her eyes open' — a quality which enables her to see ghosts — she is initially blind, having been so thoroughly hoodwinked by her new family. The predictably heroic role played by Edith's former love interest (and eventual would-be rescuer) Dr Alan McMichael (Charlie Hunnam — the weak link in an otherwise excellent cast), is not-so-subtly foreshadowed by the fact that he is both an ophthalmologist *and* a fan of the works of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Equally tellingly, early on, Sir Thomas ruefully admits to Edith that that 'I've always closed my eyes to things that make me uncomfortable. It makes everything easier.' It's a statement that ultimately tells us much about how he came to be such a self-deluding, murderous, and yet tragic figure. At this point, he truly *cannot* see how monstrous the behaviour he and his sister engage in actually is. By way of contrast, Edith's ability to 'see' beyond the everyday means that she can actively engage with the ghosts who aid her from beyond the grave. It is for this reason that she survives her horrific ordeal at Crimson Peak, despite sustaining all manner of dire physical and emotional damage. Edith can benefit from the warnings provided by the ghosts of the past —both her late mother and the doomed brides who preceded her across the crumbling threshold of Crimson Peak. It is clear, however, that Sir Thomas and Lucille will forever be haunted by their familial and ancestral history, trapped in the incestuous relationship they established in response to the childhood abuse they sustained at the hands of their brutal father and cold-hearted mother. Although Sir Thomas can briefly envision (albeit in characteristically unrealistic and typically self-serving terms) a life beyond Crimson Peak for all three of them, fatally for him, the same is not true of his obsessive sister.

Interestingly, all of Sir Thomas and Lucille's previous victims were associated with cities in Europe. Their mistake this time, it would seem, is to select for liquidation a young American who embodies the qualities of resourcefulness and reinvention associated with her home country. In addition, as a writer, Edith has the ability to control her own story. It is entirely appropriate then that, when she and Lucille finally engage in a brutal death match, Edith first fights back by stabbing her more-powerful assailant with a gold pen gifted to her by Carter, and later finishes the job off with a shovel, a symbol of the hard graft that made her lowborn father a wealthy man. Although Lucille lashes out at her sister-in-law with a bread knife (her choice of weapon arguably providing further evidence of her liminal status as both a scion *and* a servant of the house), she never really has a chance against her pure-hearted, *nouveau riche* rival: New-World purity and grit triumphs over Old-World insanity and moral corruption.

Ultimately, *Crimson Peak* is simultaneously enthralling and maddening. The film is often in danger of becoming more of a master class in outstanding set-design, visual composition, and costuming than a truly engaging emotional and intellectual experience. What just about saves del Toro from falling into the trap that has long since consumed Tim Burton — whose films for years have been empty, cynical exercises in stylistic excess and cartoonish characterisation — is the narrative's thematic consistency, and the winning performances of the central cast. Wasikowska — an actor born to play these kinds of roles — has an air of unforced intelligence and sensitivity that means she can carry off the part of the candelabra-carrying gothic heroine with genuine aplomb (having also played both Jane Eyre and Alice in Wonderland, she's certainly served her time as an onscreen exemplar of Victorian femininity). Hiddleston is perfect as the dangerously malleable and ultimately tragic anti-hero. And although hers is the most obviously over-the-top performance, Chastain's Lucille, with her hidden history of matricide, institutionalisation, and incest, is, by my reckoning at least, the most fascinating character in the entire film.

By letting us know in the closing moments that Edith is the author of the book entitled 'Crimson Peak', which we saw opened at the very beginning of the film (thereby ultimately presenting the events of the rest of the film as a dramatisation of her version of the story), del Toro neatly establishes that Edith has at last gained the real-life experience necessary to write an authentic tale of love and obsession. As well as emphasising the film's obvious desire to emulate classic works of gothic literature and film, this meta framing device therefore reinforces for us the fact that *Crimson Peak* is, in more ways than one, intended to be Edith's tale: a harrowing but empowering *Bildungsroman* from which the imperilled gothic heroine

has emerged a stronger and wiser woman. Nevertheless, for all of the emphasis placed on Edith's control of her own story in this sequence, it is still del Toro's final, eerily composed shot of the now-ghostly Lucille, left behind in the silent, rotting halls of her ancestral home, that, for me at least, lingered longest: after all, for her, as she puts it herself, 'the horror … the horror was for love'.

Bernice M. Murphy

Krampus (Dir. Michael Dougherty) USA 2015
Universal Pictures

Christmas comes but once a year, which in the world of cinema signals an onslaught of family-friendly schmaltz, containing a heavy helping of good-natured hijinks and saccharine sentimentality, most likely with Tim Allen leading the charge in a scheme to save, or indeed, avoid the festive season (as in *The Santa Clause* trilogy (1994-2006), and *Christmas with the Kranks* (2004)). Never missing an opportunity to illuminate the dark side of the most wonderful time of the year, however, the horror genre has served up its own cornucopia of holiday-centred offerings; from early slasher *Black Christmas* (1974) and the extreme childhood trauma of the *Silent Night, Deadly Night* franchise (1984-1991), to killer snowmen in the *Jack Frost* series (1997, 2000), and more recently the offbeat *Rare Exports: A Christmas Tale* (2010). With plenty of precedents, then, it comes as no surprise that a big-budget version of a traditional Noël nightmare has at last found its way into theatres.

Following a mammoth year at the box office, with domestic returns in excess of $2.4 billion — thanks to blockbusters *Jurassic World*, *Furious 7* and *Minions* — Universal Pictures rounded off 2015 with *Krampus*, a horror-comedy from Michael Dougherty, who has most notably directed the now cult-favourite Halloween anthology *Trick 'r Treat* (2007). Based on a German folk tale, the 'Krampus' is the Christmas demon whose mission it is to snatch naughty children rather than spoil them, a premise which has as of late inspired several similarly themed film adaptations. Various incarnations range from the ecclesiastical and Eurocentric *Sint* (2010), to low-budget affairs *Krampus: The Christmas Devil* (2013) and *Krampus: The Reckoning* (2015). Indeed, for such an ostensibly niche sub-genre, Dougherty's film also finds itself emerging alongside *A Christmas Horror Story* (2015), starring William Shatner. This picture takes the form of an omnibus of chilling tales, one of which cleverly depicts a department store Santa, who, while suffering a psychotic breakdown, becomes involved in an imaginary battle with the 'vile enemy of Christmas'.

Dougherty's *Krampus* tells the story of the Engel family, comprised of father Tom (Adam Scott), and mother Sarah (played by the highly talented Toni Collette), who, along with their two kids, prepare to endure the yuletide season with their insufferable extended relations; these include the couple's uncouth, gun-loving brother-in-law Howard (David Koechner), and abrasive, inebriated aunt, Dorothy, played by *Two and a Half Men* (2003-2015) regular Conchata Ferrell. Tensions simmer between the mismatched clans as they attempt to uphold the delicate equilibrium of social etiquette, which contributes moments of only serviceable humour, for example when portly Howie Jr (Maverick Flack) obnoxiously belches at the dinner table, much to the delight of his father. When the Engels' young son Max (Emjay Anthony) loses hope in Christmas, he tears up his letter to Santa Claus, at which point a storm rolls in, enveloping the town just days before 25 December, leaving the group housebound.

It is this whiteout which heralds the arrival of the film's titular baddie, accompanied by his posse of sinister snowmen and wicked elves, who have come to assist their master in collecting his dues. This introduction is weak, as Krampus (Luke Hawker) lands to little fanfare and screen-time, remaining markedly absent until the story approaches its resolution. Following his touchdown, the film proceeds by exploiting typical narrative mechanics, such as when daughter Beth (Stefania LaVie Owen) goes missing in the midst of a power outage. The atmosphere of intimidating encroachment and surveillance taps into the ever-present cultural anxiety regarding domestic intrusion, dramatised in the home-invasion genre, which has undergone a resurgence in the last decade with *The Strangers* (2008), *You're Next* (2013), and *The Purge* franchise (2013, 2014, and 2016). This engagement with familiar motifs only carries the film so far, however, and, as the family find themselves under siege, *Krampus* exposes one of its glaring flaws: its pacing. In particular, the sequences where the household is under attack feel protracted and repetitive. Confrontations, such as Tom and Sarah's battle against a wicked angel and a hungry jack-in-the-box in the attic, overstay their welcome just enough to force the plot to lurch forward, ultimately producing a hurried third act.

Sadly, by the time Krampus himself eventually materialises, he has been relegated to a supporting role in his own feature. Rather than capitalising on the chance to explore the fairy-tale mythos and give the festive devil any dialogue — perhaps in the vein of a cunning, Rumpelstiltskin-type rogue — Krampus is simply reduced to a lumbering, non-verbal, growling beast. This, alas, blunts his effectiveness, and forestalls the possibility of endowing his character with any complexity. The antagonist's persona is not the only aspect of his identity to be diminished; so too is his menacing physical presence, which is diluted though

its under-representation. In fact, the jarring editing of shots featuring the Christmas fiend and his underlings is reminiscent of the treatment of the king of the monsters in Gareth Edwards's *Godzilla* (2014), in which, on numerous occasions, the film's focus suddenly cuts away from the behemoth's unveiling one too many times. Such a strategy leaves the viewer frustrated, a dynamic which also grates during violent scenes, generating as it does indecipherable skirmishes. While concealing a monster's final reveal can efficiently engender suspense (successfully achieved by Ridley Scott's 1979 masterpiece, *Alien*), *Krampus* frequently crosses the fine line between teasing the threat enticingly and marginalising it entirely, thus alienating the spectator.

Visually, *Krampus* displays nostalgic throwbacks to the practical effects of the 1980s, a flourish that served Dougherty exceptionally well in *Trick 'r Treat*, and this approach to character realisation is utilised for the 'shadow of St Nicholas', as he is also dubbed. This tangible imagining of Krampus largely relies upon a single open-mouthed facial expression, with the creature's design as a cloven-hoofed, ram-horned, towering prowler, evoking pseudo-satanic imagery. The impish minions, in contrast, are rendered using a hybrid of both CGI — as in the case of the mischievous gingerbread-men — and elaborate puppets, the latter tactic acting as a playful nod to fellow madcap Christmas caper *Gremlins* (1984, 1990). Although digitally engineered models may permit extensive artistic possibilities in contemporary film-making, one wonders if electing to eschew such techniques altogether would have maintained greater tonal consistency and enhanced the film's potential to charm an audience.

Formally, *Krampus*' second act incorporates a flashback segment, which mimics the style of stop-motion animation, providing a refreshing diversion from the film's hoary visual register. Max's German-speaking grandmother, Omi (Krista Stadler), recounts an experience from her youth when she accidentally summoned Krampus, who abducts her parents, leaving her behind to warn others against calling such a fate down upon themselves. The decision to deliver exposition in this manner is a rewarding one, as it speaks to the enchanted and magical quality associated with Christmas, but is also richly communicative despite its seeming simplicity. The climate of poverty surrounding young Omi is portrayed in her acquisition of a loaf of bread from the back of an emergency supply van, only to have it stolen from her by the desperate greed of the townspeople. The coding of the vehicle as a ration truck fortifies a link with wartime conditions, suggesting that Krampus can be read as an analogy for fascist authority and leadership, 'disappearing' those on his list who have been 'Othered' for their beliefs — or lack thereof. Thematically, the Engel family's predicament,

as they are forced to hide from this marauding abductor, reinforces a subtext of Nazi persecution and ethnic cleansing. The interpretation of the villain's *modus operandi* in this fashion is positively provocative in politicising an ideologically oppressive ghost from the past; yet the motif is developed almost no further beyond this point, and the film abandons this curious narrative surplus which breeds more questions than answers.

To conclude, Michael Dougherty's *Krampus* is a passable horror-comedy, which, despite being somewhat editorially imbalanced, represents far more in the way of missed opportunities in terms of characterisation and cinematography than outright failings. Nonetheless, I would refer prospective viewers to *Trick 'r Treat* as a vastly more entertaining movie by the same director. That said, one element for which *Krampus* does deserve special praise is its unnerving dénouement. It is here, in the closing minutes of the film, that Max attempts to sacrifice himself, in order to procure the safe return of his family, declaring, 'I just wanted Christmas to be like it used to be'. Unfortunately, the young boy soon learns a harsh lesson — *caveat emptor* — for he is granted his wish in the shape of a cruel punishment, as he and his loved ones find themselves imprisoned inside a snow globe, destined to spend eternity together in an endless holiday gathering. The feeling of déjà vu is palpable, and a sense of uncomfortable familiarity descends upon each individual as they gaze uneasily into each other's eyes. Here, the symbolism of incarceration within an artefact rife with connotations of empty and frivolous consumerism neatly resonates with and bookends the hysterical shopping rush exhibited during the film's opening credits.

While *Krampus*' employment of this trinket as a plot device may not elevate the film to the lofty ranks of cinematic history, it still offers an unsettling twist in a genre known for embracing the security of formulaic story-telling. *Frohe Weihnachten*!

Gavin Wilkinson