FILM REVIEWS

***The Conjuring* (Dir. James Wan)** USA 2013
New Line Cinema/The Safran Company

We all have days when we just don't seem to be able to get out of the house. It's perhaps unsurprising, then, that at a time when soaring rents and house prices somehow coexist with the continued negative-equity reign of terror, the haunted-house film should be enjoying yet another of its periodic revivals. In James Wan's *The Conjuring*, released in 2013, Roger and Carolyn Perron (Ron Livingstone (a.k.a. 'Burger' from *Sex and the City*) and Lili Taylor) insist that they can't leave the beautiful if ramshackle home that is terrorising and potentially seriously endangering their family of five daughters, because they have too much money tied up in it, a plaint familiar to those who have seen more than one cinematic domestic haunting. Not least because it is allegedly based on a 'true' story, the film directly evokes the iconic *Amityville Horror* (1979), which was based on Jay Anson's 1977 book of the same name, and inspired a string of sequels, along with a remake in 2005, directed by Andrew Douglas.

The dates of the *Amityville* phenomenon are instructive here. The original film formed part of what was arguably the Golden Age of haunted-house films, running from Jack Clayton's *The Innocents* (1961) and Robert Wise's *The Haunting* (1963) (remade by Jan de Bont in 1999), to Dan Curtis's *Burnt Offerings* (1976), Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), and Tobe Hooper's *Poltergeist* (1982). After something of a lull in the 1980s and 90s, the decades on either side of the millennium have seen a slow-burning resurgence in such films. The remake of *The Haunting* (also starring Taylor) was followed by *The Others* in 2001, but it wasn't until 2005 that things really began to kick off, with both *The Skeleton Key* and *Hide and Seek* being released in quick succession, while two years later *The Orphanage* (2007, also the year in which the first *Paranormal Activity* film appeared, of which more below) made it clear that this was not simply a trend confined to Hollywood or even to the United States. 2009 saw the release of *The Haunting in Connecticut*, which spawned an awkwardly titled sequel, *The Haunting in Connecticut: Ghosts of Georgia* (2013), both of which are based on a 2002 made-for-TV movie documentary double-bill of more or less the same name. Finally, *Don't Be Afraid of the Dark* (based on a 1973 made-for-TV film) and *Insidious* came out in 2010; while the latter's sequel, *Insidious: Chapter 2*, appeared in 2013 (both directed by James Wan); and *Chapter 3*, directed by Leigh Whannell, is due out in 2015.

What is striking about this recent revival of haunted-house narratives is that little seems to have changed since the late 1970s. Apart from the token (though undeveloped) nod to financial difficulties (which has been well analysed by critic Dale Bailey in *American Nightmares: The Haunted House Formula in American Popular Fiction* [1999]), *The Conjuring* is, in many ways, closer to homage than a genuine updating of older material.[1] The film is centred around the interactions between the beleaguered Perron family, victims of violent and frightening poltergeist activity in their own home, and Ed and Lorraine Warren, a real-life husband-and-wife psychic-investigating duo played by a rather wooden Patrick Wilson and an uncharacteristically vulnerable Vera Farmiga. The Warrens battle their own inner demons and the byzantine bureaucracy of the Catholic Church to help the family against what they rapidly (so rapidly that one doubts their analytical methods) come to believe is not a haunting as such, but a case of demonic possession. This familiar plot is matched by familiar iconography. The way in which the Perron house is shot almost fetishistically from the front, the focus on the vulnerable family dog, a horrifying swarm of birds, and scenes including vomiting all strongly recall some of the most iconic imagery from *Amityville*, while a TV spewing white noise and a sequence in which one of the young girls vanishes into thin air both function as visual cues, alerting us (if we needed alerting) to the heavy debt that *The Conjuring* owes to *Poltergeist*.

To a certain extent, the film's uncanny (or perhaps simply lazy) reiteration of the plots and visual style of the 1970s haunted-house movie can be attributed to the fact that the 'real-life' events on which it is based took place in 1971. This is indicated via small, easily-missed captions announcing times and places, and a proliferation of long, sharp-finned cars, shaggy men's hair-cuts, and frilly, high-necked blouses. Apart from these vehicular and sartorial details, however, the 1970s iconography is a little vague and easy to overlook; it seems to exist more in order to foster a sort of stylistic prettiness than to produce any kind of carefully detailed realism. The girls' ankle-grazing, quasi-Victorian nighties are particularly noteworthy here; it was difficult not to feel that these were employed opportunistically to make some of the creepier scenes set at night in the girls' bedrooms even more atmospheric and otherworldly. This is not to say that pre-pubescent middle-class girls in early 1970s America *didn't* wear long, white, lacy things to bed, but rather that the film's visual register is designed to evoke a generalised sense of 'spookiness' that it draws from its generic predecessors – from the nineteenth as much as the late twentieth century. Far from being a

[1] See Dale Bailey *American Nightmares: The Haunted House Formula in American Popular Fiction* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999).

costume drama, then, *The Conjuring* makes use of historical detail so as to create a set of pleasing images. At the same time, this impressionistic exploitation of the past suggests that the film is striving to be more universal, rather than firmly anchored to a specific point in time, and therefore easier for twenty-first-century audiences to relate to and identify with. Yes, fine, this may be 1971, but really, it could be anytime — or anywhere — it could be YOU! This, at any rate, seems to be the general idea, one that is cemented by a certain visual consonance with a rather more recent manifestation of the haunted-house subgenre — the *Paranormal Activity* franchise. Static shots of empty rooms leave us in little doubt as to what is being referenced, while many of the more effective scares in *The Conjuring* come from tiny details relating to material objects and structural elements, as doors, windows, and furniture move, rattle, and creak, small objects fall over, wind chimes tinkle ominously, and so on.

It is in relation to the iconic status of the house itself, however, that the film begins to disintegrate. The visual weight carried by the house as a material and affective space is strangely undermined by the Warrens' insistence that the 'haunting' has nothing to do with it — that people are haunted rather than places, and that the demon will follow the Perrons wherever they go. Similarly difficult to square is the notion that the actual spirits haunting the house are the victims of the demon's evil dominion. We may feel sorry for the little boy named Rory (who becomes the youngest daughter's invisible playmate), and for the spectres of various women in period costumes who have harmed themselves and committed suicide in or near the house, but we are also encouraged to be frightened of them, and to acknowledge that they are dangerous. While this does make some sense, it is by no means clearly explained, an issue which seems to dog the film as a whole. In particular, a creepy Victorian china doll, named Annabelle, plays a major part in the film's initial exposition, and shows up again later at a key moment, without the audience ever being told exactly how the doll fits in to the events taking place in the Perron house. Of course, what's happening here is that material for a sequel is being set up, and lo and behold, *The Conjuring 2: The Enfield Poltergeist* is in production and due to be released in 2015, while a spin-off, called *Annabelle* and centring around the doll, is due out later this year. I would not want to imply that including 'teasers' for future films isn't a legitimate storytelling technique, but it leaves this film feeling rather truncated. Rather than fostering a sense of mystery and of phenomena too vast to fit comfortably within a single text, it is as if *The Conjuring* has been so ruthlessly edited that its coherence has suffered, or indeed that these elements were simply forgotten about by the filmmakers, who never bothered explaining them in a satisfactory manner.

This is not to say, however, that the film is without any redeeming qualities. There are some generally effective scares; it's quite entertaining, if not especially profound or ground-breaking; and it really does look quite lovely. However, while I for one will certainly be watching the sequels and spin-offs, even just the knowledge that these loom ominously in the not-too-distant future serves to heighten the overwhelming sense that we've seen it all before.

Dara Downey

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Only Lovers Left Alive **(Dir. Jim Jarmusch)** UK/Germany 2013
Recorded Pictures Company/Pandora Film/Sony Pictures Classics
(This review contains spoilers)

Only Lovers Left Alive is Jim Jarmusch's latest foray into genre filmmaking, after the equally idiosyncratic 'psychedelic Western' *Dead Man* (1995) and urban Samurai thriller *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (1999), and casts the vampire as a typically offbeat, world-weary Jarmuschian outsider. In its twin protagonists Eve (Tilda Swinton) and Adam (Tom Hiddleston), the film also manages to revitalise the trope of the vampire lover, so often of late dominated by the saccharine and sanitised legacy of the *Twilight* school. Centuries-old and still in love, the duo make for the most memorable vampire couple in recent cinema, and it's well worth spending two meandering hours in their company.

The film opens with the pair worlds apart, Eve in Tangiers, where she spends her time reminiscing with fellow vampire Christopher Marlowe (John Hurt), and Adam in Detroit, holed up in the decaying house in which he records the music (analogue, naturally) that has brought him unwanted fame and prompted him to retreat from a wider world that he regards as being populated by 'zombies'. Variously disguised as Dr Faustus or Dr Caligari, he makes nocturnal trips to purchase blood from Dr Watson (Jeffrey Wright), but otherwise his only communication is with Ian (Anton Yelchin), who helps procure the precious vintage guitars and recording equipment with which Adam surrounds himself. Ian also proves to be adept at sourcing more hard-to-get items, such as the wooden bullet with which Adam plans to shoot himself, having fallen into one of his (frequent) spells of existential despair. One video-chat later, Eve has packed some essential reading material (including David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, Beckett's *Endgame*, and Cervantes's *Don Quixote*) and is on the first night-plane out of Tangiers to Detroit in an effort to restore her depressed lover to more sanguine spirits. Once reunited, the pair talk about all sorts of things, from the fate of humanity to the

mysteries of the mushroom ('we don't know shit about fungi'), amuse themselves with music and ice-pops made of blood, and wander the post-industrial wastelands of Detroit.

All of this transpires at a pace that may admittedly prove frustrating for some viewers, but for me *Only Lovers Left Alive* it as its best during such sequences; in fact, it enters far more problematic territory precisely when it deviates from this rhythm. This is especially evident in the introduction of a third vampire Ava (Mia Wasikowska), who demands more obvious entertainment than Adam and Eve have sought thus far. Her arrival precipitates a predictable turn of events, when she seduces and kills the unfortunate Ian, and inadvertently risks drawing attention to the wafer-thin nature of the plot. Yet the film ultimately finds its way out of this potential pitfall, when Ava's actions force Adam and Eve to flee back to Tangiers, where they resume their wanderings, albeit faced with the added difficulty that they have now lost all access to a reliable supply of blood to sustain them. The more Hiddleston and Swinton share the screen, the better, because the film lives and breathes through their elegant interactions with one another, and in many ways it presents a portrait of a relationship that is as intimate and low-key as Richard Linklater's triptych of films *Before Sunrise* (1995), *Before Sunset* (2004), and *Before Midnight* (2013) — just with more blood-drinking.

Swinton's Eve in particular is a delight, humouring Adam out of his doldrums, and revitalising him in the most mundane of ways, such as when she encourages him to join her in a dance to Denise LaSalle's 'Trapped by a Thing Called Love', a sequence that is both effortlessly cool and genuinely charming. It also points to another significant aspect of the film, which is its use of music; this includes original contributions from Jarmusch's own band SQÜRL, and a diverse list of other artists and tracks (including Charlie Feathers's rockabilly classic 'Can't Hardly Stand It'). The music within the film functions as a soundtrack to persistent musings about the nature of art and the artist, and their resilience (or otherwise) with the passing of time; significantly, the Christopher Marlowe with whom Eve ruminates in Tangiers is ultimately revealed as the 'true author' of Shakespeare's plays, and Adam has chosen to settle in the original hometown of Motown, the record label that was previously as prominent a feature of Detroit as the city's once-thriving automotive industry.

The version of Detroit that is featured in the film is shot through a lens that implies it is the ideal landscape both to engender and reflect Adam's ennui. In this, it clearly recalls the work of Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre in their hauntingly beautiful photography series 'The Ruins of Detroit', and the film as a whole boasts similarly striking cinematography by Yorick Le Saux (collaborating with Jarmusch for the first time; it's also worth noting that this is Jarmusch's first experiment with digital film-making). Adam and Eve make their way

through spaces that provide visible monuments to the kind of urban decay associated with the city's economic downturn, including a visit to the Michigan Theatre, once an ornate movie-house in the Renaissance Revival style, now (among other things) a car park. Shot for shot, *Only Lovers Left Alive* is visually stunning, and nothing embodies this more than the sight of Adam and Eve standing back-to-back, his black hair and clothes contrasting with her platinum hair and white clothing, as they gaze up at the former glory of the Michigan Theatre.

In the end, *Only Lovers Left Alive* is exactly what you'd expect from a Jim Jarmusch vampire film: meditative and unhurried, wryly humorous and culturally allusive — and utterly beguiling. In fact, it turns out that the vampire makes for a curiously appropriate Jarmuschian figure, isolated and out-of-time. Its pair of undead lovers may have (quite literally) seen it all before, but they've ultimately provided a fresh take on the vampire genre.

Jenny McDonnell

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***Evil Dead* (Dir. Fede Alvarez)** USA 2013
Studiocanal/Ghost House Pictures

Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead* franchise, which until last year comprised three films and a musical, was recently expanded to include a modern-day remake of the very first film, released originally in 1981. Though produced by Raimi, along with Bruce Campbell (who starred in all the original films), this modern retelling is directed by up-and-coming sensation Fede Alvarez, who came to the attention of the producers after releasing a short film entitled *Ataque de Pánico!* (*Panic Attack!*) on YouTube in 2009. Although this trend to remake horror films can often seem pointless at best (as in another remake from last year, for example, Kimberly Pierce's widely panned *Carrie*), *Evil Dead* is a rare exception. This is due primarily to the fact that it is not so much a simplistic retelling, as it is a brave reimagining. In the words of its lead actress, Jane Levy, 'it's the same intention, but with a different story'.[1]

The basic premise of this film is much the same as its infamous predecessor: a group of young, attractive adults leave the city to stay in a remote cabin in the woods, and horror ensues. There they find a cursed grimoire and accidentally awaken an ancient, demonic force,

[1] Quoted in Erik Piepenburg, 'New Ugliness in a Little Cabin of Horrors', in *The New York Times*, 27 March 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/31/movies/the-evil-dead-is-reimagined.html?_r=0> [accessed 1 November 2013].

which gradually possesses and kills them, one by one. The most immediate difference in the remake is that the hero of the original trilogy, Ash (Bruce Campbell), has been replaced by a woman named Mia (Jane Levy). As a recovering heroin addict who requires isolation to overcome her addiction, she provides an unusually credible reason for their continued stay in the woods. Interestingly, while she embodies elements of the first female victim of the 1981 film, Cheryl (Ellen Sandweiss), she is additionally cast as Carol J. Clover's Final Girl. The first in the group to come to harm, she is placed in the same ghastly scenario as her ill-fated predecessor in what *The Hollywood Reporter* has termed 'that infamous tree rape'[2] — a scene that has by now become synonymous with the franchise due to its shocking nature (or indeed Nature). There was some discussion during preproduction as to whether this scene was entirely necessary, but in the end it was deemed essential to the remake. Indeed, at the 2012 New York Comic Con, fans were described as 'rabid' in their enthusiasm upon hearing of its inclusion.[3] (Such voraciousness is keenly — if indirectly — addressed in Drew Goddard's film of the previous year, *The Cabin in the Woods*, which starkly underlines the questionable nature of a bloodthirsty audience.) The scene, as it is restaged here, is crucially altered by the fact that Mia goes on to become the Final Girl. She is endowed with an agency denied to the putative heroine of the original film, therein transforming the narrative into one of rape revenge. This reimagining of arboreal molestation, although arguably more explicit (Alvarez makes much of the branch as a squirming phallus), is in fact made less gratuitous: the woman goes on not only to survive, but to enact revenge. The inclusion of this violent scene can further be justified by the fact that it engages with the precarious and often rapacious relationship between Nature and humanity. In John Boorman's *Deliverance* (1972), the character Lewis portentously declares 'we're gonna rape this whole god-damned landscape', thereby setting up the subsequent assault of a member of his party by 'wild' locals as somehow the revenge of Nature itself. *Evil Dead* may be seen as a literalisation of this retributive assailment by a vengeful environment — and surely such an idea is considerably more frightening today (in light of the widespread awareness of environmental crisis) than it was even thirty years ago. 'That infamous tree rape', therefore, is indeed wholly essential and serves as an aggressive precursor to the ensuing violence.

[2] J. D., 'Evil Dead: Film 2013', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 11, 22 March 2013, p. 85.
[3] Kelsea Stahler, '*Evil Dead* Remake Softens Tree Rape Scene, but does that Make it Okay?', <http://www.hollywood.com/news/movies/55006938/evil-dead-tree-rape-scene-remake-vs-original?page=all> [accessed 7 August 2014].

The violence in this film will certainly not disappoint those looking for a gore-fest: we have split tongues, scalding showers, and at one point it quite literally rains blood.[4] We are given more of an explanation here than in the earlier films for the origin of these grotesqueries, as they are cast as explicitly satanic. The film therefore is more plainly rendered as one dealing with demonic possession. Primarily, however, it falls (along with the originals) under the heading of 'backwoods horror'. The 1981 film, argues Erik Piepenburg, was a 'prototype' for this subgenre and so its modern reimagining, over thirty years later, affords us an intriguing insight into its evolution.[5] According to Bernice M. Murphy, backwoods horror films — along with slasher movies — are the most 'formulaic' in horror, and with the likes of *Wrong Turn* (2003), *Cabin Fever* (2002), and *Antichrist* (2009) to name a few, it is clear that these repetitive narratives enjoy a continuing popularity.[6] In contrasting the *Evil Dead* of 2013 with the film made back in 1981, it becomes clear that the core elements intended to frighten and entertain remain largely the same. What *has* changed is that now we are asked to question exactly *why* we are so frightened and amused by what is essentially the same story, told again and again. With the increasing popularity of postmodern meta-horror, it would seem that such questions are rather in vogue. It is significant therefore that *Evil Dead* was released within a year of *The Cabin in the Woods* — a film that openly acknowledges its debt to the franchise and plainly interrogates this persistent appetite for backwoods violence. While *Evil Dead* is less explicitly self-conscious than *The Cabin in the Woods* and more conventionally coherent, it nonetheless encourages audiences to question the treatment of gender, violence and Nature in these backwoods nasties. As with any film that is remade, we must consider the cause for its resurgence; we must interrogate the climate in which it again becomes relevant. Jennifer Brown, for example, has argued that remakes of 'hillbilly' horrors have coincided significantly with the ascension of George W. Bush.[7] While we can only begin to speculate on the rise of the ecoGothic as we are caught in its midst, it would seem reasonable to presume that its prevalence is due to an increasingly nervous understanding of Nature. As we knowingly destroy our natural environment, it seems only fitting that subgenres such as backwoods horror should continue to fascinate the popular imagination: in short, we need to *see* this nightmare. In remaking *The Evil Dead*, Alvarez allows us to do just that, and ultimately provides us with an innovative take on a very old tale,

[4] Indeed *Evil Dead* now holds the record for the most fake blood used in the making of a feature film, overtaking that held by *Dead Alive* (1992).
[5] Piepenburg, 'New Ugliness in a Little Cabin of Horrors'.
[6] Bernice M. Murphy, *The Rural Gothic in American Popular Culture: Backwoods Horror and Terror in the Wilderness* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 133.
[7] Jennifer Brown, *Cannibalism in Literature and Film* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), p. 12.

which confirms that this story is just as frightening now as it ever was — and perhaps even moreso.

Elizabeth Parker

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***Jug Face* (Dir. Chad Crawford Kinkle)** USA 2013
Modernciné
(This review contains spoilers)

Jug Face (2013) is an indie reimagining of the well-trodden 'hillbilly horror' genre (for example, *The Hills Have Eyes* [1977/2006]), and marks the feature-length screenwriting and directorial debut of Chad Crawford Kinkle. It features a unique concept together with a surprisingly cohesive visual narrative and introduces themes of ritualism, sex, and morality, all of which sets the stage for one of the most original pieces of contemporary horror in recent memory. It takes place in the isolated woods of Tennessee, and is centred on a group of people who are governed over by the forces residing in a surreptitious pit, located in the centre of the rural community. Simply referred to as 'The Pit', this murky hole grants the remote populace the power to heal disease, in exchange for ritualistic human sacrifices. Villagers are selected arbitrarily by the spirits (dubbed 'The Shined') who reside within the pit and travel throughout the surrounding forest. The wanton bloodlust of these malevolent forces is foretold by a pre-determined oracle, Dawai (Sean Bridgers), who is ordained by the pit and falls into a trance when it calls for blood. The oracle unconsciously crafts the likeness of the proposed sacrifice into a clay 'Jug Face', thus deciding the fate of the villager who will be offered to the pit in a graphic blood-letting ritual (in which the victim's jugular vein is severed). If this ritual is not completed, the indiscernible forces that reside in the pit threaten to exact their revenge by slaughtering villagers at random.

The film commences with saucer-eyed protagonist Ada (Lauren Ashley Carter) embroiled in an incestuous act with her brother, juxtaposed against brief glimpses of the ominous pit, alongside the portentous sculpting of a clay visage. We are thereafter introduced to Ada's fellow villagers and thus given a glimpse into the far-right Southern moral compass by which they live. Village politics demand virginity in order to facilitate the arranged marriages of younger townsfolk, at the risk of severe punishment if a woman is found to be sullied upon being 'joined'. We soon learn that Ada has become pregnant due to her

incestuous affair, when we witness her staining her underwear with red pottery glaze in order to hide the pregnancy from her mother (who routinely checks for signs of her daughter's menstrual cycle). During a trip to her companion Dawai's shack, Ada discovers a newly crafted jug face with a stark resemblance to her own visage. Realising that she is pre-ordained to be the next sacrifice, Ada promptly conceals the jug face in the forest to protect her unborn child, thus creating the catalyst for the ensuing series of events and the subsequent awakening of the pit's murderous tendencies.

As 'The Shined' emerge from the depths of the pit in order to seek revenge against Ada's family and fellow townsfolk for tampering with their design, random slaughter ensues at the hands of the spirits. Now able to see through the eyes of 'The Shined', Ada falls into a trance-like state and witnesses them as they rove through the forest and wreak murderous havoc upon her peers. The blame for this massacre eventually falls upon Dawai, targeted by the now frenzied villagers, for failing to predict the correct sacrifice and crafting a fake replacement jug face in place of Ada's (who has not yet disclosed to him that she has been chosen by the pit).

The actions of the inhabitants of the village prove to be the most petrifying circumstances that Ada faces, with supernatural elements only further accentuating the stereotypical conservative value system of Bible-Belt America. The conservative nature of the villagers is made more obvious by their obeisance to the supernatural authority of an all-seeing omniscient antagonist — that is, 'The Shined'. The paranormal leanings of the plot, however, appear somewhat problematic and dependent on flourishes of low-budget CGI. This is specifically evident during a scene involving an extended dialogue between Ada and one of 'The Shined', where it is revealed that her grandfather previously committed a similar act of resistance, when he hid his wife's jug face in order to prevent her own sacrifice. The depiction of the physical form taken by 'The Shined' is far less striking than the looming shots of the pit itself, or of its vengeance on the villagers, when it revokes its healing powers and instead begins flaying those who submerge themselves in its waters in search of respite from illness.

As circumstances gradually worsen for Ada and Dawai, they face violent persecution, forcing them to flee from their disintegrating community, and leaving Ada conflicted about accepting her fate. Will she flee the village, with the blessing of a member of 'The Shined', or agree to the pit's demands and sacrifice herself in order to save Dawai from a ghastly death in her stead? Although she had earlier attempted to rebel against the destiny that the pit had pre-determined for her, she ultimately chooses to conform to that fate in order to rescue

her friend, and the conclusion of the film stresses Ada's decision to honour the traditions of her ill-informed society. In this way, Ada is harshly punished for defying her designated role, at the expense of the oppressors, who she once considered her equals. The film (which bears comparison in some respects with British films such as *The Wicker Man* [1973]) depicts a fictitious ritualistic belief system in order to critique conservative moralism in ways that seem like a very relevant assessment of certain regions of America, which have often appeared wholeheartedly resistant to modernity and change. It urges us to condemn this mentality, while emphasising that people caught in its confines are unable to escape from it.

Overall, *Jug Face* makes a highly successful commentary upon the hillbilly horror subgenre that it clearly sets out to redefine. The isolated wilderness of *Deliverance* (1972) is successfully merged with the more visceral elements of the contemporary version of *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006) to extremely successful effect. However, *Jug Face* defies the norms of its genre in its introduction of moral gray areas — the hillbillies it depicts are victims of the pit that governs over their existence, as opposed to being cast as the clear antagonists (as in the aforementioned films). This original take by Crawford Kinkle sets the film apart from its predecessors in the subgenre: it is wholly innovative in terms of narrative and its robust characterisations.

Oisin Vink

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***Would You Rather* (Dir. David Guy Levy)** USA 2012
IFC Films

For most, the short-lived commercial success of torture porn in the mid-Noughties had tapered off when the *Saw* series was finally put out to pasture following the release of *Saw 3D* in 2010. However, if recent reports come to fruition that Lionsgate are developing an eighth instalment, this genre mainstay could well be called out of retirement for one more blood-soaked payday. So, while the release of *Would You Rather* in 2013 arrives somewhat too late to the torture-porn party to be considered a legitimate genre cornerstone like *Saw* (2004) or the *Hostel* series (2005, 2007, and 2011), it suggests that for some, the torture-porn flame still burns brightly (or at least flickers in a limited release/straight-to-DVD kind of way), and acts as a stopgap measure to sate audiences' gleefully sadistic appetites in the intervening period. *Would You Rather* is something of a genre offspring, as it approaches torture through a combination of the 'game' narrative of *Saw* with the gratification of the elite

of *Hostel*, centring around a contest in which players must decide between two equally undesirable and possibly lethal choices for the entertainment of a wealthy aristocrat.

The plot focuses on Iris (Brittany Snow), who, finding herself in financial desperation, accepts an invitation from the affluent stranger Shepard Lambrick (Jeffrey Combs), to attend a dinner-party at which she will play a game against seven other guests, potentially to win medical care for her sick brother. Upon arrival, the group are joined by the flamboyant Lambrick and his obnoxious son Julian (Robin Lord Taylor), and are served a lavish meal of foie gras and rib-eye steak by butler Bevans (Jonny Coyne). It is here that the sinister intentions of what is to come begin to unfold, when Lambrick offers and successfully secures a number of morally bankrupt deals with several of his guests. First, he persuades vegetarian Iris into eating meat for ten thousand dollars, before goading Conway (John Heard), a recovering alcoholic of sixteen years, off the wagon with an enticing bounty of fifty thousand dollars. When Conway questions Lambrick's motivation for acting in this way, his response is, 'Because I want to help you.' These exchanges of tense, faux-moral dialogue, coupled with Lambrick's modus operandi of character assassination, are arguably the most uncomfortable in the film. He exploits his position of power as leverage over the players to uncover their weaknesses and publicly humiliate them, in scenes that linger in the memory more than any of the film's depictions of physical harm, as the audience must endure the spectacle of a person selling their integrity for a price — however high it may be.

Following the meal, Lambrick outlines the rules of 'would you rather' before giving one final chance for people to withdraw from playing. Thus begins a game involving assorted methods of injury infliction, with Lambrick acting as master of ceremonies. The structure of the competition provides increasingly problematic ethical dilemmas, such as when high-stakes gambler Peter (Robb Wells) must choose between lashing Iraq veteran Travis (Charlie Hofheimer) with an African whipping staff, or potentially fatally stabbing paralysed Linda (June Squibb) in the thigh with an ice pick. The characterisations of Travis as a serviceman and Bevans as a former MI5 interrogator are especially revealing, as they tap into the cultural anxiety surrounding supposedly permissible torture which contextualised the genre's rise during the Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay scandals in the early to mid-2000s. This is most evident when Julian thanks Travis for his courageous service, but then exacts his revenge for daring to question him. What follows is Travis's prolonged torture as he sacrifices himself repeatedly by bearing any potential pain meant for other players. Without clear motivation for his overall participation, Travis becomes a literal whipping boy, evoking sympathy as a shell-shocked soldier now punished by those he protects.

While certain indications signal the dinner party to be an annual occurrence, such as the presence of Dr Barden (Lawrence Gilliard Jr.) who is a former winner and now supplies the game with new contenders, Lambrick's original reason for hosting these gatherings is unclear, a thread of the plot that would have benefited from further exposition. A number of possible clues are offered through Lambrick's son Julian, who is presented as a passive apprentice being inducted through observation. We learn that not only has Julian lost his mother but that he has acted out in some undisclosed manner at the previous year's game. Apart from these intriguing hints, however, we receive scant information which might help the audience further to situate this character within the loosely outlined backstory, rendering the film's premise vague to an extent that is distracting and redundant.

Conversely, the film's highlight is undoubtedly Combs's portrayal of Lambrick's villainous grandiosity, which is complimented by Bevans's dry English wit and Julian's spoiled smugness. These personalities serve the high-class, extravagant atmosphere of *Would You Rather*, primarily created through the luxurious mansion setting — a far cry from the grimy bathroom, or later industrial warehouse locations of *Saw* for example. This sophisticated tone, juxtaposed against the despair of the underprivileged characters, resonates particularly well in the recessionary culture within which this film appeared, accentuating the grotesque excess of the seemingly 'untouchable' upper classes alongside the less wealthy, who are merely their playthings. This climate of hardship is initially introduced by the tantalisingly hypnotic musical motif accompanying Iris's job interview, which is especially powerful and effective through the melody's subtle ambiguity. It is first heard in this opening scene, connoting a sense of cautious optimism in her attempt to secure employment, but later returns in a moment of bleak reflection for Iris, and so provides menacing foreshadowing in a film which emphasises the psychological experience of torture over the sometimes outlandishly intricate traps featured in its generic predecessors.

It might be easy to dismiss *Would You Rather* as a late attempt to cash in on the financial success that torture porn enjoyed during its heyday. Nonetheless, its comparatively restrained depictions of torture may leave some gorehounds (particularly those accustomed to the elaborate traps of the *Saw* variety) somewhat unsatisfied. Yet it is precisely here that the film distinguishes itself, by providing a fascinating alternative, one which expands the genre by downplaying the level of explicit on-screen physical cruelty in order to expose the ethical predicaments faced when an individual is forced, under coercion, to choose the lesser of two evils. *Would You Rather* acts as an exploration of compliance and how people assimilate themselves into the lexicon, rules, and parameters of their own captivity, becoming agents of,

and actors in, the performance of their own torture. Thematically, *Would You Rather*'s idea of 'decision-making in its rawest form' may not resurrect torture porn; however, in fusing the iconography of its antecedents with such heavy-hitting moral concerns, the film certainly makes a thought-provoking contribution to an ailing sub-genre.

Gavin Wilkinson

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TELEVISION REVIEWS

***Lost Girl*: Season 3** (Syfy 2013)

'My love carries a death sentence.'
–Bo in *Lost Girl*

Lost Girl is a female-led Canadian supernatural television series, created by Michelle Lovretta, which was first broadcast by Showcase on 12 September 2010. The show became the highest-rated Canadian-scripted series premiere of all time on Showcase and, following its consistent delivery of stellar ratings, following its consistent delivery of stellar ratings, further seasons are in the works. The show revolves around a succubus named Bo, who feeds (during sexual encounters) on the energy of humans, sometimes with fatal results. Loath to embrace the harsh hierarchy of the Fae, the supernatural clan system into which she has been born, Bo is a fiercely independent renegade who takes up the fight for the underdog (usually humans) while searching for the truth about her own mysterious origins. Ultimately, because of her succubi abilities, she cannot escape the fact that she *is* one of the Fae, a group made up of multiple races of supernatural entities who align themselves either with the Light or the Dark. Bo struggles to remain neutral, a choice which allows her to vacillate from one side to the other at will, particularly when in search of information, though doing so often places her in grave danger. With leather-clad ferocity, Bo therefore explores a world teeming with sex, death, swordplay, and mythical creatures, rendering *Lost Girl* a satisfying concoction of dark romanticism, urban terror, and gleeful gothicism, of suspense, horror, humour, and eroticism.

Set in downtown Toronto (although not explicitly), the show is largely focused on a deeply divided society (somewhat similar to that depicted in *True Blood* [2008–present]) and on the horrors that pervade the show's supernatural reimagining of the city, lingering as it does on abandoned urban lofts and post-industrial wastelands. Anna Silk gives an impressive and meaningful performance as Bo, while well supported by the consistently spirited sidekick