FILM REVIEWS

Kill List
(Dir. Ben Wheatley) UK 2011
Optimum Releasing

Note: This review contains extensive spoilers

Kill List is the best British horror film since *The Descent* (Dir. Neil Marshall, 2005). Mind you, you wouldn't know that from the opening half-hour or so. Although it opens with an eerie scratching noise and the sight of a cryptic rune that can't help but evoke the unnerving stick figure from *The Blair Witch Project* (Dir. Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999), we're then plunged straight into a series of compellingly naturalistic scenes of domestic discord which, as several other reviews have rightly pointed out, evoke nothing so much as the films of Mike Leigh. (The fact that much of the film's dialogue is supplied by the cast also adds to this feeling.) But what Leigh's work doesn't have is the sense of claustrophobic dread that simmers in the background throughout Wheatley's film (his second, after 2009's *Down Terrace*). Nor have any of them – to date at least – had an ending as devastating and intriguing as this. Yet the preliminary scenes in *Kill List* are in no sense meant to misdirect, or wrong-foot the audience: rather, they're absolutely pivotal to the narrative as a whole, even if many of the questions it raises remain tantalisingly unresolved.

Jay (Neil Maskell) and his wife Shel (MyAnna Buring) live in a spacious, well-appointed suburban home (complete with jacuzzi) and have a sweet little boy, but theirs is clearly a marriage on the rocks, and even the most seemingly innocuous exchange between them is charged with hostility and mutual misunderstanding. "You're in danger of becoming a miserable cow, Shel", Jay says, in the opening minutes, and then grins, in a characteristically futile effort to defuse his innate air of tamped-down violence. The family seem to have been used to a certain standard of living, but we're soon made aware that Jay has not worked in 8 months, and that the money is rapidly running out. (These sequences have much in common with another recent, but criminally under-looked, British horror film, Dom Rotheroe's *Exhibit A* [2007].)

Jay is a former soldier who spent time in Iraq, and evidently suffers from some form of post-traumatic stress disorder; even his bed-time story to his son turns into a thinly fictionalised account of a Baghdad car-bombing. The strain of trying to keep some façade of normality in front of his wife and child is clearly becoming too much for him, and he only feels free to reveal some of how he is feeling to his best friend, business partner, and former comrade-in-arms Gal (the excellent Michael Smiley). Gal is a charming, kind-hearted and witty Irishman whose ability to defuse Jay's turbulent mood swings proves particularly useful during a strained dinner party at the latter's home which starts off awkwardly and climaxes in a particularly vicious slanging match between the hosts. Gal has brought along his new girlfriend, Fiona (Emma Fryer), who claims to work in human resources, and who says of her job – which, as she readily admits, mainly entails sacking people – that "It's nothing personal". It's an utterance, that like many in the film, will take on rather more sinister connotations as the film goes on, as does Jay's reply that "There's a lot of dirty work to be done". The fact that she etches the strange symbol seen at the very beginning of the film into the back of the bathroom mirror and pockets a used tissue stained with Jay's blood slightly later on leaves us in no doubt that she knows more than she's letting on.

Though they claim to work in "sales", it's fairly obvious from the outset that Jay and Gal aren't exactly "legitimate" businessmen. It's a suspicion confirmed when Jay shows off his shiny new assault rifle to Gal in the garage, and casually mentions that Shel bought it for him. In fact, the friends are killers-for-hire who have been out of commission ever since some never-explained incident in Kiev. At Gal's request, however, and with the aid of some sustained nagging from Shel (who is not only privy to their profession, but actually seems to handle the admin for them), Jay reluctantly agrees to get back in the game.

It's at this point that the film transitions from being a tense domestic drama to a grittily mundane thriller with horror undertones. Jay and Gal meet up with their mysterious boss, "The Client" (Struan Rodger), who presents them with a "Kill List" of targets and a large wad of cash, sealing the deal with blood when he slices Jay's hand with a large knife. They carry out a series of professionally executed and (thanks to Jay's rapidly disintegrating mental state) increasingly brutal killings. What makes matters even more unsettling, both for Jay and the audience, is the fact that their victims seem not only to have to have expected their deaths, but actually welcome them: they even say "Thank You".

Each episodic encounter is preceded by a Tarantino-esque title screen (as in, "The Priest", "The Librarian", "The M.P.", and last of all, "The Hunchback"), but there's absolutely nothing smugly post-modern or self-consciously stylish about their exploits. Rather, Wheatley's violence is always brutal, harrowingly realistic and disturbing, not least in what is perhaps the most difficult sequence to watch. Having discovered that "The Librarian" is also a child pornographer, Jay tortures the man until he gives up the name of his accomplice, in scenes reminiscent of Australian revenge flick *The Horseman* (Dir. Steven Kastrissios, 2008). Even Gal is shocked by Jay's brutality and unsettled by his willingness to deviate from the plan. A more obvious film might use Jay's actions here as a means of showing the audience that, despite his murderous profession, he's a "good" killer. *Kill List* opts for something a lot murkier, though, and his behaviour further confirms that he is a deeply disturbed and violent man looking for any excuse to vent his rage. He's not a vigilante: he's a nasty piece of work.

Yet despite all this, the fact that Jay has such a close and apparently genuine connection with Gal means that we always retain a certain amount of empathy for him. One of the best things about this film is the fact that it essays such a touching and yet unsentimental portrait of male friendship. When they're not off shooting strangers in the back of the head, Jay and Gal's "trip" could be any tedious work assignment. They spend a lot of time on the motorways and in dull car parks, and sleep and eat in anonymous mid-range hotels. Though it's an intensely serious film, there are some genuinely humorous moments in *Kill List*, most of which come courtesy of the constant stream of mock-serious patter that comes from Smiley's character, who is always trying to make his pal feel a bit better about himself. You really do get the sense that these men enjoy one another's company, but it's also obvious that Gal is becoming increasingly concerned about Jay's unpredictable behaviour. The standout scene as regards this element in their relationship comes when they eat dinner in a dreary hotel dining room whose only other customers are a large table full of relentlessly happy evangelical Christians who decide to start a sing-song. Jay's response – and Gal's reaction to it – is undeniably humorous, but we also know that it will take very little for the situation to become very unpleasant indeed. Underlining the film's attention to detail is the fact that the song the evangelicals try to sing is none other than "Onward Christian Soldiers", one of many references to the Knights Templar, the Crusades, and the job of the soldier that recur throughout the film. Furthermore, the fact that the protagonist's targets each represent some powerful sector of society – religion, politics, and scholarship – also give us the sense that a conspiracy of much wider ramifications than we might previously have suspected is unfolding around the protagonists.

It is surely the final act of the film that will be most talked about, and which has attracted the many *Wicker Man* (1973) compassions which surround the film. Certainly, there are undeniable similarities between this film and Robin Hardy's, in terms of plotting, iconography, and, perhaps most importantly of all, as regards the mythological trappings that underpin the story (let's just say that anyone familiar with James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* will have a sense of where all this is going). Yet despite all this, *Kill List*, is an intensely original and striking effort in its own right. It evokes other films – not least a particular strain of paranoid conspiracy thriller – but it carves out its own unique path as well. From the moment that their effort to infiltrate the country estate of "The M.P." goes horribly awry, Jay and Gal enter the world of nightmare, in which each escape route leads inexorably to a dead end, and terrifying (and possibly supernatural) antagonists dog each step. It's also here that Jay's domestic life, and his relationship with Shel, once more take centre stage, and combine with the more obviously horrific "conspiracy" plot to create a gut-wrenchingly unexpected, yet somehow inevitable, climax. It's a pleasure to see a genre film in which the often throwaway role of "the wife" is imbued with real importance and mystery, as it is here. Shel (herself a former soldier who knows how to handle a firearm) has secrets of her own, even if they ultimately remain unknowable – as do many of the questions that the film presents. While some viewers may that the film's fundamental reluctance to pin anything down deeply frustrating, and even cynically evasive, I believe that this lack of definitive answers only adds to the narrative's deeply disturbing effect.

In the end, then, *Kill List* is lots of things at once. On the most realistic level, it's a story of masculinity in crisis and family breakdown, and of the hugely damaging after-effects of military service during an inherently unjust war. It's also a compelling conspiracy thriller/horror film to rival anything that 1970s-era Roman Polanski could have come up with. In its final scenes, as domestic discord and paranoid horror story combine to create a surreal final reckoning that is simultaneously chilling and perplexing, the film demonstrates just why it is that it has been rightly acclaimed as the most effective British horror film in years.

Bernice M. Murphy

The Night of the Hunter
(Dir. Charles Laughton) USA 1955
Criterion (November, 2010)

Reviewing *The Night of the Hunter* is like reviewing a Grimm Brothers' fairytale. It's mythic, it's monumental, it's so a part of the collective consciousness that telling people about it seems utterly redundant. So what am I doing it for? Well, there's always an outside chance that some unfortunate individuals out there have not, as yet, experienced what director Charles Laughton referred to as his "nightmarish... Mother Goose tale." To those individuals I would simply state, get it now, skip the next few meals if you have to, but get it now. To those who have seen the film, I say, get this new Criterion version now, skip the next few meals....etc.

As if in penance for the film's resounding critical and commercial failure upon its release in 1955, *The Night of the Hunter* has, in more recent times, received acclaim from every quarter. In 1992, the United States Library of Congress deemed the film to be "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant" and selected it for preservation in its National Film Registry. It was rated #34 on AFI's 100 Years... 100 Thrills ranking, and #90 on Bravo's 100 Scariest Movie Moments. In a 2007 listing of the 100 Most Beautiful Films, *Cahiers du cinéma* ranked *The Night of the Hunter* No. 2. It is among the top ten in the BFI list of the 50 films you should see by the age of 14. It ranked as the 71st greatest movie of all time on *Empire Magazine*'s 500 Greatest Films list. And Robert Mitchum's Harry Powell was ranked No. 29 in the villains column in AFI's 100 Years...100 Heroes and Villains. Impressive? Well, I suppose, but when you consider that these same lists include the likes of *The Barefoot Contessa* (Dir. Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1954), *Arthur* (Dir. Steve Gordon, 1981), *Forrest Gump* (Dir. Robert Zemeckis, 1994), *Heat* (Dir. Michael Mann, 1995) and *Billy Elliot* (Dir. Stephen Daldry, 2000), one is reminded how pointless and inane such interminable list-making is.

I can't help but wonder how Charles Laughton would feel about all this. Along with, presumably, thinking it was a bit late in the day for such accolades, I think Laughton would be really quite tickled. At the time of the film's release Laughton was known as a distinguished and mildly eccentric actor in films such as *The Old Dark House* (Dir. James Whale, 1932), *Island of Lost Souls* (Dir. Erle C. Kenton, 1933), *The Private Life of Henry VIII.* (Dir. Alexander Korda, 1933), *Ruggles of Red Gap* (Dir. Leo McCarey, 1935), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Dir. William Dieterle, 1939), *The Big Clock* (Dir. John Farrow, 1948) and *Hobson's Choice* (Dir. David Lean, 1954). He invested a tremendous amount of heart and soul into the project, which was his first attempt at directing, and when it bombed he never directed again. If sources close to him (including his wife, Elsa Lanchester) are to be believed, and I don't see why not, Laughton was devastated by the poor response.

It's not difficult to see why the film was so poorly received upon its initial release. It's a lyrical, expressionistic, beautiful, and highly original work. In other words, it's art, and the American cinema-going public don't like art on their movie screens – it belongs in galleries, not places of entertainment. Most film critics aren't too keen on art either, unless it limits itself to the "artistry" of technical innovation.

I'm reluctant to offer a plot synopsis, for the reason stated at the beginning of this review but I will, if only a very brief one. It's West Virginia in the 1930s. Harry Powell (Robert Mitchum) is a woman-hater; he hates "perfume-smellin' things, lacy things, things with curly hair". Posing as a preacher, 'Reverend'

Powell seeks out lonely women (widows "with a little wad of bills hid away in a sugar bowl"), murders them and steals their money. While in prison for the theft of a car, Powell discovers that his cellmate, Ben Harper (Peter Graves), has hidden $10,000 from his last robbery. Harper is executed and, upon his release from prison, Powell seeks out, woos and eventually marries his cellmate's widow, Willa (Shelley Winters), in the hope that he will discover where Harper hid the money. Powell becomes convinced that Willa's children, John (Billy Chapin) and Pearl (Sally Jane Bruce), know the whereabouts of the money and he persistently and menacingly questions them about it, "and the little child shall lead them". Willa eventually discovers Powell's intentions and he murders her. The children go "a runnin'" and Powell embarks on a hunt for them. When the destitute children find refuge in the home of Rachel Cooper (Lillian Gish), a tiny but tough old woman who looks after stray children (outcasts of the Great Depression), they discover her to be an invaluable protector and the first truly dependable adult they have known. When the 'Preacher' appears at her door, to reclaim his little ones, Rachel immediately sees Harry Powell for what he really is and the battle between Good and Evil begins.

As one commentator has phrased it, *The Night of the Hunter* is "cinema's most eccentric rendering of the battle between good and evil". Its story, like a twisted fairytale, paints its figures large and with little regard for realism. But, like a fairytale or a child's nightmare, the film has its own inherent reality and truth. Told from a child's point of view, *The Night of the Hunter* speaks of childhood fears and fantasies: the difficultly of keeping a secret, the vulnerability and confusion of living in an adult world, the bonds (both good and bad) of family, and the longing for a magical journey which will lead to safety. Like a fairytale or, indeed, a Biblical story, Laughton's film deals with elemental dualities: God and the Devil, heaven and earth (or Hell), male and female, light and dark, good and evil, knowingness and innocence.

Stylistically, the film owes a debt to German Expressionism, with surreal sets, bizarre shadows, unusual camera angles and distorted perspectives, all of which echo and resonate with the film's narrative and thematic concerns. In keeping with the Biblical or fable-like quality of the story, much of the acting and dialogue is stylized with more than a touch of American Southern Gothic. The acting has also been referred to as Brechtian. Laughton had worked closely with Brecht on the American stage version of his play *Galileo*, playing the title role, as well as editing and translating the play along with Brecht. *The Night of the Hunter*'s connection to Southern Gothic can also be found in its origins; it is based on Davis Grubb's 1953 novel of the same name, and adapted for the screen by James Agee. But these Southern Gothic origins go even further than this; Grubb's plot was based on the true story of Harry Powers, who was hanged in 1932 for the murders of two widows and three children in Moundsville, West Virginia. Known as the West Virginia or the Appalachian Bluebeard, Powers lured his victims through 'Lonely Hearts' ads saying he was looking for love, but in reality he had the intentions of taking these women's money and then murdering them. Echoed in scenes in Grubb's novel, which would also become a part of the film, the crime scene of Powers' murders was a basement (four rooms under a garage), where bloody matted hair and clothing, a partially burnt bank book and a small bloody footprint of a child were discovered. During his imprisonment a mob surrounded the jail where Powers was held demanding he be lynched.

The most notable and powerful addition that the novel and, subsequently the film, made to this real-life Southern Gothic story is the theme of religion. Based in the Bible Belt during the Great Depression, in an environment of socially conservative evangelical Protestantism, the story of Harry Powell is far more than the story of a bogus preacher, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves." Powell does not simply don the clothes and manners of a religious man to disguise his true intentions; he practices and believes in a warped form of religion, "The religion the Almighty and me worked out betwixt us". What is immediately clear is that, through religion, Powell

has discovered a path and a justification for his murderous hatred of women. Using religion as a template for his twisted sexual desires, Powell finds, within the pages of the Bible, both a validation and a language for his profound hatred, “You whores of Babylon!”

But *The Night of the Hunter* (novel and film) complicates this dark depiction of religion with the character of Rachel Cooper, who uses her knowledge and understanding of the Bible to practice acceptance and love, and instil these same values in the children under her care. Thus, the struggle between good and evil is not to be found in the characters’ acceptance or rejection of certain moral teachings but in the way they have interpreted them and applied them to their lives, “by their fruits you will know them.”

During Mitchum’s ‘audition’ (Laughton didn’t really audition his actors, he talked with them and instinctively knew who would work in the part), Laughton described ‘The Preacher’ as “a diabolical shit”, to which Mitchum shouted back, “Present!” Indeed, Mitchum seems so right in the role of Harry Powell, it’s nigh on impossible to imagine that at one point Laurence Olivier was considered for the part. The scene in which Mitchum tells “the little story of Right Hand-Left Hand – the story of good and evil”, wrestling his interlocking hands (the knuckles tattooed with the “G-O-O-D” and “E-V-I-L”), is one of cinema’s most delectably iconic moments.

Taking into consideration the amount of commentators that have referred to the film and, in particular Mitchum’s performance, as terrifying, some viewers may be bewildered by what could be construed as the actor’s playful, occasionally even hokey and slapstick, performance (especially as the narrative reaches its close). But this rendering is in keeping with the highly stylized nature of the entire film. More specifically, it is in keeping with the black humour of Southern Gothic and its fable-like quality. In this film, as in many fables, the figure of evil is a dissembler and once he has lost his power to trick people, he rapidly becomes an object of ridicule. It should be noted that while Mitchum is magnificent as Harry Powell, Shelley Winters and Lillian Gish are equally brilliant, as the gullible and slightly unhinged young widow Willa and the benevolent and fearless matriarch Rachel, respectively. The children, played by Billy Chapin and Sally Jane Bruce, are wonderful. They carry you with them every step of the way; their world is your world. You share their fears and hopes, and come to understand exactly what Rachel means when she observes, “Children are humanity's strongest. They abide... and they endure.”

This Criterion edition of *The Night of the Hunter* (both on DVD and Blu-Ray) looks and sounds exceptional. Stanley Cortez’s stark and poetic cinematography looks stunning and the film's score, composed and arranged by Walter Schumann (in close association with Laughton), has never sounded better. Considering that, before this release, DVDs of *The Night of the Hunter* had nothing but a trailer as an extra, this Criterion edition of the film is an absolute joy. It is literally stacked with treats. We get an excellent audio commentary featuring second-unit director Terry Sanders, film critic F.X. Feeney, archivist Robert Gitt, and author Preston Neal Jones. There is also a new documentary, featuring interviews with producer Paul Gregory, Sanders, Feeney, Jones, and author Jeffrey Couchman, and a new video interview with Laughton biographer Simon Callow. We also get a clip from *The Ed Sullivan Show*, 1955, in which cast members perform a scene deleted from the film. There is a 15-minute episode of the BBC show *Moving Pictures* about the film, an archival interview (1984) with cinematographer Stanley Cortez, and a gallery of wonderful sketches by author Davis Grubb. But best of all, this Criterion edition contains a two-and-half hour documentary, ‘Charles Laughton Directs *The Night of the Hunter*’. Restored and edited, over a 20 year period, by film archivists Robert Gitt and Anthony Slide, from over 80,000 feet of rushes and outtakes that Laughton had lovingly kept, this is a breathtaking treasure trove of outtakes, 'rushes', and behind-the-scenes footage. To accompany this, there is a new 17-minute video conversation between Gitt and film critic Leonard Maltin about the documentary and the discovery and restoration of

the material used to make it. Lastly, we get a 30-page liner notes booklet featuring essays by critics Terrence Rafferty and Michael Sragow. Criterion are well known for the high standard of supplements included with their releases, but they have outdone themselves with this incredible selection of extra features. Finally, *The Night of the Hunter* has been given a release that is worthy of it and Harry Powell is back amongst us, as he promised; "you haven't heard the last of Harry Powell yet. The Lord God Jehovah will guide my hand in vengeance. Devil! You whores of Babylon! I'll be back, when it's dark."

Elizabeth McCarthy

The Damned
(Dir. Joseph Losey) UK 1963
Columbia/Hammer
Sony Pictures Home Entertainment (2010)

One of the most unusual horror films ever to emerge from the Hammer Studios, *The Damned* is set, not in a distant corner of Europe at some indeterminate point in history, but in a British sea-side resort in what was then the present day of 1960. It doesn't feature Peter Cushing, Christopher Lee, or any of the other Hammer stalwarts and there is not a cobweb-strewn crypt or a blood-splattered laboratory in sight. Neither is there any sign of a vampire, one of Baron Frankenstein's creations or any other species of monster, except perhaps those who wear a human guise. Instead, *The Damned* deals with a very real fear, one that came to consume the whole world in the years between this film's production and its release. This was the fear of impending nuclear war and the belief that the human race was running rapidly out of time.

A co-production between Columbia Pictures and Hammer, made by the acclaimed American director Joseph Losey and adapted from the now obscure science-fiction novel *The Children of Light* by H.L. Lawrence, it's immensely ironic that this, one of the most subtle and intelligent films Hammer ever produced, suffered a fate far worse than many of its more unpleasant and worthless offerings. Butchered in the editing room, kept waiting almost two years for its release and then withdrawn from cinemas before it had a chance to make any impact, *The Damned* was treated with total disdain, even by the studios that financed it. In many ways *The Damned*'s DVD release now represents the first opportunity an audience has had really to appreciate this accomplished, conscientious and alarmingly ahead-of-its-time horror movie.

Based in and around the Dorset town of Weymouth, *The Damned*'s central character is American former insurance executive Simon Wells (Macdonald Carey) who has decided to go "on holiday from everything." Entranced by a young girl called Joan (Shirley Anne Field), Wells is lured into a trap set by Joan's psychotic brother, King (Oliver Reed), and his gang of vicious thugs. Robbed and badly beaten, Wells is helped to a hotel by two military men. There he meets their boss, Bernard (Alexander Knox), and his mistress, the sculptress Freya (Viveca Lindfors). Bernard warns Simon that "The age of senseless violence has caught up with us too" and the American returns to the dock and prepares to depart in his boat. Suddenly Joan appears and, after another encounter with King, Wells encourages her to leap aboard his ship and the two head out to sea. Enraged that Joan has escaped his obsessive, incestuous hold, King and his hoodlums set off in pursuit.

Hunted along the coast by the relentless King, Simon and Joan are forced to break into a mysterious military base. Chased by security guards they fall into the sea and are swept inside a cave. Within they find themselves surrounded by a group of children who claim never to have seen the outside world and who live in a specially constructed bunker beneath the base. Simon and Joan are horrified by the children's plight and vow to help them. Then they discover something. All of the children have skin which is ice-cold to the touch.

It transpires that the children were born in the aftermath of a nuclear accident and that they are able to withstand extremely high levels of radiation. Bernard is implanting in them all of human history, science and culture so that "When the time comes," the children shall be the inheritors of the Earth. The danger is that the children are highly radioactive and prolonged exposure to them is fatal, hence the fact that they

must be educated by remote control. Failing to understand why the children are being held prisoner in their shadowy underworld, Wells and Joan plot their release. Unfortunately, King has followed them and, in the desperate struggle for survival that follows, the future of the human race is put in jeopardy.
What distinguishes *The Damned* as a horror film is the elegance with which it intertwines so many themes, including questions of progression and regression, the role of science and the value of art. At its heart is the concept of violence as both a creative and destructive force. King and his thugs commit crimes because they are an outlet for their talent and natural energy, and they execute them with the skill and precision of artists. The deadly children, themselves the unforeseen result of a form of violence, could now prove to be the key to the continuation of life on Earth. The accelerated destruction of civilization might allow an entirely new world, and a new evolutionary age, to begin. In fact, *The Damned* even dares to suggest that violence may be the motive power behind history, the necessary evil that is the ultimate cause of all change.

There is little doubt that the world presented in *The Damned* is crying out for change. The viewer is left under no illusion that Britain's great imperial project is anything other than dead and buried. One of the film's earliest images is of a monument commemorating Queen Victoria's Jubilee gaudily decked out in amusement arcade lights and when we first see King and his gang they are sprawled on the base of statue to George III. This is a stagnant, decaying world in which the talent of the young is no longer being harnessed. "What else is there to do?" replies one of the gang when asked why he behaves as he does. The military too seem to be at a loss. With no real enemies left to fight they have had to content themselves with the mindless posturing which has now brought civilization to the brink of destruction. Cooped up in the base, Bernard's team of scientists bicker and, indifferent to the suffering of the children, they merely complain that their abilities are being wasted. In this way, Losey argues that there is no fundamental difference between the cowardly and imbecile activities of King and his gang and the faceless institutional violence of the military and those who serve them.

The conflict at the centre of *The Damned* is not one between good and evil but between old and new values. Simon is a man who knows that his traditional values have ceased to be relevant but he doesn't know what else to do other than uphold them. Bernard explains that he became a public servant because the imminent catastrophe meant that "it was too late to do anything in private life. "Self-reliance, character, gentility. Do you think these values will mean anything?" ponders one of Bernard's educational experts, thinking aloud about the wasteland the children shall inherit. Freya alone refuses to lose faith in mankind's capacity to grow but she can only really express herself by creating artworks which no-one understands and fatally underestimates man's savagery. Even King has an ethical system, thoroughly twisted though it is, and accuses the modern world of having no morals.

Since they both connect the cruelty of the individual with the barbarism of the state and asses the relationship between art and violence many critics have drawn comparisons between Losey's film and Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) and it's true that at times *The Damned* feels like a dry run for Kubrick's movie. Neither is their similarity simply a thematic one. King and Kubrick's Alex share many stylistic traits, such as the peculiar patchwork language they speak, their adoption of dapper attire for their crime-sprees and their use of a sword-stick, or in King's case a sword-umbrella. It's also a peculiar coincidence that it was on the beach of a sea-side resort much like Weymouth that the author of *A Clockwork Orange*, Anthony Burgess, saw the gang warfare of the Mods and Rockers and conceived the notion of a novel on that subject. However, *The Damned* is a far more sensitive and profound study of the omnipresence of violence in modern society than Kubrick's film.

That *The Damned* is such a harmonious piece of cinema is no small achievement on Losey's part when you consider the battle for control that raged behind the scenes. Drawn to the movie by its anti-nuclear message, Losey secretly commissioned a new version of the script and began shooting this without the studio's knowledge. When the producers at Hammer learned what was happening they were stunned, but too much of the script had already been shot. Losey's revised script ended with an elaborate chase between a sports car and two helicopters and necessitated much aerial photography and stunt work. This led the film's budget to spiral to £170,000. Although filming was completed in September 1961, *The Damned* was held back by Hammer's executives, who believed that its inflammatory political message might do the company harm. It was only in May 1963 that the film was finally released as the lower half of a double bill, and even then with a full seven minutes cut. Some film historians now believe that it was due to *The Damned* that Hammer rarely ventured outside of Gothic territory again.

That *The Damned* was treated so deplorably is tragic because there is much in it that impresses today. Losey's direction has the same vitality and earnestness here that it does in the films he would later make with Harold Pinter. Evan Jones's screenplay is witty and sophisticated. Arthur Grant's beautiful black-and-white photography makes the most of the Weymouth and the Portland Bill locations and Hammer regular James Bernard's music is mournful and subdued and even his theme for King's gang is catchy. The production design by Bernard Robinson, particularly the children's subterranean lair, is striking and as good as anything Ken Adam would later visualise.

As for the cast, Macdonald Carey does his best to make his patronising hero likeable. The 23 year-old Oliver Reed uses both his voice and physicality to great menacing effect, and it's fascinating to see how his character reverts to a snivelling child by the end. Alexander Knox is credible as the frosty, fanatical Bernard but it's Viveca Lindfors as the enigmatic Feya who makes the strongest impression. Constantly putting an interesting spin on even the most routine dialogue (the movie's best moment is her reaction to Bernard's news that it's too late to prevent the world's destruction), she gives a stunning performance and invests the film with a real emotional centre. Completing the cast are the familiar British movie actors Walter Gotell, James Villiers and Kenneth Cope of *Randall and Hopkirk (Deceased*) fame.

Losey also manages to come up with some legitimately scary scenes, most notably the radiation-suited security guard prowling silently through the darkened classroom towards the sleeping children, King chasing Simon and Joan across a derelict and moonlit churchyard and the children leading them into the strange netherworld they have put together from the flotsam and jetsam which has drifted into their cave. Overall, though, this is a film which uses implication to convey the horror it deals with. Nothing helps to achieve this more than the use of the work of the brilliant British sculptress Elisabeth Frink. Frink was famous for her terrifying, jagged sculptures of sinister, elongated and winged figures, mutilated soldiers with truncated limbs and especially predatory birds. Frink's "graveyard bird" and the rest of her sculptures are used in the film as both a fearful reminder of the violence inherent in nature and as harbingers of the nightmarish life-forms the world may spawn in the wake of a nuclear winter.

A horror film with both a head and a heart, *The Damned* is a disturbing and haunting work which anticipates more recent movies like *Eden Lake* (Dir. James Watkins, 2008) and this year's *Never Let Me Go* (Dir. Mark Romanek). More than any other film it convincingly depicts a world in which most of the characters see Armageddon as inescapable and gives us an unforgettable image of a cycle of destructiveness that has gone totally out of control. A flawless, crisp print with a gallery and extensive notes by Marcus Hearn, *The Damned* is a release to be welcomed.

Edward O'Hare

Insidious
(Dir. James Wan) USA 2011
Film District/Alliance Films

From its promotional materials, one would assume that Insidious is yet another entry in the "creepy kid" subgenre of horror, initiated by *The Bad Seed* (Dir. Mervyn LeRoy, 1956) and still present in such recent films as *Joshua* (Dir. George Ratliff, 2007) and *Orphan* (Dir. Jaume Collet-Serra, 2009). In fact, Dalton Lambert (played by Ty Simpkins), the possessed child of *Insidious*, spends most of his time comatose in a hospital bed in a back bedroom, where he proves considerably less active than Linda Blair's Regan in *The Exorcist* (Dir. William Friedkin, 1973), another film that the marketing campaign for Insidious strives to evoke. Instead, James Wan's film is closer in structure and spirit (pardon the pun) to *The Amityville Horror* (Dir. Stuart Rosenberg, 1979) and *Poltergeist* (Dir. Tobe Hooper, 1982), simultaneously paying homage to the "haunted house" subgenre and attempting to subvert its characteristic narrative and conventions.

Insidious is the collaboration of producer Oren Peli (director of *Paranormal Activity* and producer of *Paranormal Activity 2*) and director James Wan and writer Leigh Whannell (director and writer of *Saw*, respectively). Here, they eschew the "found footage" aspect of *Paranormal Activity* (2007) and the graphic violence and gore of the *Saw* films in favour of supernatural horror, steeped in family melodrama and focused more on a gathering sense of dread as, for the Lambert family, the implausible increasingly becomes entirely too plausible. Like *Poltergeist*, *Insidious* is somewhat episodic in nature and can be divided into four distinct acts, the first involving the family's terrifying experiences in their first home. In the second act, the activity follows the family as they attempt to escape by moving to another home, while the third depicts the intervention of authorities dealing in the paranormal. Finally, the film's fourth act takes the form of a coda that should feel entirely predictable and gratuitous, but ultimately manages to leave even the most hardened horror fan in need of a few moments for personal collection while the end credits roll.

As the film opens, Josh and Renai Lambert (Patrick Wilson and Rose Byrne) are still unpacking following their move into a new house. In short order, we discover that Josh is a high school teacher while Renai is a stay-at-home mom, looking after their three young children. One morning, their eldest son, Dalton, fails to awake, entering a comatose state that doctors are unable to explain. As symptoms of a haunting begin to accumulate as well, Josh and Renai's marriage shows signs of strain and an emotionally exhausted Renai insists that the family move to a smaller home, considerably less spooky than the last. Before long, however, Renai once again encounters a sinister apparition and seeks the counsel of her sympathetic mother-in-law, Lorraine (Barbara Hershey), who brings in a powerful medium (Lin Shaye). Accompanied by two bickering ghost hunter types (screenwriter Whannell and Angus Sampson), the medium visits the house and helps the family to determine what they are really dealing with. It seems that neither house has been haunted: it is Dalton who is being haunted, the target of a handful of malevolent entities seeking to take control of his unattended body (his coma is explained as the result of astral projection, a dangerous practice inherited from his father). As the film nears its climax, Josh must come to terms with his own childhood encounter with an insidious spirit, undergoing hypnosis and venturing into the spiritual netherworld known as "The Further" in order to rescue his son from a demonic captor.

What differentiates *Insidious* from the majority of contemporary horror cinema is its emphasis on atmosphere, with some of the film's scariest moments taking place in broad daylight. Wan's film also cleverly collects the conventions of the haunted house subgenre even as it subverts them: for example, the first half is set in a pre-war home, suitably gothic in appearance, and every inch the classic haunted house of both film and literature. In the film's second half, however, the family resides in a markedly smaller and more modern home in which they presume they will be safe. However, this fleeting sense of security on their part (and ours) is quickly shown to be false. The film features a number of brutally effective scenes, with the most striking occurring shortly after the family's move into the second house. Taking out the garbage, Renai is surprised to hear, through an open window, the phonograph that she left playing inside being tampered with and the sedate piano music of her choosing replaced by Tiny Tim's truly sepulchral rendition of "Tiptoe through the Tulips." Peering in the window, she sees the gray-faced phantom of a small boy in outdated fashions dancing a macabre jig in her living room. It is at this moment that both Renai and the audience realize that the family is dealing with something much worse than a haunting. Like *Poltergeist*, *Insidious* places a young family in jeopardy, with the paranormal activity centering around one of the children (instead of being abducted into the television set ala Carol Anne in *Poltergeist*, Dalton enters a mysterious comatose state). Yet whereas *Poltergeist* presents a reasonably straightforward motivation for its haunting (the family home is built over a desecrated graveyard, and the dead are angry), *Insidious* attempts to differentiate itself by featuring not only ghosts but the demonic as well. Once astral projection is also thrown into the mix, *Insidious* begins to veer away from the simple but efficacious ghost story it initially appears to be, with too many supernatural elements at play and too many questions left unanswered.

The film also suffers issues of plausibility (the ability to support a large family and afford the first house on the father's sole income as a high school teacher), as well as pacing: the film's second half seems to switch gears too suddenly, introducing the concept of inherited capabilities of astral projection as an explanation for Dalton's possession, while Renai, the heroic mother of the film's first half, becomes a mere supporting character, as her husband Josh becomes the film's protagonist. The odious comic relief offered by the ghost hunters arriving halfway through the film doesn't mesh well with the relentless suspense worked up to by that point, and the twist that closes the film, while suitably frightening on its own, seems almost obligatory at this point in the genre. Nevertheless, *Insidious* succeeds in its attempt at updating an established subgenre and offering something other than the remakes and torture porn into which the horror genre has descended in the past decade. That I had to see it twice in order to write this review, because most of my first viewing was done with my eyes covered, is an endorsement in and of itself.

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