FILM REVIEWS

Arrested Development
***Dogtooth* (*Kynodonthos*)**
(Dir. Giorgos Lanthimos) Greece 2009
Verve Pictures

Seldom has Philip Larkin's poetic observation "They fuck you up/Your Mum and Dad" been more grimly appropriate than in relation to Greek director Giorgos Lanthimos' morbidly witty *Dogtooth*, winner of the *Un Certain Regard* Prize at Cannes in 2009. The 'children' of the offending parents in *Dogtooth* are three young adults – two women and a man – in their late teens or early twenties who have been kept completely isolated from the outside world for as long as they can remember. Although 'father' goes out to work every day in his Mercedes (to his job as manager of the factory that provides our only glimpse of the outside world), his wife and children remain at home, confined within the gated surrounds of their country home. There's a huge back garden, a luxurious swimming pool, and a well-appointed house. The grass is green, and the sun always shines. A large wooden fence cuts off any view of the outside world. 'The children', as they are always identified within the film, spend their days playing childish, bizarre games, bickering among themselves, and bartering with each other for the few small trinkets – a hair-band here, a measuring tape there – which their parents permit them to own.

It's as though they've been on school holidays for every single day of their lives. The youngsters are most often dressed in shorts, t-shirts and swimming costumes, often clad entirely in white, while their father, a man of the world, is almost always seen in a suit and tie. There's a sense of paralysing boredom and, understandably, barely suppressed frustration to the children's sorely restricted lives that Lanthimos and his cinematographer evoke with considerable skill, often by framing otherwise unremarkable shots in a deliberately off-kilter manner which reinforces the wholly unnatural, artificial nature of their lives.

Indeed, the technique brings to mind the cinematography of another middle-class family nightmare, Michael Haneke's 1989 film *The Seventh Continent* (*Der Siebente Kontinent*), in which the profound alienation of the characters – who ultimately kill themselves rather than continue to live in a world of apparent meaninglessness – is reinforced by the fact that Haneke often included shots in which body parts were filmed in disorientating close-up as his characters carried out 'ordinary' household tasks. In fact, the subject matter and deliberately skewed cinematography of *Dogtooth* bring to mind the thought that if Haneke were Greek (and had a sense of humour) this is a film he could have made.

It must be noted as well that Lanthimos' premise is actually quite a common trope in the modern horror movie, although the execution is genuinely original. Wes Craven's *The People Under the Stairs* (1991), for instance, features a deranged brother-and-sister who live as man and wife and keep their kidnapped 'daughter' Alice a prisoner in their booby-trapped suburban home, forcing her to wear little-girl dresses and sleep in a room obviously meant for a much younger child. In both the 1993 Australian horror film *Bad Boy Bubby* (dir. Rolf de Heer), and the 1970 British film *Mumsy, Nanny, Sonny and Girly* (dir. Freddie Francis), grown men are treated like giant babies by their overbearing 'mothers'. A more recent exploration of many of the same themes can be found in M. Night Shyamalan's 2004 film *The Village*, in which, remarkably, the director seems wholeheartedly to endorse the fact that the parents of his artificially 'old world' community have deliberately been lying to their children for years about the nature of the world outside. Just as the youngsters of *The Village* have been told that venturing beyond the boundaries

of their community will mean death at the hands of monsters which dwell in the forest, so too are the young people in *Dogtooth* told that terrible creatures called 'cats' stalk the land beyond the safety of the garden fence. An older brother, (never seen, but referred to several times during the course of the narrative) is said to have been devoured by them, although the audience knows that the truth is that he has probably escaped. This lie leads to one of the film's most gruesomely funny scenes: when a tiny kitten strays onto the property, brother bravely (and graphically) dispatches it with a pair of garden shears while his screaming sisters look on from the 'safety' of the house.

The claustrophobia of the basic set-up is heightened by the fact that everyone in the film, except for the sole outsider to enter (disastrously) into this hermetically sealed world, is referred to only in relation to their position within the family – as brother, sister, father, mother, daughter, son, etc. It's a telling sign: individual identity has been subsumed into the family itself. Although the children are prisoners, they don't even know it, or at least, certainly not on a conscious level, making their position all the more tragic. Even language itself has been used as a means of authoritarian control. Their parents have deliberately given them false definitions for certain words that are usually associated with the outside world – "Pass the telephone" for instance, means "Pass the salt". Their ability to understand the world, and to piece together the truth about their predicament, is fatally compromised by the fact that they have so deliberately and systematically been given the wrong words with which to define reality – "zombie" is a small yellow flower, "sea" is a "leather armchair" and most bizarrely (and suggestively) of all, "pussy" is, according to their mother, "a great light". The children therefore lack even the language which would allow them to realise just how constrained their lives actually are: they are as much prisoners intellectually as they are physically. It's a realisation that Lanthimos cleverly reinforces by having the actors playing the children always speak in the slightly halting, inarticulate and naïve manner of someone with a mild intellectual impairment. Mary Tsoni, the actress playing the younger daughter is particularly good at this and effectively conveys childlike incomprehension and innocence throughout.

From the very opening scenes of the film – in which the children take part in their latest bout of a game they call 'Endurance', a competition to see who can withstand pain for the longest – violence, barely suppressed, bubbles underneath, occasionally exploding on the surface, such as in the scene in which the eldest sister (who gradually becomes the main focus of the narrative) suddenly slashes her brother on the arm with a knife during an argument. Eldest herself has a prominent scar on her shoulder – is this a remnant of an earlier incident? Tellingly, she slashes her brother because he found the toy airplane which she believed was hers: their parents throw them into the garden whenever a real plane passes overhead and then tell the children that it has crashed. As far as the children are concerned, they are the only people in the world, and so it makes complete sense that the only media the family consumes are home movies of themselves, a neat reflection of the insularity and narcissism of the nuclear family.

Given the circumstances then, it is hardly surprising that the introduction of an outsider from the 'real' world should have unsettling and ultimately horrific consequences. The father decides that his son's sexual needs should be facilitated (those of his daughters are, of course, ignored) and assigns the job to Christina, a young security guard at his factory. He drives her in a blindfold to the family home, ushers her in to his son's room, and then pays her to have sex with him. But any contact at all with the outside world is contamination. The 'children' – and in particular the young women – gaze upon the insouciant, deadpan outsider with absolute fascination, intrigued by the fact that she comes from beyond the boundaries of their home. And Christina turns this fascination to her own advantage, exploiting the eldest girl's childish enthralment and naïveté by encouraging her to exchange sexual favours for things like hair gel, and sparkly hair-bands. The eldest then unthinkingly and mechanically replicates this behaviour with her younger sister.

As if the introduction of sex into this world of perpetual childhood isn't destabilising enough, Christina reluctantly accedes to eldest's demands that she provide VHS movies for her to watch. After watching the likes of *Jaws* and *Rocky* in secret, the eldest, who, of all the children, has always shown the most awareness of their entrapment, re-enacts scenes from the forbidden films with an intensity that is at first amusing – as when the siblings pretend there is a shark in the swimming pool – and then downright disturbing, as when she recites monologues from *Rocky* with unhinged intensity. There's also a truly remarkable sequence – perhaps the standout scene in the film – during one of the family's many entertainment nights (during which the children are excepted to perform for their parents), eldest suddenly diverges from the endearingly awkward dance she and her sister have prepared to engage in what seems to be an impromptu recreation of the famous routine from *Flashdance*. Like many moments in the film, it's so bizarre that it starts off morbidly funny but soon becomes deeply disturbing, as the long-limbed, gawky young woman (excellently played by Aggeliki Papoulia) throws her body around the neat living room with a manic and desperate energy which manages to unsettle her parents as much as the audience.

Like any repressive regime – be it Iran, China or North Korea – power lies in controlling all access to the world outside, and to the media, and when Christina's crimes are discovered she pays a terrible (and grimly appropriate) price. Eldest is punished too, by being battered around the head with the illicit tapes themselves. VHS features in another important way in the film: the parents' late night viewing of hardcore porn is suggestive of the latent (and not so latent) sexual dysfunction that pervades the house. It seems horribly inevitable, then, when the father decides that it would be simpler – and safer – to keep things in the family instead, and declares that his son will have to chose between his sisters.

At a time where certain notorious real-life instances of abuse within the nuclear family (the Fritzl case naturally comes to mind but Ireland has also had its fair share of domestic horror stories reported in the media of late) have helped reinforce the suspicion that real horror all too often lies within the home, *Dogtooth*'s premise isn't as unlikely as it may once have seemed. While the subject matter is familiar, though, the execution is anything but. This Greek tragedy is one of the best films I've seen all year: a true *tour de force* of considerable originality, energy and vision which convincingly refutes the saccharine 1950s truism that father knows best.

Bernice M. Murphy

The Road
(Dir. John Hillcoat) USA 2009
Dimension Films

John Hillcoat's adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's 2006 novel *The Road* is a heart-rending tale of the love between a father and son, and a stark portrayal of humanity on its last legs. McCarthy's book has garnered both critical and popular appeal, winning a Pulitzer *and* gaining a spot on Oprah's Book Club list, and it was always going to be tricky to follow up with an equally successful film version. McCarthy's unique style in particular presents a potential stumbling block, and personally I was intrigued to see how his sparse, poetic prose, bare-bones dialogue, and haunting descriptions of dark, bleak beauty would translate to the screen. Nevertheless, director Hillcoat (who previously found success with *The Proposition*) and screenwriter Joe Penhall have proved more than up to the challenge, ably supported by stunning cinematography by Javier Aguirresarobe, and a resonant soundtrack from Nick Cave and Warren Ellis.

The Road is a post-apocalyptic tale of a father, known only as The Man (a haggard Viggo Mortensen), and his son, known as The Boy (Kodi Smit-McPhee), trying to survive the cold and hunger in a desolate America; the wife and mother of the family, The Woman (Charlize Theron), is a mere memory as she committed suicide some years before. Now, father and son are faced with negotiating the reality of life after an unidentified disaster – ash falling from the sky; intermittent earthquakes; a clouded sun; no animals, food, or light; marauding cannibalistic gangs and desperate, terrified refugees. Deciding that their chances of survival will improve by walking south in search of the ocean, warmth and the hope of salvation, they set off, encountering a series of tests to the man's humanity and moments of powerful tension along the road. One key encounter is with the prophet-like Old Man or Eli (Robert Duvall), a remnant of the old world. At the boy's persuasion, they share a meal with Eli, whose wise, desperate words and utter vulnerability inspire Man to keep struggling. Another occurs further toward the end of their journey when a thief (Michael K. Williams from *The Wire*) attempts to steal from Man and Boy, prompting a pathetic chase scene between the two scrawny men. The intensity of the scene in which Man instructs The Thief to strip as the latter sobs for mercy is unflinching and overwhelming in its harrowing depiction of hunger, desperation, and fear, and the cruelty of our hero seems to drive another stake in the heart of hope. When Man and Boy finally reach the coast, there are few signs of deliverance from despair, and the final scenes depict both the frustrating frailty of the human body and, ultimately, the determination of humanity to hope and love.

The road itself, long an icon of American popular culture, is, of course, central to the visual aesthetic of the film. The normal landmarks of the road trip are subverted here in the stark, post-apocalyptic reality. The ubiquitous gas station is typically a source of respite from the journey and sometimes a source of malevolent energy and hidden horror (think *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, dir. Tobe Hooper, 1974); here, it is rendered anachronistic, abandoned and covered in ash and ice. The bank's lopsided ATM sign and a sequence of long shots of grey streets with broken power lines also clearly serve to state the fact that the supposed bastions of power – oil, money, energy – are useless in the face of such a disaster. These shots are essential in the conveyance of loneliness. John Ford-esque wide shots of American landscape and tiny, vulnerable human figures fill the screen. However, rather than the blue skies and lush prairies of the Westerns, these shots are of a muted, grey palette, and the land is devoid of life or growth. In a particularly stunning series of shots that perfectly capture the bleak beauty of McCarthy's prose, the tiny figures of Man and Boy stand with their backs to the camera, facing a line of burning forest (a veritable hell–hole) or bent into the wind pulling their cart as they relentlessly move south. Moreover, these images

of the pair's struggle to keep moving to find safety while pulling their entire belongings behind them through horrendous desolation have obvious resonance with contemporary disasters such as Hurricane Katrina and the Haitian earthquake which have generated a barrage of images of suffering refugees in the media. The desperate need to hope that at the end of the road lies some sort of salvation is exquisitely and poignantly rendered in *The Road* and is all the more powerful in the light of these all-too-real disasters.

Indeed, there does seem to be an underlying ecological message in both the book and the film. The environmental argument that the earth is dying and that we are killing it is conveyed in an extreme (and arguably heavy-handed) manner here. The point is made apparent when The Man states that the earth is dying, all the animals are dead, soon all the trees in the world will be dead; worse still, as Eli elaborates, there were clear warnings that this would happen. The sound effects and shots of the tree roots ripping from the soil just after Man and Boy discover the most shocking of scenes in an underground cellar hit the viewer hard as it seems there is no respite, light, or goodness left in the world (although the discovery of a beetle and a bird flying in the grey sky do provide glimmers of hope toward the end of the film). While the cause of the disaster is never made explicit in *The Road*, it does seem to be part of a trend of films bemoaning the destruction of the planet, be it because of a super volcano, nuclear war, or climate change. Many films, such as *Avatar* (dir. James Cameron, 2009) or *The Book of Eli* (dir. Albert Hughes and Allen Hughes, 2010), have explored this theme in recent years. Whatever the cause, the fear remains that we could very possibly see the destruction of the earth as we know it. Few post-apocalyptic films have dealt with the theme as subtly and stirringly as *The Road* with its emphasis on the destruction of humanity.

Ultimately, though, the film is about the strength of this humanity. The typical obsession with 'good guys' and 'bad guys' is played out here where the only options left are suicide, cannibalism, or scavenging on the road. The first two options have a long history of taboo in popular culture and are dealt with interestingly in the film. The Woman's decision to die is cleverly told through a series of flashbacks which become progressively more muted as her despair takes hold. The opening scene of the film is of a smiling Theron in sunlight and honey tones. This light gives way to beige and grey shadows as The Woman decides to choose death. The chillingly beautiful lines "the coldness of it was her final gift" echo throughout – the absence of a mother haunts every scene and also inspired the soundtrack by Cave and Ellis. The Man rejects suicide yet he teaches the boy how to shoot himself in the mouth should they be captured by cannibals in an especially disturbing and challenging scene. Cannibalism, we soon learn, is "the great fear", and the fundamental division between good and bad guys. In cases of survival, cannibalism is sometimes accepted, as in the real life horrors of *Alive (*dir. Frank Marshall, 1993), for example. Here, however, Hillcoat goes for the more common rendering of cannibalism as the ultimate evil. Much of the horror and tension come from encounters with this great crime, in particular in the cellar scene in which Man and Boy discover men and women awaiting dismemberment and slow death as they are farmed for cannibals' consumption. The horror of cannibalism is the fact that it reduces humans to the status of animals in an abattoir. Hillcoat's cannibals are a remnant of Rural Gothic cannibals found in the likes of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* or *The Hills Have Eyes* (dir. Wes Craven, 1977) – filthy, gap-toothed, overall-wearing savages who ride pick-up trucks, speak in a deep southern drawl and whoop as they chase their prey. Also similar to these other cannibal movies is the question of revenge and who deserves to survive. Man's blind need to protect his son leads him to acts of cruelty. His constant need to demarcate the lines of savagery belies his doubts, an anxiety similarly expressed in colonial adventure texts. Indeed, the film boasts references to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in the Kurtz-like fence of skulls and to *Robinson Crusoe* in the association of washing and shaving with higher morals, placing it within a long history of cannibal versus non-cannibal culture.

Despite the melancholic nature of this film, I would not call it unrelenting as other critics have. In fact, the beauty of the relationship between the father and son provides depth and light in an otherwise savage, grey world. Certainly, it is not a light-hearted romp, and while Mortensen's heroics are not as eye-catching as some of his other sword-wielding roles, the subtle beauty of this film make it very much worth watching. The questions it poses about survival and dignity, the desperate loneliness of refugees, and the frailty of our world are well worth pondering.

Jenny Brown

Ghost Story
(Dir. Stephen Weeks) UK 1974
Nucleus Films (2009)

Although visceral, bodily horror became increasingly popular on British screens in the 1970s (as censorship slackened, and as an ailing film industry produced films to satisfy audiences bored with traditionally more sedate television fare), Stephen Weeks's *Ghost Story* emerges as a true oddity for its time. A dialogue-heavy, reserved, atmospheric period piece, it was principally filmed in a furnished Edwardian house in India (standing in for a late 1920s-into-1930s rural Britain), and builds its chills through gradual realization rather than outright assault.

McFayden (Murray Melvin) invites school friends Duller (Vivian Mackerall, popularly known as the principle inspiration for the "Withnail" character in Bruce Robinson's *Withnail & I* [1987]) and Talbot (Larry Dann) to a remote country estate, under the pretence of having a hunting/shooting weekend. Although he initially professes not to know who owns the house, it is soon revealed that McFayden stands to inherit it from his family and has actually invited his friends to join him in investigating claims of its strange, unresolved history. Talbot, the earnest scholarship boy who tries to remain optimistic and practical against the snobbish, aristocratic airs of the other men, is the first to be privy to the history of the place. The mysterious appearance of a doll sends Talbot into a series of fever dreams, in which he uncovers the suppression and gradual incarceration of the young Sophie Kwyker (Marianne Faithfull) at the hands of her brother Robert (Leigh Lawson), the erstwhile family patriarch who is the recipient of his sister's dangerous sexual advances. These two stories—of the men bickering over the strange circumstances of the weekend, combined with the torrid family psychodrama—come to connect directly, but to reveal the link here would lessen the gradual impact of the tale. Needless to say, this atmospheric film works precisely because its scares morph with the story: once the past has ruptured the present, the pervasive feeling of uneasiness (nested in a reserved *mise-en-scene* reliant on the "haunted house" subgenre) shifts to monstrous dread, as violence, conflagration, and evil ritual converge on our polite vacationers. It might be a stretch to over-praise *Ghost Story*, as it certainly suffers from pacing issues, the usual imperfections of a hurried and modestly-budgeted independent feature, and a sometimes tenuous sense of logic, but the film somehow turns these flaws into endearing characteristics. Philip Norman's script manages at once to juggle period-specific dialogue and the surreal stuff of nightmare, while the visually creative Weeks wrings atmospheric value out of many under-lit, overly dark set-pieces. The acting is uniformly strong.

Though it was previously released on VHS, illegally, as *Madhouse Mansion*, this Nucleus Films two-disc set gives the film a proper, restored presentation. Director Weeks, who independently produced the film during one of the British film industry's intermittent periods of decline, extensively participated in the preparation of this release's bonus features, dispelling the myths and apocryphal rumours that often accompany discussions of his film. A fine audio commentary, moderated and prompted by Samuel Umland, features an array of scene- and anecdote-specific recollections, while much contextual background comes courtesy of this DVD set's centrepiece, an original documentary called *Ghost Stories* (also produced by Nucleus, who have made similar productions such as the recent *Kim Newman's Guide to the Flipside of British Cinema* [2010]). *Ghost Stories* features memories from the cast (including Murray Melvin; Hammer star Barbara Shelley; Larry Dann), crew (Weeks; composer and Pink Floyd collaborator Ron Geesin), and extensive contributions from Kim Newman. He discusses the film in relation to others of the time, describing it as very much a "one-off," with no other direct kin. Of

particular interest are Weeks's comments on the coincidences that made filming in India possible, as well as the various accounts of food poisoning and the inclusion of as much appropriate incidental material as turned up, such as the collaboration with Western hippies from a nearby spiritual commune, who appear in the film as patients of an insane asylum!

Other films from Weeks's concentrated body of work have previously been made available on DVD—specifically his Christopher Lee/Peter Cushing collaboration for Amicus *I, Monster* (1971), and his self-remake of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (titled *Sword of the Valiant: The Legend of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* [1984])—but his amateur and early TV works have not. Thus, what truly makes this DVD set remarkable is its inclusion of his early, and in some cases almost totally unseen, films. While "The Chelsea Cobbler" is something of an era-inflected curio (an off-beat, swinging commercial for a trendy shoe store), and TV short *Deserted Station* (1965) comes across like many overwrought experimental student films (pretentious, belaboured, and technically spotty), they provide a fascinating glimpse at the variety of film production encouraged at the time. Weeks seems to have had a personal interest in war, as three of these films (including his short feature for Tigon *1917* [1968]) are set during World War I, but his real talent lies in the suggestion of sublime moods. *The Camp* (1965), a brief look at a WWI prisoner camp by way of Alain Resnais's *Night & Fog* (1955), combines narration, photographs, and footage of a deserted POW barracks to powerful effect. Better still is *Moods of a Victorian Church* (1967), a colour short which combines expertly chosen architectural detail, occult ritual, and a simple narrative to produce a mini-masterpiece of the architectural uncanny.

Though not for all tastes, *Ghost Story* is compulsively interesting due to its thematic and stylistic uniqueness as compared with other British horror films of the 1970s, as well as its impressive convergence of cult talents. On their own, Mackerrell, Faithfull, Hershey, Geesin (and now Weeks) would each help make a film worth seeking out, but their collaboration here—and the dignity afforded the film by Nucleus—amounts to a borderline-essential DVD release.

Kevin M. Flanagan

The House of the Devil
(Dir. Ti West) USA 2009
Metrodome Distribution

Set during an unspecified point in 1980s America, Ti West's recent release *The House of the Devil* has a plot that recalls a well-told urban legend and stylistically resembles a long-forgotten video nasty. The opening credits play out to a dated synth-pop score replete with freeze-frames and even some old-fashioned zooms. West also chose to shoot on 16mm film, rather than digital which surely would have been more cost-effective, thus creating a creepy murky visual style in keeping with the era. The marketing of the film has also been quite sensitive to the film's intentions – the theatrical poster sports the schlocky tagline: "Talk on the phone. Finish your homework. Watch TV. DIE"; and promotional copies were even released on VHS. These details, coupled with some canny wardrobe and make-up choices, help lend a sort of period authenticity to the film.

This suggestion of a standard 1980s horror also extends to the film's somewhat typical premise. If you were to break the set-up of *The House of the Devil* down into its most basic components, it would consist of the following: a college student in need of money; a too-good-to-be-true proposition; an isolated house in the woods. But it is out of these familiar (one might say hoary) elements that West assembles one of the most interesting and certainly the most tense horror film of recent years. After an opening with a disclaimer which states that Satanism was rampant in the 1980s and that the following story was based on "true unexplained events", we are then introduced to Samantha (Jocelin Donahue), a young college student who's searching for her own place to live but can barely afford the deposit. To make ends meet, she responds to an urgent bulletin board message for a babysitting job on the same night there's going to be a lunar eclipse. After some initial hesitation Samantha decides to take the job and she makes her way to an isolated mansion. Here credit must be given to Donahue for her engaging performance. She occupies the frame for most of the film; as the camera stalks around corners, down corridors and through windows it seems always to follow her. Her angular face – all cheekbones and wide eyes – recalls the likes of Jamie Lee Curtis in *Halloween* (dir. John Carpenter, 1978) or Mia Farrow in *Rosemary's Baby* (dir. Roman Polanski, 1968). Admittedly, the character of Samantha is drawn somewhat broadly, but Donahue is an intriguing presence and the babysitter is a stock figure typical of the sort of straight-to-VHS horror that West is so painstakingly recreating here (babysitters being one of the more popular forms of fodder for horror films of this era). Her character is a cliché but West is all-too-aware that clichés have their own particular pleasures and they can yield surprising results when utilised correctly. What happens when one takes familiar elements from horror such as the babysitter or the abandoned house or the creature in the attic and reconceptualises them? West seems to be more interested in putting video nasties under the microscope and seeing what made them work by stretching and dissecting their various elements, but in the end assembling something that feels more original.

Indeed, apart from genre manipulation *The House of the Devil*'s setting in the 1980s has a possibly functional motivation. The issue of technology is one that has to be addressed in every modern-day horror. For example, another recent low-budgeted film *Paranormal Activity* (dir. Oren Peli, 2007) confronts this issue head-on by making use of home-video to chilling effect. Nowadays it would no longer be sufficient for a budding terroriser of babysitters simply to cut the phone lines. Michael Myers would have to carry a mobile phone jammer, disable the wireless internet and hope that his presence hasn't already been tweeted.

However, despite its retro milieu and aesthetics *The House of the Devil* avoids becoming a reverential museum piece as its sensibilities are unmistakeably modern. West is a contemporary of other notable American directors such as Joe Swanberg and Andrew Bujalski who make talky, indie films, sometimes collectively referred to as "mumblecore". They usually utilise non-professional actors to portray the travails of young Americans. This film plays like a nightmarish inversion of their usual preoccupations: the fears and anxieties of adulthood; trying to get money together for your first place; menial work; and all the other attendant horrors of maturity. West even casts one of the scene's breakout stars Greta Gerwig as Samantha's best friend. In stylistic terms, if the horror element of *The House of the Devil* were to be removed, it would strongly resemble many of these films, with its long scenes of someone plodding around a house and making aimless phonecalls. Although there have been other mumblecore horror films in recent years (most notably the Duplass Brothers' *Baghead* (2008), which also stars Gerwig) *The House of the Devil* seems to be the first that could masquerade as a traditional and (possibly more significantly), marketable horror film.

Perhaps the most admirable and radical achievement of the film is West's expert building of a tension throughout the film. We know something supernatural has to occur, as is plain from the title of the film. What's more, you don't cast Tom Noonan as a creepy guy with a strange proposal, and cult actress Mary Woronov as his unsettling wife, and then give them the same surname as the hotel owner in *The Shining* without setting off some alarm bells. So how does West make it work? Well, we *know* something has to happen, we just don't know what or, more importantly, when. The middle portion of *The House of the Devil*, in which Samantha is alone in the house, extends what would usually take about 15 minutes in a regular horror film to an almost unbearably tense length. And so for the bulk of a 90 minute film a girl prowls around an apparently fathomless house; she turns the television on and then off again; she makes numerous phone calls and searches through drawers. In short, she does what anyone would do if left alone in a creepy mansion and this is precisely what draws in the viewer. It manages to be simultaneously unsettling and riveting. We are even allowed a moment of lightness as Samantha switches on her walkman and dances around the house in a sequence that references that particularly 80s propensity for montages and provides a brief respite from the suspense. When the inevitable scenes of horror and gore do occur they are all the more affecting because of the film's initial moderation. Otherwise there are no hokey musical stings or cheap scares to make the viewer jump; just pure paranoia and tension.

Ultimately, what makes *The House of the Devil* such a notable achievement is this refusal to deliver easy thrills which would only detract from the film's overall atmosphere. At a time when horror films, such as *The Human Centipede* (dir. Tom Six, 2009), are depicting increasingly explicit scenes of cruelty and mutilation, *The House of the Devil* takes the opposite tack, in being an exercise in extreme restraint and is all the more memorable for it.

Brian Davey

Alice in Wonderland
(Dir. Tim Burton) USA 2010
Walt Disney Pictures

When a young Tim Burton started his career as an animator and conceptual artist at Disney, he reputedly found himself constrained by a studio aesthetic that seemed to be at odds with his own darker worldview. Nonetheless, it was during his apprenticeship at Disney that he eventually produced a number of short films – *Vincent* (1982) and *Frankenweenie* (1984) – that functioned as his calling card with the wider Hollywood community. By the mid-80s, Burton had struck a deal with Warner Bros that eventually saw him emerge as a leading proponent of gothic and fantasy filmmaking with the likes of *Beetlejuice* (1988), *Batman* (1989) and its sequel three years later, and *Edward Scissorhands* (1990). In recent years his idiosyncratic style has evolved to see the likes of *Big Fish* (2003) and *Sweeney Todd* (2007) garner plenty of awards and critical acclaim, and help distract from his growing roster of creative missteps such as the likes of the ill-advised 'reimaginings' of *Planet of the Apes* (2001) and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005). Now, some 25 years after he parted company with Disney, Burton has found his way back to the House of Mouse with *Alice in Wonderland*, but this is not quite the happy reunion between a magnanimous studio and its wayward prodigal son that might have been hoped for; nor has Burton returned triumphant to produce a successful marriage between his brand of fantasy gothic and family-friendly Disney fare. Quite the opposite, in fact, as *Alice in Wonderland* actually exposes the full extent to which he's lost his way.

Burton's live-action but CGI-heavy *Alice in Wonderland* is set up as a sequel of sorts to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass* (1872), those classic texts of children's and nonsense literature. Carroll's first Alice novel closes with a vision of his young heroine's future as a grown woman who "would keep, through all her riper years, the simple and loving heart of her childhood; […] would gather about her other little children, and make their eyes bright and eager with many a strange tale, perhaps even with the dream of Wonderland of long ago; […] would feel with all their simple sorrows, and find a pleasure in all their simple joys, remembering her own child-life, and the happy summer days." Not so Burton's Alice (Mia Wasikowska), who continues to be haunted by dreams that act as a reminder of bygone days in Wonderland that she has long since (perhaps consciously) forgotten. Now 19, Alice is forced to face up to the reality that comes with being a young Victorian lady of marriageable age – marry she must, lest she end up like her unfortunate spinster aunt (Frances de la Tour) and doom herself and her mother (Lindsay Duncan) to a life of comparative poverty, following the death of her father (Martin Csokas), a successful businessman. Faced with a proposal from the unappealing but rich Hamish (Leo Bill), Alice runs away from unpleasant reality and follows the White Rabbit (voiced by Michael Sheen) down a rabbit hole, ending up in Underland (as we are informed it's actually called) where she encounters a series of familiar faces from Carroll's original texts – Tweedledum and Tweedledee (Matt Lucas in a dual role); the Mad Hatter (Johnny Depp); and an array of CGI creations voiced by Britain's national treasures – the Cheshire Cat (Stephen Fry); the Caterpillar (Alan Rickman); the March Hare (Paul Whitehouse); and the Dormouse (Barbara Windsor). The famous inhabitants of Underland now constitute a rebel alliance that seeks to overthrow the despotic reign of the Red Queen (Helena Bonham Carter) and her henchman Stayne, the Knave of Hearts (Crispin Glover). It has been prophesied that Alice will return to defeat the Jabberwocky (voiced by Christopher Lee) on the Frabjous Day and restore the White Queen (Anne Hathaway) to her rightful place on the throne and depose the megalomaniacal Red Queen. Initially, Alice fails to recognise that she is indeed "the right Alice" and does not seem up to the task – she has, as the Mad Hatter repeatedly tells her, "lost her

muchness" – but it's little surprise that all she needs is a spell in Wonderland in order to recover it again, and return to the real world rejuvenated and equipped with the gumption to strike out on her own by the film's end.

It is in its conservative narrative structure that Burton's film really falls flat, sacrificing the surreal dream logic and the spirit of Carroll's originals in favour of a linear framework that negates the possibility for such playfulness. The 'prophecy' device sets up a quest narrative that is fundamentally uninspired and never in any danger of going unfulfilled – the climactic battle between Alice and the Jabberwocky is signposted and even previewed once our heroine arrives in Wonderland and is shown a handy scroll that outlines precisely what will happen, emptying the plot itself of any dramatic tension. Alice's adventures are all harnessed to this linear framework, and are the poorer for it, as each run-in with a familiar face from Wonderland is woven into the elaborate quest narrative, losing their potential to function as episodic, dream-like and surreal diversions in the process. All seems designed to repackage Alice's tale as a lazy and near-sighted take on female empowerment, as young Alice rediscovers her "muchness" and slays the Jabberwocky before returning to the real world and taking a stand against the rules of the Victorian marriage market by choosing instead to become a businesswoman and set sail for China to make her fortune and open up east-west trade routes. Alice's apparently triumphant conclusion is worrying on a series of levels, as she seems to assert her authority by becoming a good capitalist and a good coloniser, a troublingly conservative and antiquated outlook for these times. What's more, Alice's independence can only ever be partial, as she has signed up as an apprentice for the firm owned by the man that would have been her father-in-law, had she accepted Hamish's marriage proposal – so she may have rejected a role as surrogate-daughter to him but she remains firmly under his control as an employee. Hardly a rallying cry for women everywhere to throw off the shackles of patriarchal oppression, despite what the film itself tries to imply elsewhere, right down to its inclusion of an incongruous end-credits song by Avril Lavigne.

Even more disappointingly, Burton's usually slick and inventive visual flair is notably absent, and the film seems hampered by its reliance on overwrought CGI animation and substandard 3D effects. What's more, his gothic worldview is starting to look tired as he cannibalises his own work in a way that seems less like the practice of a signature style than evidence of an uninspired mind. Again and again, it seems he falls back on certain visual tropes as shorthand for the Burton brand – the tree from *Sleepy Hollow* (1999), for example, pops up for no good reason here – but increasingly it's starting to look as though he's fresh out of ideas. His ongoing overdependence on an established stable of actors – Depp, Bonham Carter, Lee – contributes even further to a sense that the film has been phoned in, with Depp's Mad Hatter recalling the lazy habits and worst excesses of his Willy Wonka. As Alice, Wasikowska tries her best but seems a bit lost within the film's CGI landscape and hemmed in by a characterisation that is as emptily 'Burtonesque' as the rest of the film, right down to her ashen face, doe-like eyes and blonde hair that recall so many Burton heroines past (among them *Sleepy Hollow*'s Christina Ricci and *Edward Scissorhands*' Winona Ryder). Like his adaptation of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* appears to be the work of a director on autopilot, and worryingly it seems set to continue – next up for the director is a feature-length remake of his 1984 short *Frankenweenie*, also with Disney. It's about time he stopped remaking and readapting 'beloved' classics and get back in touch with the man who gave us the sublime *Ed Wood* (1994) and *Sleepy Hollow* at the height of his creative powers. *Alice in Wonderland* is a far cry from those heady days, and worst of all is the degree to which it comes across as a tame retread of a series of recent family-friendly fantasy film franchises, with visual echoes of and shameless borrowings from the likes of the *Narnia* and *Lord of the Rings* series. In fact, as Alice faces off against the Jabberwocky in her climactic battle, the viewer might be forgiven for thinking that the projectionist had accidentally put on the final reel of *The Return of the King*, so reminiscent is it of that film's face-off between Éowyn (Miranda Otto) and the Nazgûl.

With his return to Disney, Burton has now produced a film that tries to tick all of the boxes of family-friendly fantasy filmmaking that have become *de rigueur* since Peter Jackson first put Middle Earth onscreen, but ultimately in *Alice in Wonderland* these tropes come across as both stale and derivative. Like his heroine, then, it seems that Burton has returned to Wonderland only to discover that he's lost his "muchness" – whether or not he can recover it remains to be seen.

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