FILM REVIEWS

Year of the Remake: The Omen 666 and The Wicker Man

Jenny McDonnell

The current trend for remakes of 1970s horror movies continued throughout 2006, with the release on 6 June of John Moore's The Omen 666 (a scene-for-scene reconstruction of Richard Donner's 1976 The Omen) and the release on 1 September of Neil LaBute's The Wicker Man (a re-imagining of Robin Hardy's 1973 film of the same name). In addition, audiences were treated to remakes of The Hills Have Eyes, Black Christmas (due Christmas 2006) and When a Stranger Calls (a film that had previously been 'remade' as the opening sequence of Scream). Finally, there was Pulse, a remake of the Japanese film Kairo, and another addition to the body of remakes of non-English language horror films such as The Ring, The Grudge and Dark Water. Unsurprisingly, this slew of remakes has raised eyebrows and questions alike about Hollywood's apparent inability to produce innovative material. As the remakes have mounted in recent years, from Planet of the Apes to King Kong, the cries have grown ever louder: Hollywood, it would appear, has run out of fresh ideas and has contributed to its ever-growing bank balance by quarrying the classics.

Amid these accusations of Hollywood's imaginative and moral bankruptcy to commercial ends in tampering with the films on which generations of cinephiles have been reared, it can prove difficult to keep a level head when viewing films like The Omen 666 and The Wicker Man. Their originals have become deified and venerated since they first appeared: the release of the two remakes in 2006 has led to public outpourings of dismay and anger from horror aficionados who regard the originals as untouchable cultural artefacts. As a popular medium, though, film has always been reliant upon adaptation, and the embryonic years of cinema produced numerous literary adaptations and remakes; likewise, horror cinema has always thrived on such adaptation, from Nosferatu to the Universal classics produced from the 1920s to the 1940s. As the medium has grown in status and stature in the course of the twentieth century, it has produced countless cinematic texts: and it is logical that filmmakers should consistently turn to this vast body of work (as well as to other forms) to provide inspiration for new versions of old stories. With a little originality of vision, adaptation within the medium of film has proven successful time and again: Seven Samurai was successfully transported to the American West for The Magnificent Seven; Rob Reiner updated It Happened One Night for the 1980s and gave us The Sure Thing; and had Howard Hawks not adapted the stage-play The Front Page (which had previously been filmed in 1931) and changed the gender of one of its lead characters, cinema would have been denied His Girl Friday, and with it the sublime, fast-talking screwball pairing of Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell. In theory, then, remakes need not be heinous crimes against cinema; in practice, though, inspiration and originality of vision are not always evident in remakes, and for every His Girl Friday, there's a Switching Channels.

When it comes to recent horror movie remakes in particular, the films produced have tended to be inept or glossy rehashes of older films (The Fog, The Texas Chainsaw Massacre). Moreover, they have further contributed to the perception of horror as a genre that is often derivative, formulaic and sequel-driven (of which the recent direct-to-DVD appearance of I'll Always Know What You Did Last Summer is a timely reminder). 2006 has also brought its fair share of sequels in this vein: Underworld: Evolution, Final Destination 3, Scary Movie 4, and Adrift (a film that was not an official sequel to Open Water, but which has been sold in many territories as Open Water 2 because of its obvious similarities); still to come this year are the forthcoming Saw III, The Grudge 2 (the sequel to the remake of the Japanese original, which itself spawned an inferior sequel), and The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning (a prequel to the remake of the original). Horror sequels have rarely surpassed their originals but have often attempted to replicate their successes by sticking closely to the blueprint of a tried-and-tested-formula (witness, for example, the law of diminishing returns in the Nightmare on Elm Street or Friday the 13th series); horror movie remakes are now emerging as a natural offshoot of this process. More than any other genre horror has not lent itself to the remake treatment with any real success: fundamentally, it's hard to scare the living daylights out of people with a film that they've already seen in another incarnation. Yet the trend continues unabated, and next year audiences can look forward to remakes and re-imaginings of the likes of Halloween (by Rob Zombie) Day of the Dead, The Hitcher and The Omega Man (as I Am Legend, the title of the Richard Matheson novel on which it is based), and there's also the persistent rumour about an imminent remake of The Birds.

Within horror there have been instances of remakes which have gained formidable reputations of their own: John Carpenter's The Thing, Don Siegel's Invasion of the Body Snatchers and David Cronenberg's The Fly, for example, all proved iconic updatings of 1950s B-movies: the latter two are being given the movie remake treatment again and are due for release in 2007 (Oliver Hirschbiegel's The Visiting and Todd Lincoln's The Fly), but the long-proposed sequel to The Thing has as yet failed to materialise (except in the form of a video game). While it is apparent that not all remakes can achieve the status as Carpenter's definitive ice-bound classic, they needn't all be hailed as pointless an exercise as Gus van Sant's notorious updating of Hitchcock's Psycho in 1998, which famously only succeeded in transforming Norman Bates into Master Bates in glorious Technicolor. Similar projects in other genres have proven more palatable to audiences and critics alike: Todd Haynes, for example, meticulously recreated the world of Douglas Sirk's melodramas and garnered rave reviews and awards a-plenty with Far From Heaven (a technically brilliant exercise in film-imitation, but its sumptuous reconstruction of Sirk's style was not accompanied by the corresponding substance: the emotional heart that characterised his work). Van Sant's Psycho was fundamentally hampered by the fact that it seemed an exercise in futile imitation, a re-enactment of a classic thriller which pivots on a now well-known but originally ground-breaking and unsettling double-whammy of twists: Janet Leigh's untimely demise in the shower and the climactic unveiling of Mother. Iconic endings will always pose a problem for directors of remakes, as Tim Burton gamely proved with the incomprehensible twist in his re-imagining of Planet of the Apes that fails to

challenge the original's legendary closing scene. It's not just the endings that are tricky, though, and the director that takes on an iconic horror film will always have his or her work cut out for them if they're pitching their work to a genre-savvy audience. This is true whether they deliver a scene-for-scene remake such as The Omen 666 or a 're-imagining' such as The Wicker Man: stick too close to the blueprint and run the risk of an exercise in carbon-copying; but tamper with things too much and face the wrath of outraged film enthusiasts.

Both The Omen and The Wicker Man are iconic 1970s horror films with famously downbeat endings and thirty years of nostalgic nightmares behind them. Obviously, an informed audience will know as much when viewing the remakes, but this prior knowledge is further heightened by the general cine-literacy of contemporary horror audiences, who are notoriously aware of the 'rules' of their chosen genre, as has been evident in the move towards post-modern self-awareness in the likes of Scream and Final Destination. Generic rules have now been unpicked within the genre and parodied in the unnecessary and unfunny Scary Movie series. The informed audience for the horror remake, then, is one that is doubly invested with a sense of authority that undermines the fundamental element of surprise on which storytelling relies. At the same time, the authority of the filmmaker is destabilised when telling a story that is familiar and which may have lost its power to effect an audience on the primal level on which horror should function. The best horror films are frightening on a first viewing, and unsettling experiences thereafter (The Exorcist, 1973); the very best prove frightening on every single viewing (The Texas Chain Saw Massacre, 1974). But there's a cosy familiarity about horror remakes, which counteracts all of horror's main impulses to terrify its audience, and it's an obstacle over which the recent remake of The Omen inevitably stumbles.

In truth, part of the problem lies in the iconic status of The Omen itself, which is such a pervasive presence in the history of horror's move towards box-office credibility and acceptance at the end of the 1970s that is all-but impossible to re-view it with anything close to fresh eyes. There's a hazy, nostalgic glow around The Omen, and in a sense, it has become too iconic, elevated to greatness when compared to its own inferior sequels and the numerous devil-child films that emerged in its wake (for example, Children of the Corn, Godsend). In hindsight, it actually adds up to less than the sum of its parts (Gregory Peck, Jerry Goldsmith's score, those death-scenes), and the main problem with the remake is that it has attempted to replicate those parts exactly without really trying to make them add up to something more.

On the face of it, The Omen 666 remake looks like the worst kind of cash-cow filmmaking, a scene-for-scene remake, released on 6/6/06, taking opportunistic advantage of the commercial potential for a demonically-themed horror movie released on the once-in-a-century number-of-the-beast-tinged date. The gimmick apparently worked: the film did respectably at the box office, and when I tried to see it on opening night, two different cinemas were sold out (forcing me to see another remake, Poseidon, instead). But the gimmick had been used before, also with some success: the UK release of the original Omen was on 6/6/76, as close to the number-of-the-beast as the 1970s would allow. The Omen franchise has always had a commercial eye on its audience, and

even on its initial release, it seemed a little familiar, with a hint of Rosemary's Baby and The Exorcist about it: the 'derivative' tag that haunts so many contemporary films is equally applicable to this, a film that really paved the way for the commercial success of horror throughout the late 1970s and into the early 1980s. Its 2006 incarnation merely capitalises on this commercial savvy for a new generation, and even flaunts its derivative nature by casting Mia Farrow as Mrs Baylock in a nod, not to the original, but to Rosemary's Baby, a film that the original was accused of 'ripping off'. It's a witty gesture in what is otherwise standard remake fare that makes everything bigger and bolder with louder explosions and more elaborate deaths.

It's perhaps unsurprising, since David Seltzer is credited as screenwriter on both the 1976 and 2006 Omens, that the plot is an exact photocopy of the original: Robert Thorn (Liev Schreiber), U.S. ambassador to Italy at the beginning of the film, chooses not to tell his wife Katherine (Julia Stiles) that their first child died at birth, instead opting to pass off an orphaned infant as their own progeny. Damian (Seamus Davey-Fitzpatrick), of course, turns out to be the spawn of Satan; his nanny, the priest who tries to warn Thorn that his son bears the number of the beast, and Jennings, the photographer who gets caught up in matters, all meet satisfyingly nasty ends; and, after the untimely death of Katherine Thorn, the film climaxes with the equally untimely death of Robert Thorn, who fails to kill young Damian, thus leaving him free to pursue his true father's work, as well as giving Hollywood an excuse to tackle (and hopefully improve) the sequels in which Damian paves a path to the White House. There is little new in the film, save some minor modifications to the details of some scenes, and the introduction of some dream sequences. These are effective for a few jumps, but are all-too-brief to really build to anything more than some MTV-style editing. The film is quite stylishly produced, and some imagery is memorable: in particular the starkness of the snow-bound trip across Italy undertaken by Robert Thorn and Jennings in pursuit of some answers, and the recurrent use of blood red imagery on white backgrounds that subtly anticipates the impending trauma of the film's climactic battle. But these are the only subtle touches in a film that is elsewhere heavy-handed and obvious in its execution.

It's in the death scenes that the film seems to feel it must push some boundaries, and it ups the ante for the demise of David Thewlis's Jennings (a more elaborate decapitation than David Warner's) and Pete Postlethwaite's Father Brennan who is skewered by a church steeple in the same way, but ends up resembling Darth Maul in his long black robes and with shards of glass sticking out of his head. These beefed-up sequences probably do play well to a contemporary audience reared on the imaginative demises of the Final Destination series, but the decision to tamper with the death of Katherine Thorn is indicative of the overwhelming lack of subtlety on display throughout the film. The original worked on the power of suggestion, and Lee Remick's tumble from her hospital window was motivated as much by her own growing paranoia as any palpable threat from Mrs Baylock. In contrast, Julia Stiles' character is disposed of in her hospital bed – this time by Mrs Baylock, who proves very handy with a syringe. There is no room for ambiguity in this Omen: from the opening montage of recent events that suggest the eve of Armageddon (9/11, the Asian Tsunami, the Columbia space shuttle disaster) to the closing shot of a George W. Bush look-alike clutching the

orphaned Damian's hand, the film displays a singular lack of subtlety in justifying its own existence and asserting its contemporary relevance. It displays a corresponding lack of originality, and it remains difficult to appraise the film on its own terms: quite simply, it has been seen before, one too many times.

Neil LaBute's The Wicker Man is a different beast altogether, a re-imagining that just about retains enough of the outline of its original text to justify its claim to the title. The original Wicker Man was a low-budget British chiller, a cult classic with much in common with the independent ideals of 1970s American horror filmmakers such as George A. Romero and Tobe Hooper. Its reputation has primarily rested on that ending, as it explodes into horror after a slow-burning eighty minutes or so (depending on the cut) when Edward Woodward's Sergeant Howie fulfils his appointment with the wicker man. Hardy's film revolved around the clash between Howie's repression and the sexual liberation of the inhabitants of Summerisle, and climaxed with the ultimate clash between Christian and pagan virtues, with the virginal Christian police officer burnt as a May Day sacrifice by the pagan islanders so that their apple crops might recover from the previous year's disastrous harvest. The film's power rests in the manner in which Howie's ideals are ultimately used against him to valorise the ideals of his pagan adversaries, and his sacrifice makes for a shocking closing reel. However, there is no such power on display in LaBute's updating and relocation of The Wicker Man to the present day in the Pacific Northwest.

LaBute's film notoriously rejects the original's clash between Christian and pagan ideals, a rejection that is made clear from the very first scene, in which Nicolas Cage's traffic cop peruses the self-help section of a bookstall. Instead, LaBute invokes his favoured topic of the battle of the sexes, but his outmoded gender clashes manage to make the film feel more dated even that Hardy's folky 1970s version: even the sight of Britt Ekland's naked body-double slapping herself while crooning a creepy folk tune was preferable to the offensive and misogynistic gender politics which abound in LaBute's film. His Wicker Man is entirely predicated on a dystopian vision of the oppression of men ('drones') by empowered, witch-like women (led by queen bee Sister Summersisle, played by Ellen Burstyn). The suggestively named Edward Malus (combining the male and phallus that Molly Parker's schoolmistress educates her charges to mistrust) is a doomed man before he even sets foot on Summersisle. Malus is a 'troubled' man, having failed to rescue a mother and child from a burning car in the film's opening sequence, and is lured to Summersisle by his former fiancée, Willow, to seek her missing child, Rowan (later revealed to be his own daughter). But whereas Hardy's islanders were merely eccentric to begin with (and really remain so up until the point at which they burn Howie as a sacrifice), LaBute's islanders are obvious weirdos from the first moment Malus encounters a group of silent men carrying a suspiciously dripping bag and strange women who speak in stilted constructions and refer to one another as 'Sisters'. Every woman in this film seems to be part of a convoluted plot to lead Malus to his appointment with the wicker man, and the film grows to a crescendo of distasteful violence against women, as Malus punches and karate-kicks his way through a selection of these 'Sisters' (to a cinematic swell in Angelo Badalamenti's score) and tries to save his recently-acquired daughter. After some ludicrous, and hilarious, off-screen torture,

punctuated by ridiculous expository dialogue, finally he's strung up in the wicker man, eloquent to the last ('You bitches! Killing me won't bring your goddamned honey back!'), his young daughter lights the flame that will kill him, and the wicker man burns. As the screen fades to black, and the giggles subside, the unthinkable happens: a caption appears onscreen, reading 'Six Months Later', and the incredulous audience is treated to a coda in which another hapless police officer is seduced by an islander. We can only hope to be spared the inevitable sequel if LaBute's film turns out to be the resounding critical and commercial failure it looks set to become.

The problem with The Wicker Man is not just that it's a bad remake of a classic chiller with bludgeoned nods to its original (Cage's character is called Edward, and Willow's surname is Woodward), which elicits giggles where the original unsettled. It's also a film that quarries other classic horror sources, so it looks like a hodgepodge of any number of better films: in Rowan's red cardigan and Malus' watery pursuit of nightmarish visions of her, as well as the blind twin sisters who prophesy the coming of the wicker man, it visually references Don't Look Now (the upper half of the double bill with which the original Wicker Man was released); and in his frenzied search of Sister Summersisle's house, the film borrows heavily from The Shining. But it's also reminiscent of less memorable films: in particular, its reclusive female colony smacks of M. Night Shyamalan's tiresome post-9/11 allegory The Village. But even taken on its own terms, LaBute's film is a convoluted mess, with badly-written dialogue and ludicrous plotting to get Malus to the island, and a central turn by Cage that is all teeth and wild hair, one of the worst cases of over-acting in an actor who is terminally prone to do so. But read in relation to its obvious influences, The Wicker Man almost feels like four bad remakes: they add up to one farcical folly.

Ultimately, both The Omen 666 and The Wicker Man are mainstream horror films that sit at either end of the remake spectrum, but whereas The Wicker Man has been categorically and soundly denounced by fans and critics alike, The Omen 666 has received mixed reviews overall.

The most obvious reason for such different receptions is that, even taken on its own terms, The Wicker Man is an absolute mess, whereas The Omen 666 sticks very close to the blueprint of a solid film (and manages the occasional jump of its own), with the result that it too delivers an average, if unimaginative, film. But there's another reason for the overall indifference to a remake of The Omen and the overall indignation at a remake of The Wicker Man, and this lies in the nature of the original texts themselves. The 1976 version of The Omen was a slick Hollywood production that built on the success of The Exorcist and continued to pave the way for horror's emergence as a respectable genre with Oscar potential (finally endorsed in 1992 when Silence of the Lambs scored victories in the five major Oscar categories); The Omen 666 replicates these credentials, with a bigger budget and an appropriately commercial director in John Moore (whose previous film was the 2004 remake of Flight of the Phoenix). On the other hand, The Wicker Man has come to be seen as a counter-cultural classic produced outside the studio system, and a key example of horror at its subversive best. The remake apparently comes equipped with independent credibility of its own in the shape of Neil LaBute, but this independent spirit has delivered a film that is staggeringly

ham-fisted and derivative. The issue, then, is not that The Wicker Man dares to re-imagine its source material for a new generation, but that it delivers an end product that counteracts the subversive and counter-cultural ideals for which its original has come to stand. In the end, it is a disheartening prospect, but The Omen 666 – a safe remake of a solid film – is the lesser of two evils.

Jenny McDonnell

Three… Extremes (Dir: Fruit Chan, Takeshi Miike, Chan-Wook Park)
Tartan Asia Extreme (18), Out Now

Let's face it, with the notable exception of the classic Dead of Night, cinematic horror anthologies are generally less than brilliant. Anyone who has sat through creaky ensemble pieces such as Asylum, Creepshow, Cat's Eye, Demon Knights, and Body Bags will know how these things usually go: with any luck, there will be one adequate entry, but the rest are almost always guaranteed to be inferior instalments characterised by ropey acting and predictable twists. Even Dead of Night had a rather twee middle segment about a haunted golf course. In other words, whilst literary horror is often at its finest in short story form, filmic horror has rarely been at its best when confined to a reduced running time.

However, when the anthology in question features work by three of Asian horror's most interesting talents, the prospect is intriguing. At a time when mainstream Western horror films have all but run aground in a sea of their own mediocrity, and the blazing talents of the 70s horror boom have, with the notable exception of George A. Romero, lapsed into relative obscurity, discerning horror fans have learned in recent years that they should look further afield if they want to see genuinely interesting, innovative work within the genre. The recent DVD release of Three… Extremes – featuring short works by Hong-Kong based Fruit Chan; Japanese provocateur Miike Takeshi (of Audition and Gozu notoriety); and Korean hyper-kinetic stylist Park Chan-Wook (Old Boy, Lady Vengeance) - again suggests that western film makers would do well to try and inject some of the energy, extra-morbid black comedy and sheer stylistic verve on display here into their own efforts, even if the offerings on display here are at times somewhat uneven.

Hideo Nakata's Ringu famously alerted the west to the fact that horror films could still actually scare people, and that film's unprecedented success (as well as the speed at which an inferior, but generally well-received American remake was produced) meant that it was suddenly much easier to get a hold of Asian films in Europe thanks to distributors such as Tartan and Optimum Asia. The boom has produced many excellent movies (A Tale of Two Sisters, Lady Vengeance); some interesting, but flawed (The Grudge, Hypnosis, Audition); a few very dull ones (Pulse, Uzumaki); and the occasional movie that is downright offensive (Freezer, Visitor Q), as well as having an important impact upon western filmakers. Note to Eli Roth: buckets of gore, vomit and self-righteous xenophobia do not a westernised Japanese horror film make, even if you have somehow convinced Miike to make a cameo appearance. Three… Extremes, which is clearly being targeted at those who prefer their horror gory rather than ghostly, falls into the interesting-but-flawed category, but should still be required viewing for anyone remotely interested in Asian horror and cinema.

The anthology opens with Fruit Chan's satirical, stomach-churning offering Dumplings, which is probably the best of the lot. The premise is this: beautiful Aunt Mei (Bai Ling), who claims to be considerably older than her looks suggest, makes a living providing special dumplings to rich Hong-Kong women desperate to preserve their youth. One such customer is Ching, a frustrated

former actress who believes that by halting the aging process she will be able to save her troubled marriage. It is soon revealed that the secret ingredient of Mei's dumplings is actually foetal tissue. It's provocative conflation of feminine vanity and the unborn means that the film has much in common with F. Paul Wilson's Manhattan-set short story "Foet", in which rich young women find themselves jealously coveting expensive hand-bags stitched together from foetus hides. Understandably revolted when she discovers what she's been scoffing, the vain, self-absorbed Ching nevertheless soon becomes a frequent consumer of these tasty treats, even as she finds out more about where Mei gets them from. Not only does she surreptitiously procure flasks of foetuses from the local hospital, but she also performs the occasional late-term abortion herself (in a particularly gruesome aside, it is revealed that the older the foetus, the more powerful its effects).

One such operation, carried out on a pregnant schoolgirl, is graphically depicted, and the scene allows Chan to make a sly reference to the nature of the relationship between Hong Kong and mainstream China. The witchlike, ageless Aunt Mei hails from the old world, and is here associated with folk medicine and magic: she also seems to take great pleasure in having so much power over the fashion conscious, westernised and intensely materialistic local women who flock to her door. "They never get rid of boys in China", she notes, in an aside which obviously refers to her native land's famously restrictive one-child family policy. Cut down from a full length film, Dumplings proceeds briskly to a suitably disturbing final shot, in which Ching, having been deprived of Mei's recipe, decides to make some dumplings of her own. Not for all tastes, it's nevertheless an uncompromising and at times darkly comic tale of vanity and greed, although at times the narrative does seem rather choppy, a reminder of the fact that it was originally a much longer piece.

The second segment, Cut, directed by Park Chan-Wook, also rests upon an intriguing premise, and has some fascinating visuals, but ultimately fails to work as well as it could have. The protagonist is a nice-guy horror film director whose apparently perfect life is violently disrupted when a disgruntled extra decides to put his mild-mannered demeanour to the test. He faces a terrible dilemma: he must strangle a small child conveniently trussed up on the sofa or watch as his pianist wife loses a finger every five minutes. The film utilises many of the elements which helped make Park's Vengeance trilogy a hit, such as scenes of bloody violence, a frenetic, inventive visual style, black humour and, above all, a preoccupation with revenge and the outrageous extremes people can go to when all that they hold precious is threatened. Park even finds time to throw in some obviously self-referential meditations on the effects of sudden fame. Needless to say, it all concludes with some tense last-minute twists, and a satisfyingly ironic fate for the psychopath who has engineered the whole grisly scenario. The final minutes also offers a rather baffling scene in which the director conclusively proves that he isn't a nice guy anymore. Despite the intriguing film-within-a-film opening, a satisfyingly bleak cruel streak and some impressive visual flourishes, ultimately there is rather more style than substance on display here.

However convoluted the closing moments of Cut are, they still make more sense than Miike's Box, the impressionistic, often hauntingly atmospheric but ultimately too bizarre to take seriously tale of a

young novelist tormented by visions of her dead (twin) sister. Much of the film takes place in silence, and it jumps without warning from (seeming) reality to fantasy throughout.The central image here is that of a young girl painfully contorting her freakishly flexible limbs in order to fit inside a box: it seems that the sisters were once contortionists in a circus, until one of them died in a horrific accident. Those who have seen Miike's most famous film, Audition, will recognise many of the preoccupations on display here: sexual abuse, incest, female entrapment and disfigurement. Thankfully, he doesn't have time to insert any vomit-eating scenes. It's all beautifully put together, and does deliver some delicate chills, but the denouement lets it down somewhat. Audiences will be most likely be torn between thinking, "Ok, that kind of makes sense" or, more likely, "What the hell?!", for the segment concludes with a fairly ridiculous attempt to make psychological sense of what is actually quite a confusing story. I'm not sure Miike knows what he was up to here either. Ultimately, though occasionally uneven, Three… Extremes is still well worth watching, and while there is a lot of gore, it is generally used rather more intelligently than in pretentious American torture-porn like Hostel. To sum up: recommended. The DVD also comes with knowledgeable film notes and a behind-the-scenes documentary.

Bernice M. MurphyBlood For Dracula (Dir. Paul Morrissey)
Tartan Video (18) Out Now

Over thirty years after its original release, Blood For Dracula has been repackaged and is now available on DVD for the first time. The film is now visually clean and crisp, and we may appreciate the particular colour effects and set design. Paul Morrissey's Blood For Dracula is the second instalment of his 'Costume Trilogy', comprising Flesh For Frankenstein (1973) and Beethoven's Nephew (1985). However, there are some questions over directorial credits to Flesh for Frankenstein, and there is substantial evidence to suggest that Italian director, Antonio Margheriti, may have co-directed the film. While Flesh For Frankenstein (also starring Udo Kier and Joe Dalessandro) is deliberately melodramatic and grandiose, Blood For Dracula is intended to be a more subtle production: nevertheless, it spirals into a ludicrous spectacle. It is because of this comic and ghastly representation that the film is still held in high cult status, making its Dracula, Udo Kier, a star in underground horror cinema. The delight in viewing this new edition DVD is the inclusion of a commentary track by Udo Kier, Paul Morrissey and renowned academic Maurice Yacowar, whose expertise on Morrissey is included at critical moments. If I may make a suggestion, leave this commentary on if you have experienced the film before. It is more rewarding in retrospect, and Yacowar's contribution in particular proves to be an invaluable source of both critical film theory and interesting anecdotes for any fan of the underground horror genre or of the 'Warhol Factory'.

Morrissey's film must be commended for its originality in plot; while the original narrative of Dracula (and a number of film adaptations) includes the story of the Count travelling from his homeland to seek new victims, Blood For Dracula humorously makes this necessity hinge on the Count's need for virgin blood. With no virgins left in Transylvania, the Count decides to relocate to Italy, a good Catholic country, where he assumes he will have his pick. Facing potential starvation in his homeland, where this lack of available virgin blood has already condemned his sister to a certain death; it is at the suggestion of his wily servant Anton (Arno Juerging, who also plays Kier's assistant in Morrissey's Frankenstein), that Dracula heads to Italy in search of 'pure' blood under the pretence that he is seeking a bride. Soon we discover that the home of four young maidens and their aristocratic parents provides ample choice for the Count. As Dracula's plans to feed off the young maiden sisters come together, the farm boy Mario (played by Warhol icon Joe Dallesandro) becomes suspicious. It emerges that Mario has sexually conquered the two sisters offered to the Count and has his sights set on the youngest sister, Perla, as a final conquest. In an infamously horrid scene, Dracula bites the sexually-charged Saphiria, whom Mario has 'corrupted' previously, and becomes violently ill, vomiting for two onscreen minutes in a spectacular display of retching and writhing on Kier's part. Only then do we realise the consequences of Dracula's deviance from his 'pure' blood diet. While the aristocratic parents of these doomed young maidens seem oblivious to the vampire residing in their guestroom, Mario investigates the Count's strange habits and his interest in the girls' virginity. Upon discovering that Dracula is a vampire, Mario plans to eradicate him, as he is undoubtedly a competitor. In a Grand Guignol spectacle, Mario rapes the youngest daughter to 'protect' her from Dracula's thirst and finally dismembers the Count limb from limb. This climactic

ending highlights the overthrown power of the bourgeois past and the frailty of our Old World monsters in postmodern times and as the final shot closes, we discover what we had (nervously) suspected all along: Dracula is left to be a victim and it is Mario, the film's Van Helsing figure, who has always been the true monster.

One must not expect this Dracula film to be a remake of the Hammer Horror template. The film lacks the stylisations of Hammer classics while it overtly (and ridiculously) sexualises every possible scene with Dallesandro and the women. While I must confess to enjoying the ridiculous nature of the 'Costume Films' of Paul Morrissey, this film does lack a particular visual beauty, which we have come to expect in costume Dracula films. Moreover, Kier's Dracula is often childlike, a master who is so co-dependant on his servant's common knowledge that it often translates as a child/parent relationship. It is also worth noting the ridiculous overacting: Kier's overly dramatic speech and movements are often exhausting and Dallesandro's Brooklyn accent is hilariously out of place in the film's rural Italian setting. Perhaps, for these reasons and more, the film is primarily of note as a form of titillating pomp 'horror' – for which Warhol would expect nothing less than full credit. The film is both intreresting and mildly shocking for a Warhol novice, and simply delightful for the Morrissey fan, but ultimately one can approach this film both with a serious mind to explore the changing role of Dracula in popular culture and as a filmic celebration of the ludicrous.

Sorcha Ní Fhlainn

Isolation (Dir. Billy O'Brien 2005)

One of the anxieties tapped in Billy O'Brien's low-budget horror film Isolation is the fear of scientific experimentation. The theme was first reflected in Mary Shelly's novel, Frankenstein: The Modern Prometheus, in 1818, and has become increasingly relevant in today's world of cloned sheep and genetically modified crops. Isolation repeats this mistrust of scientific inquiry devoid of ethical sensibility first depicted in Frankenstein .

The story is set in a rural Ireland of incessant rain and gloomy skies that has not seen any benefit in the recent economic recovery. Dan O'Reilly (John Lynch) lives alone on the family dairy farm and is in debt. He agrees to allow a scientist (Marcel Iures) to run a fertility experiment on his cattle under the supervision of the local vet, Orla (Essies Davis), who is also Dan's ex-girlfriend. As Dan waits for the incipient arrival of the calf which is a product of the experimental treatment, a caravan parks by his property. Inside are the young traveller Jamie (Sean Harris) and his girlfriend Mary (Ruth Negga). They're hiding out from Mary's family, and need a sanctuary. Dan is hostile to them at first, but later enlists Jamie's help in the middle of the night when the cow goes into labour.

There have been plenty of signs that the experiment has not been going well. The calf bites Orla's hand while it is still in the womb, adding a new twist on the vagina dentata phobia. John, the scientist, is shifty in his dealings with both Dan and Orla, and tight-fisted with the promised cash that Dan needs so badly. Once the calf arrives, Orla recognises that it is deformed. She kills it and performs an autopsy. During the messy and bloody examination of the entrails Orla discovers that the calf has been born pregnant, but the babies are malformed chitinous creatures. As Orla hurries away to conduct tests and consult John, one of the mutants creeps away, unnoticed.

What follows is an escalation of tension and action as the creature infects other cattle on the farm, mutates further, and proceeds to hunt down the farm's inhabitants. It results in a showdown in which Mary must scramble through mucky confined passages under the floor of the milking house to kill the slithering chittering monster before it escapes the isolation of the farm.

O'Brien eschews the recent trend in horror movies, which attempts to offset tension with moments of humour, by making a straight-up moody horror film. There are similarities in style and narrative to both Ridley Scott's Alien (1979), and John Carpenter's The Thing (1982), but O'Brien builds his own credible and claustrophobic atmosphere in Isolation, and directs it with confidence.

The film exhibits careful casting choices. All the actors do a fine job with the strong material O'Brien has written for them. In particular Marcel Iures was an inspired choice for this film's Victor Frankenstein. He's European, obsessive, and devious, and thus, firmly tied into the iconic figure of the mad scientist. Ruth Negga proves again that she is one of Ireland's rising stars with her performance in the film.

The location is eerie, and is used effectively to add to the sense of an unknown menace lurking around every barn, with large halls, wet flapping plastic, and water pounding on tin roofs and mucky fields. In one memorable scene Dan has to drive his tractor into a deep pool of slurry, in which anything might dart out to latch onto him.

O'Brien also proves that he understands a key element to successful monster movies: less is more. The FX are kept to a well-judged minimum. There are flashes of the creature, sufficient to evoke fear, but not enough to prompt mirth or the realisation that it's really a collection of plastic and resin. Instead O'Brien relies on increasing the action as the film progresses, and is unafraid to revel in blood and gore at appropriate moments. This is an example of a director who understands the conventions of horror filmmaking, and most importantly enjoys the genre.

There are weaknesses, such as an under-explained background to the experiments, and flimsiness to some characterisation. Yet, in the last half an hour of the film, as the characters scramble to survive the mutant creature, such thoughts are absent. The film cleverly exploits fears of infection, worries about fertility, and the ever-present dread of the unknown thing that resides in dark corners.

At the Fantastic Fest in Austin, Texas at the end of September 2006, Isolation won Best Director, Best Picture, and Best Cinematography in the Horror Jury Awards, and was placed second in the audience awards. The prizes are a well-deserved recognition of the effort Billy O'Brien and his team put into creating the film.

One can only hope that in the future other Irish filmmakers will be able to forge our long tradition of supernatural storytelling with the visual medium to create more quality horror films like Isolation.

Maura McHughThe Proposition (Dir: John Hillcoat)
Tartan Video (18) Out now

Nick Cave's strength as a storyteller has long been evident in his musical output, and it is a skill that he again puts to good use in The Proposition, his second script for director John Hillcoat. Their first collaboration was Ghosts…of the Civil Dead (1988), a low-budget futuristic horror set in the confines of a prison, populated by brutal criminals. The Proposition is a more restrained, sophisticated and subtle film in almost every respect. The premise is simple: recently relocated from England to a post in the outback, Captain Stanley (Ray Winstone) has been entrusted with the task of civilising the land and suppressing rebellious factions of the population (both settler and Aboriginal). The film opens with his capture of two of the notorious Burns brothers, members of a gang of outlaws who are responsible for the vicious murder of the Hopkins family. In the wake of this attack, the middle brother Charlie (Guy Pearce) has actually parted company with the gang, taking his younger brother Mikey (Richard Wilson) with him, but he is now faced with the titular proposition: locate and kill the gang's leader, his elder brother Arthur (Danny Huston), or condemn his younger brother to the gallows. What follows is a dark study of fraternal loyalty and morality; an examination of man's inhumanity to man; and a meditation on the brutality of the class, national and racial conflicts that laid the foundations of the Australian nation.

The film has most widely been described as an Australian Western, with its outback setting in the 1880s and its double-stranded story that pits the law-enforcer Stanley against the lawless Burns brothers and the indigenous Aboriginal population. Director John Hillcoat has written and spoken widely on his long-held desire to adapt the genre within an Australian context, and the film is commendable for its complex depiction of the relationships between these population groups and of divisions within them in the years leading up to the emergence of Australia as a commonwealth. However, with its brooding and oppressive atmosphere, distinctive brand of Old Testament imagery and judgement, and depiction of a harsh and alien landscape, it also has affinities with the gothic tradition that has manifested itself most famously in the American South (for example, in the writings of William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor). Traces of this tradition are littered throughout Cave's back catalogue (in particular on Henry's Dream and The Murder Ballads), as well as in his only novel to date (And the Ass Saw the Angel, first published in 1989): equally, it informs The Proposition's twisted morality tale, in which a tale of bloody retribution is played out in a harsh and oppressive setting.

The desert has proven a rich gothic landscape in Australian literature and film throughout the last century: even in such crowd-pleasing comedies as Crocodile Dundee and The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert it has featured as a potentially disturbing and unwelcoming space, and in Australian horror movies such as Wolf Creek the outback has been utilised as the site of unbearable human suffering. Similarly, it dominates The Proposition, and is captured memorably by director of photography Benoît Delhomme. The film is beautifully shot: the harsh browns and yellows of the exterior shots contrast starkly with the washed-out blues and greens of the interiors of

the Stanley homestead: this location provides some of the most striking shots, in particular of their cultivated garden, lost in the vast, inscrutable landscape which engulfs it. Throughout the film, the desert functions as an unknowable space at the heart of a continent, mirroring the hearts of darkness that both Stanley and Charlie Burns are forced to confront in the course of the film.

The film's strength lies in its fundamental moral ambiguity. It is viewed through the eyes of two anti-heroes, Captain Stanley and Charlie Burns, both of whom are faced with the prospect of doing the 'wrong' thing for their own interpretation of the 'right' reasons, and by the end of the film both men will have confronted the devastating repercussions of their respective attempts to do right. The film manages to blur such binaries as 'right and wrong' and 'civilised and barbaric' throughout: for example, it is the most refined characters (the local landowner Eden Fletcher, played by David Wenham) and Martha Stanley who are responsible for the film's most violent sequence when they ill-advisedly order that Mikey be whipped (thus setting things up for the film's disturbing final act). Equally, Danny Huston's Arthur is first established as an eloquent and almost enlightened soul long before we see him in action as the bloodthirsty killer that Stanley has described him to be.

Considering the bloodthirstiness and brutality that pervades The Proposition, the film demonstrates considerable restraint in the scenes of violence that punctuate the narrative. This is most evident in the pivotal scene in which Mikey is whipped: there is just one brief glimpse of his shredded back after less than half of the proposed one hundred lashes, while the rest of the scene focuses on the blood-spattered faces of the increasingly silent and repulsed spectators, on the sodden whip itself, and on the puddle of blood which collects on the ground. Elsewhere, the violence remains bubbling under the surface (as in Charlie's early scene with bounty-hunter Jellon Lamb, played by John Hurt in a startling cameo), or is depicted off-screen. The bloodiest moments are implied through reaction shots and sound effects, and crucially, the event that provides the immediate context for the film – the attack on the Hopkins homestead – is never shown. As the film hurtles towards its devastating final reel, it erupts into action in the climactic scenes at the Stanley homestead, and the full ramifications of Stanley's proposition are revealed.

All in all, Hillcoat and Cave have delivered a complex and unsettling film that lingers in the memory long after the credits roll. With excellent performances from Guy Pearce, Ray Winstone and Danny Huston in particular, a haunting and affecting score by Cave and Warren Ellis, and an impressive two-disc set, this proposition is one worth considering.

DVD extras: Two documentaries ('Making Of The Proposition' and 'Meet the Cast and Crew'); Exclusive interviews with Guy Pearce and Danny Huston; Theatrical trailer; Feature-length commentary with John Hillcoat and Nick Cave

Jenny McDonnell

HORRORTHON: TERROR IN THE AISLES (1998 to Present)

How did it all begin? Believe it or not, it all began in my house back in 1994. As a child growing up I adored the horror film. It was such a rush to be thrilled and put oneself in the skin of the victim for ninety minutes. It was such a rush that I knew one day I'd end up working within the horror genre and making horror films. Myself, my cousins and my friends would get together on numerous weekends watching ten to fifteen horror films starting on a Friday night right through to Sunday. It was so much fun that I decided I wanted to take it to the next level. My friend Derek O'Connor suggested that I should talk to Pete Walsh in the Irish Film Institute and create Ireland's first and only horror film festival. So, with the help of my friend and festival co-director Michael Griffin, we got the wheels turning.

Ironically, Pete in the IFI was considering bringing over a festival in the U.K. called Phantasm (named after the film, I gather) but after speaking to him I convinced him that we didn't need to do this: I could programme what started as a one-day event, and is now a four-day festival. My goal was to give an entire younger generation a chance to see a film that hadn't been allowed video due to the BBFC banning many films during the whole video nasty era: that film was The Texas Chain Saw Massacre. I knew one screening in a 260-seater cinema was not going to be enough, and I was right: three days before the screening, it had sold out. I suggested that we needed to do a second late-night screening, which we did, due to the fact that some publication had booked 150 tickets for the first show. This was something I had never heard of before, especially with a 25-year-old film. However, it proved a point: the horror film had been neglected in Ireland. Considering that the most famous horror story of all time – Dracula – was written by an Irish man, Bram Stoker, it seemed odd that nobody in Ireland was doing festivals or making horror films. This was 1998 and it was the start of my professional career within the genre.

Over the years, Horrorthon has grown beautifully. When one creates something it's like watching a child grow up and seeing how different it is with each passing year. It's always a great pleasure to be greeted and thanked by festival-goers for doing it: that means more than anything and out of this I have made plenty of new friends personally and professionally. To say what the best year was, hmm? My own personal favourite was 2001. For the first time I had a great guest over, Brian Yuzna of Re-Animator and Society fame. It was such a hit with the audience and I was showing his new movie Faust: Love of the Damned. I also had what I felt was the best year in terms of programming. When would you get a year where every major horror director had a new film out? 2001 had John Carpenter's Ghosts of Mars, George A. Romero's Bruiser, Dario Argento's Sleepless, Jack Sholder's Arachnid and the surprise film was The Others. It also had some great retrospectives: Mario Bava's Blood and Black Lace, Robin Hardy's The Wicker Man and a 70mm screening of John Carpenter's The Thing. God, that was some year! Premiering my own produced feature film Dead Meat in 2003 was also a great buzz. In fact, I owe a lot to Brian Yuzna who I considered my mentor when producing my first film. He gave me a lot of great tips and advice that was all invaluable.

Since then, the festival has had some great films and guests. We had Danny Boyle and the cast over for 28 Days Later; we gave Rob Zombie's House of 1000 Corpses it's only ever Irish screening and Ruggero Deodato came last year for the 25th-anniversary screening of his notorious film Cannibal Holocaust. It

was the first ever screening in Ireland and I found Ruggero to be a very kind and sincere Italian gentleman. One would look at the film and then look at him and never put two and two together! So, here's an inside story I'll share with you. When I told Ruggero that Cannibal Holocaust had sold out, holding his hand up to his forehead, he said "Oh no, oh my God the animals!" Since the film is not recommended for vegetarians I understood immediately what he had meant. I reassured him by saying "Everybody here tonight knows what this film is, there will be no problem." He and his partner Valentina then joined everybody in the foyer for drinks before the screening and then I had the pleasure of experiencing something that doesn't normally happen. I sat right beside Ruggero watching Cannibal Holocaust twenty-five years after the film was originally made. Normally filmmakers never watch their films again because by the time it's all done and dusted they are normally sick of them. But Ruggero obviously wanted to see how an Irish audience reacted. So, he sat right next to me and towards the end of the screening when all hell breaks loose in the final reel, Ruggero turned to me, held his hand up and, referring to the violence, said: "It's terrible!" Michael and I have said it before and will say it again – "It could only happen in Horrorthon". True, but without those who attend every year it wouldn't happen at all, and I thank you deeply for that!

Ed King (http://horrorthon.com/)

Horrorthon 2006: Or, what does one do with 50 free Kit-Kats?

As the Horrorthon approaches its tenth anniversary, it's clear from the entertainment provided by this year's festival that the event is going from strength to strength. After a program last year which was in places a little lacklustre, it was reassuring to see a much more promising line-up this time round. Indeed, a sure sign of the organisers' confidence was the fact that this year's festival began a day earlier than usual, with the Irish premiere of the hit Korean monster-movie-with-a-conscience *Host*, which by all accounts lived up to its promising reputation, followed by Bernard Rose's (*Candyman*) new film *Snuff Movie*.

Things got into full swing on Friday, as the mayhem kicked off with a screening of *Friday the Thirteenth Part 2*. Next came Mary Lambert's underrated 1990s hit *Pet Sematary*, unusual in itself for being one of the very few mainstream horror movies directed by a woman. For the first half hour or so, the film is actually quite good, despite the fact that leading man Dale Midkiff has only two expressions (both of them variations on mild befuddlement). However, as pets (and small children) are successively crushed by monster trucks, things just get sillier and sillier, and protagonist Dr Creed comes across more as the dumbest man alive rather than the grieving father rather effectively portrayed in Stephen King's source novel. Still, the evil cat was quite menacing, and any film in which a distinctly non-scary toddler has to pretend to be a soulless zombie is worth a look.

Pet Sematary was followed by another film in which a doctor decides rather unwisely to up sticks and move to the countryside: Anders Banke's hit Swedish vampire flick *Frostbiten* (*Frostbite*) which proved to be one of the best films of the weekend. From the eye-catching opener in which Scandinavian Nazis try to fight off blood-sucking peasants to the refreshingly grim conclusion, *Frostbiten* was a delight from start to finish, and found time to include idiotic teenagers, talking dogs, a hilarious "meet the parents" type scenario in which a family pet comes to a bloody end, and the first "death by gnome" that I've ever seen.

Friday's proceedings came to a suitably gory end with a rare showing of Lamberto Bava's *Demons*, which the director himself introduced. Completely ridiculous, outrageously sexist and deliriously gory as it was, *Demons* was still an enjoyably over-the-top ninety minutes, even if it did, rather confusingly, star badly dubbed Italian actors pretending to be American whilst starring in a film apparently set in Berlin. Featuring the most stereotypical 1980s soundtrack ever (including songs by Rick Springfield and Motorhead, surely the first time the two have ever been in such close proximity), a fast-thinking pimp who seems to have walked in out of a Blaxploitation movie, and the most unlikely appearance of a helicopter ever, *Demons* went down a treat with the audience, and if nothing else, no matter how incoherent, still made more sense than the woeful *Demons 2*.

By Saturday, the hardcore elements in the crowd had amassed at least a dozen free Kit-Kat's each, and Horrorthon-induced blood clots were beginning to take hold. One of the few outright duds of the weekend was the dire Welsh-set *Darklands*, here shown in a special cut reedited by director Julian Richards. He really shouldn't have bothered: *Darklands* was dull, silly, and ill-conceived from start to finish, and had the look of a particularly tedious ITV drama. It's amazing that Anthony Schaffer, writer of the *The Wickerman*, didn't sue, as this was such a poorly-executed rip-off of his much superior film which merely substituted evil Scottish Pagans for evil Welsh nationalists. The only disturbing thing about this flop was the scene in which 'star' Craig Fairbass is doped up and greased with baby oil so that he can father the new messiah ala *Rosemary's Baby*.

Thankfully, after a rather clichéd, 'girls around the campfire menaced by psychopath' opening, Jack Ketchum adaptation *The Lost* was a much more effective and accomplished effort. The tale of a small-town psycho (who even works in a motel) perpetually on the verge of a complete breakdown, *The Lost* proceeded to a brutal, genuinely disturbing climax which owed something to the similarly downbeat classic *Witchfinder General*.

The second screening of Showtime's *Masters of Horror* series (introduced by series producer Andrew Deane) proved to be a strong one, featuring as it did the shorts "Family" (by John Landis) and "Pelts" by Dario Argent. "Family" was a witty, morbid tale of madness and obsession set in the suburbs which briskly proceeded to a slightly predictable but gruesomely enjoyable 'biter-bit' style ending, whilst Argent's contribution was much stronger than his previous *Masters of Horror* offering, *Jennifer*. Starring Meatloaf as a shady fur merchant who acquires magical racoon pelts, the film showcased Argent's abilities to effectively combine sex, sadism and gore, and climaxed with an unforgettable scene in which Meatloaf met a suitably ironic fate, which I can't reveal here without ruining the story for those who haven't seen it. Definitely not one for the faint-hearted!

As is by now traditional, Saturday's screenings were rounded off by a camp classic, *Jaws* rip-off *Grizzly*, which featured the least menacing killer bear of all time, but did provide one of the best exchanges of dialogue of the whole festival, which went as follows:

Square-jawed Park Ranger: "Only one person can tell it like it is, and that's little Bobby."

Dopey Girlfriend: "You mean he's alive?!"

Ranger: "Part of him is."

Sunday probably featured the strongest line-up of the weekend, opening with a screening of the highly entertaining Hammer classic *Countess Dracula*, which featured more ridiculous moustaches and conveniently topless dead servant girls than you could shake a stake at. It was followed by another *Masters of Horror* anthology: this time of *Machinist* director Brad Anderson's *Sounds Like*, (which I didn't get a chance to see myself, but which was according to reports somewhat underwhelming), and of Takeshi Miike's controversial *Imprint*, shown on the *Bravo* channel here some months ago, but banned from television on the United States, for reasons that soon became clear during the screening. Miike can generally be counted upon to produce something unforgettable (his earlier film *Ichi the Killer*, a truly bonkers Yakuza/Horror flick, went down a treat at this festival a couple of years ago) and *Imprint* was no exception. Starting off as an unusual historical drama about the relationship between a mysterious American abroad and a Japanese prostitute, things soon became increasingly surreal and violent. Featuring a truly horrific torture sequence, stomach-churningly realistic abortion scenes and a genuinely bizarre denouement, it was certainly one of the most talked about movies of the Horrorthon.

Continuing this years pleasing tendency to showcase genre classics, Sunday afternoon also brought a showing of George A. Romero's groundbreaking *Night of the Living Dead*, the most influential Zombie movie ever made. Though unsurprisingly creaky in places, and at times even a little dull (or maybe my chocolate-only diet was beginning to catch up on me), the film still has a stark, uncompromising energy to it, particularly in the opening and closing scenes, and it's not difficult to see why unsuspecting kiddies who were accidentally shown the film during matinee screenings in the 1960s

would have been very freaked out by what they saw. Maybe *Dawn of the Dead* could be screened next year and *Day of the Day* the year after?!

The surprise film is always one of the best attended and most eagerly anticipated events of the Horrorthon, if not always of particularly high quality, and much of the fun of the weekend comes from trying to guess what will be shown. Indeed, Horrorthon stalwarts will recall with fondness the moment a couple of years ago when, just as a scheduled screening of another film was due to take place, the projectionist accidentally put on the wrong opening reel and a chorus of delighted geeks, realising that the cat had been let out of the bag, shouted "It's *The Machinist*!". This year's surprise film, *See no Evil* starred charisma-free wrestler and Tor Johnson look-alike Jacob Goodnight as 'Kane', a monosyllabic crazy (with predictable mother-issues) who dispatches idiotic teenagers in an old rundown hotel (which looked just like the hotel in Tobe Hooper's similarly woeful *Toolbox Murders* remake). Though it seemed to go down well with many in the audience, it was a derivative, tedious and formulaic ninety minutes, and I think that the closing scene, in which a dog pissed in the dead killer's eye sockets, was a metaphor for what hack director Gregory Dark had just put the non-wrestling fans in the audience through.

My personal favourite of the whole Horrorthon, and possibly the best film of the weekend, was Guillermo Del Toro's justly acclaimed fantasy-thriller *Pan's Labyrinth*. Set in Fascist Spain during the 1940s, the film tells the story of a book-loving little girl who escapes into a rich fantasy world in order to evade her brutal Stepfather, a Captain in Franco's forces. Whilst the sequences in which the young heroine descends into Pan's underground kingdom and meets all manner of magical (and sinister) creatures are well rendered and striking, it was the scenes set in the 'real' world above ground which ultimately proved to be the most horrific and the most heartbreaking. The film was enthralling from start to finish, and the poignant climax in which both worlds violently come together was genuinely affecting.

As is traditional, Monday kicked off with a couple of documentaries for the truly hard-core genre enthusiasts in the crowd. *Going to Pieces* was apparently a fascinating and extremely well-researched look at the rise of the Slasher movie, whilst *Ban the Sadist Videos 2* was a well-received follow-up to last years look at the 1980s 'video nasty' phenomenon.

Fittingly enough then, the film which followed, *Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon* was an at times genuinely amusing mockumentary which affectionately spoofed the Slasher genre, and in particular the trope of the 'Final' or 'survivor' girl. Though initially owing much to 1990s Belgian hit *Man Bites Dog* (another film in which a camera crew record the exploits of a serial killer and become complicit in his crimes), thankfully *Behind the Mask* distinguished itself by means of an agreeably flippant tone, and an ending which featured a somewhat predictable but thoroughly enjoyable twist. And what horror fan couldn't help but admire a film in which Robert Englund imitates Donald Pleasance in *Halloween* and Zelda Rubenstein (the diminutive medium from *Poltergeist*) meets a gory end?

Monday's offering from Hammer was the deeply dated Terence Fisher film *The Devil Rides Out*, notable mainly for Christopher Lee's great goatee, lots of plummy English accents, and a hilariously inept giant-spider attack that was even less convincing than the giant bear in *Grizzly*. Korean ghost story/psychological thriller *Cello* was very disappointing indeed: a dull, derivative and ultimately quite silly variation upon *Jacob's Ladder* (something which the 2002 surprise film *Dead End* did with a great deal more style and energy). The most disturbing thing about this movie was the fact that someone vomited in the cinema entrance during the opening credits (no doubt due to the vast amount of free junk

food on offer during the day) thus blocking off the main exit (and preventing escape) for most of the film as IFI staff bravely endeavoured to clear up the mess.

Finally, Horrorthon 2006 concluded with a thoroughly enjoyable screening of Tobe Hooper's *Poltergeist*. Well, I say Hooper (it's his name on the credits), but as many other critics have previously pointed out, the opening thirty minutes or so, set as they are in an idyllic, child-centred suburban paradise, have executive producer Steven Spielberg's fingerprints all over them. Indeed, for a while one wouldn't be surprised if E.T. waddled into frame at any moment. I'd forgotten just how funny the opening third of the film is (at least once I put out of my mind the depressing fact that the two young girls in the film, Dominique Dunne and Heather O'Rourke, both died tragically young in real life), which makes it all the more alarming when giant trees start coming to life. Mind you, as my brother noted, if Robbie found the tree so scary at night why didn't he just close the curtains? Hooper's influence begins to manifest itself at this point, as the children's bedroom becomes a swirling vortex of evil and little Carol Anne gets sucked into another dimension by the 'TV People'. There are also some surprisingly gory sequences (although, as a colleague pointed out, the pop-up corpses seem to have been borrowed from *The Raiders of the Lost Ark*). *Poltergeist*, like *Jaws* last year, was a real crowd-pleaser and a highly fitting way to finish Horrorthon 2006.

Ultimately, this was one of the strongest Horrorthon line-ups I've ever sat through, and one can only hope that with the much-anticipated tenth anniversary the festival continues to thrive. Though it coincides with the weekend of the Dublin City marathon, I know which endurance test I'd rather attempt again next year. With thanks to Eoin Murphy, Lizzy McCarthy, Emma Croot, Sorcha Ni Fhlainn, Jenny McDonnell, Dara Downey, Maria Parsons, and everyone else who risked deep-vein thrombosis to brave the Horrorthon Experience…

Bernice M. Murphy

A Touch of Frostbite

An Interview with Swedish Vampire Filmmakers Anders Banke and Magnus Paulsson

Without a doubt, one of the biggest crowd-pleasers of Horrorthon 2006 was the hilariously droll Swedish vampire movie *Frostbiten*(or *Frostbite*). We were fortunate enough to be granted a brief interview with Director Anders Banke and Producer Magnus Paulsson, who took time out from their busy film-watching schedule to discuss topics such as the difficulties in getting a Horror film made in Sweden, the effects of perpetual darkness upon the human psyche, and the reason why so many small animals meet a nasty fate in their first feature-length film…. (Those yet to see the movie should note that this interview contains some spoilers).

Murphy: This is the first Swedish vampire film – indeed the first Swedish horror film – that I've ever seen. Are you a one-off?

Magnus Paulsson: The audience is there, but the will to make such films, especially if one needs state financial support, is not. This is the first Swedish vampire film in the history of cinema, and the first horror film to be given support by the Swedish film institute since it was founded in 1964.

McCarthy: Does Swedish film making generally then look down upon films of this type?

Paulsson: Yes, I think there is a tradition amongst the establishment that they are supposed to look down on genre movies.

Banke: I call it cultural fascism.

Paulsson: Which is what it is.

Banke: They have a very narrow view of what is culture and what is not, and to what to them isn't culture shouldn't be supported. And since Swedish is such a small language, most films need some state support. So of course the film makers who want to make films adapt to the existing market. They make a hell of a lot of drama, some police films, and a few comedies. Hopefully it's beginning to change.

McCarthy: I'm sorry to do this, but I'm going to have to mention Ingmar Bergman. The best Swedish horror film I've ever seen is Bergman's *Hour of the Wolf* – I don't even know if you would consider it a horror movie. Because Bergman is such an iconic figure, do you think that he is in some way responsible for the fact that Swedish film makers are now associated with a certain type of film?

Banke: I haven't seen that film in a very long time. Is it a horror movie?

McCarthy: That's how it was marketed to the English-speaking audience.

Banke: Wasn't "My Summer with Monica" marketed as some sort of sex film in the United States? The story of a bad girl?! I can see why they'd try to market other films in the same way, to make them more commercial. Where our film stands in relation to that one, I wouldn't know. In the 1960s, just after the Swedish Film Academy was established, for the first year or two the criteria used to admit new students were designed to favour people who psychologically resembled Bergman as closely as possible. Bergman rules, and there could be nothing else, so for a year or two at least, the questions would be along the lines of, "Do you have doubts about God? Do you have a conflicted relationship with your parents?", and so

they seriously tried to find people as close to Bergman as possible. Of course, once such students left the film school, they tended to do quite badly. That's the level of narrow-mindedness that has existed in Sweden for some time.

McCarthy: To make a vampire film these days is quite a brave move, as the Hollywood vampire has been defanged in recent decades: he's cute, he's someone to love, to feel sorry for.

Banke: I agree that there aren't that many vampire films now. I don't know why that is, they're fascinating.

Murphy: Where there any existing vampire films which you watched and thought, "Ok, I like that", or "I'll avoid that" – films which influenced you during the making of *Frostbiten*?

Banke: The reason we made a vampire film was first of all because we are genre buffs from way back, but secondly because we received a very good script that happened to feature vampires.

Paulsson: It was very, very funny.

Banke: That's what caught our attention.

Murphy: There's a real deadpan quality to the film… Do you have a vendetta against small animals? Because there are a lot of dead pets in the film!

Banke: (Laughs) We had one extra scene in which we did really bad things to another small creature, but we cut that out.

Paulsson: That will be in the special edition. It's been shot.

Murphy: You can put "Even more animal mutilation !" on the cover.

Banke: I find small dogs irritating, but I have a cat. We don't do anything bad to cats in this film. I actually had a white bunny rabbit when I was little, exactly like the one in the film. I didn't bite its head off, of course...

Murphy: I was hoping the rabbit in this film would become a vampire.

Banke: Well, we actually planned a scene with the little dog who became a vampire, the one that talks to Sebastian, in which the dog is running about on the ceiling, slagging him off, but we ran out of money and time towards the end of the shoot and thought, "we can lose that!".

Murphy: The film has quite an open-ended conclusion. Was this to make a sequel possible?

Banke: No, that was nothing to do with the wish for a sequel, but was actually a homage to Polanski's *The Fearless Vampire Killers*, in which the heroes survive, and escape, but actually spread the virus all over the world. Here, the family escapes, but two thirds of them are vampires.

Murphy: It's a reassuringly un-Hollywood ending.

Banke: It never occurred to us to have a Hollywood-style ending. It would just be stupid to us.

McCarthy: The darkness factor in this film, the whole idea of setting a vampire film in a place that is perpetually dark - it's a very interesting idea.

Murphy: Yes, have you read the Graphic novel 'Thirty Days of Night' which has a similar premise?

Paulsson: Yup, I read it recently, actually. It's quite good.

Banke: I know there are people on the internet who will say "Oh, they're just copying Thirty Days of Night", but we actually got the script back in 1999, which is long before the comic book was released. I haven't read it yet. Our script writer is from the far north of Lapland, where they have a whole month of darkness every year, so it was based upon his experiences of that.

Murphy: People here in Ireland might have only the vaguest idea of this concept; they may have heard of the Norwegian film Insomnia (set during a time of perpetual daylight), but that's about it. But this literally means that you will have thirty days in a row of darkness. How do people survive?

Banke: You have to be born there to survive it. We come from southern Sweden: it takes us a whole day to travel north. It's pretty strange to us… we shot the exteriors up north, and the interiors in a studio in the south.

McCarthy: Two very quick questions before we let you go: one is about Swedish horror, on which I've carried out a quick investigation…

Banke: It must have been a very short investigation!

McCarthy: Yes, it was! It seems like most Swedish horror films to date have been comedy horror, as in films such as "Evil Ed" and "Camp Slaughter".

Banke: This is how small the Swedish horror community is: *Evil Ed*'s special effects guy did our special effects , and the lead actor in that film played the young Beckert in the opening scenes of *Frostbiten*!

McCarthy: So there are a lot of connections.

Banke: Yes, it's a small community.

Murphy: Do you have hopes that the film will be an international hit along the lines of last year's Russian success *Nightwatch*?

Banke: Yes, indeed, we're getting a British and Irish release – on the eight of December, I think – and the film is currently number one in the independent films chart in Russia. We're also being released in Turkey, Malaysia, Singapore…. Did the humour in the film translate?

Murphy: Absolutely, especially the film's very wry, sarcastic strain of humour. I think that's a very Irish trait as well…

Banke: Yes, I think that Scandinavia, Canada, the UK, all Northern countries have the same type of humour.

Murphy: Finally, do you have plans to make any more genre films in Sweden?

McCarthy: A Swedish western perhaps?

Paulsson: Yes! That's one of a number of projects we're looking at.

Banke: Yes, we have about seven projects lined up at the moment: they're all very different. We will find one to develop, and try to get funding for it. We don't just want to work within the Swedish market: *Frostbiten* has shown that it's possible to make this type of genre film in Sweden, in Swedish, when beforehand people would say, "Do it in English, you'll earn so much more money."

Paulsson: Now we've proven that it's possible to do it here. *Frostbite*n is by far the biggest-selling Swedish film this year. We've done very well internationally.

Frostbiten will be released in Ireland and the UK in December. We would like to thank Anders and Magnus for kindly agreeing talk to us, and wish them all the best with this and with future projects. Thanks also to Ed King for facilitating this interview.

Bernice M. Murphy and Elizabeth McCarthy