FILM REVIEWS

Thirst

(Dir. Park Chan-wook) Korea, 2009
CJ Entertainment, Korea with Focus Features, USA

From the chillingly beautiful Swedish vampire child of *Let the Right One In* (Dir. Tomas Alfredson, 2008) to the all-American undead of Catherine Hardwicke's *Twilight* franchise, vampires are clearly in vogue once again. Yet what director can cook up anything genuinely new with this weary stake-and-crypts cliché in a post-Dracula, post-Buffy universe? South Korean director Chan-wook Park (previously best known for his critically acclaimed 'Vengeance' trilogy) has pulled it off with *Thirst* (2009), the beautifully filmed tale of a Korean Catholic priest enduring the physical and ethical turmoil of vampirism. I can hardly put it better than did one fan on *Thirst*'s Facebook page: 'A Korean vampire movie…how cool is that!'

Of course, Park's connection between the Catholic ceremony of communion and the vampire's blood-garnered immortality is not original: Alan Ryan's 1982 short story *Following the Way*, to give just one example, implies that all Jesuits are immortal vampires ('"This is the cup of My blood… Take and drink of it"'). What is truly original is Park's use of a background not only of modern Asian evangelical Christianity but also of contemporary urban Korea. Significantly, there is no native Korean variant of the vampire legend. Park delights in revitalising Western tropes within a radically alien context (a previous film, *Oldboy* (2003), reframed the Oedipus legend in modern Seoul); and the greater part of *Thirst* is a darkly humorous Korean pastiche of Émile Zola's 1867 novel, the Gothic *Thérèse Raquin* (think adultery, murder, drowned bodies and a gooseberry-playing ghost).

Thirst's hero, a deeply spiritual Korean priest, Sang-hyun (Song Kang-ho), volunteers for medical martyrdom as a test subject for an antidote to a deadly African virus, which kills by causing multiple haemorrhages. Sang-hyun duly succumbs to the disease's symptoms, including disfiguring blisters, and passes away on the operating table during a blood transfusion. Moments later, inexplicably, he comes back to life, apparently cured. He returns to his parish in Seoul as "the bandaged priest" with a reputation for achieving miraculous cures. But Sang-hyun realizes that the transfused blood which saved his life has also infected him with vampirism; he gains supernatural strength, but craves human blood and scorches in sunlight. The virus, lurking in his bloodstream, returns unless he replenishes his vampire strength by drinking blood. Meanwhile, Madame Ra (Kim Hae-sook), the mother of Sang-hyun's childhood friend Kang-woo (Shin Ha-kyun), implores him to cure her son's cancer. When Kang-woo recovers, Sang-hyun becomes a regular visitor at Madame Ra's weekly mah-jong soirées (domino evenings in Zola's original). Here he meets and falls in love with Tae-ju (Kim Ok-vin), Kang-woo's fey, dissatisfied wife. From this point, the events of *Thirst* parallel Zola's Gothic narrative with fiendish accuracy, only occasionally distorted by the film's vampire sub-plot. Sang-hyun and Tae-ju make secret, passionate love in the Catholic hospital and in the recesses of Madame Ra's claustrophobic apartment. "It's not a sin for me, I'm not a Catholic", Tae-ju reassures her clerical lover. She is first disgusted, then enthralled by his vampirism; later, she tricks Sang-hyun into killing her husband by implying that the marks of self-harm on her body are wounds inflicted by the benignly imbecilic Kang-woo. As in *Thérèse Raquin*, the husband dies in a boating accident, the mother-in-law becomes a paralysed invalid, and the lovers move in to look after her and maintain her tradition of weekly at-homes. But Kang-woo's ghost spoils their idyll

by literally coming between them at every moment, even the most intimate. Sang-hyun and Tae-ju grow to hate each other. He kills her, but instantly repents and forces his own blood down the corpse's throat (all witnessed by the paralysed Madame Ra). Tae-ju is reborn as an inexorably vital undead. She despises Sang-hyun's practice of stealing donor blood (like Louis in Anne Rice's 1976 *Interview with the Vampire*, Angel in the television series of the same name, or the Cullen family in *Twilight*, Sang-hyun is the vampire equivalent of a vegetarian) and insists on killing fresh human prey. This predilection bodes ill for the mah-jong guests when Madame Ra attempts, more successfully than her French counterpart Madame Raquin, to expose the lovers' guilt. From this point the film's ending is inevitable (foreshadowed by Zola), but also internally meaningful and poignant.

Thirst is stitched up the middle like an autopsy subject: the documentary tone of the first part, with its emphasis on Christian passion and medical horror, jars with the tragicomic narrative of the Zola-dominated second half. But to dwell on the artificiality of this join would be to overlook Park's subtle homage to Zola's naturalism. The original *Thérèse Raquin* was intended by Zola to demonstrate the inevitability of human actions under certain predetermined conditions (boredom, sexual frustration, temptation), or, as he puts it in his Preface to the novel, to apply to 'living bodies the analytical method that surgeons apply to corpses'. Park's film is an equally naturalistic study of human responses to slightly more unnatural conditions (as before, plus vampirism): what is a vampire if not a corpse, after all? Meanwhile, almost in passing, Park undermines a few minor presuppositions, like the sanctity of the clergy. In an interview, Park admitted that he visualized *Thirst* as the story of a 'moral downfall' rather than a vampire flick: thus he deliberately picked a protagonist 'at the apex of human holiness or earnestness' in order to study his moral degeneration (see http://www.filminfocus.com/video/the_moral_vampire). Yet, as Sang-hyun develops from a holy ingénue into a multiple murderer, he never loses his original faith or the audience's sympathy. He accepts vampirism as an organic compulsion, stronger than God, but not stronger than his innate sense of humanity and justice. Although he loves Tae-ju, he admits that the impulse to compromise his vows by seducing her originates with his vampire side rather than plain old human lust. Even the prospect of vampirism corrupts: Sang-hyun's confessor, a saintly, blind old priest (In-hwan Park), begs vainly to be infected with vampire blood in order to see again. The film frequently borders on the distasteful or grotesque (for example, in the scene in which Song-hyun sucks blood from an unconscious patient's drip), but this is inevitable in the genre of Gothic naturalism. One of the most comically repulsive scenes (Madame Ra diagnosing her adored son's tummy trouble by sniffing his fart) is all too human.

While critics are keen to namecheck the influence of *Thérèse Raquin* on *Thirst*, they ignore the film's potential debt to a slightly later Zola novel, *La Faute de l'Abbé Mouret* (1875). Here, Zola's hero, the youthful, worshipful Abbé Mouret – who, like Sang-hyun, is obsessed with mortifying the flesh for spiritual profit – convalesces from a life-threatening illness under the care of a naïve, free-spirited local girl, Albine. Together, they discover the edenic virtues of carnality. Like the lyrical rooftop courtship of Sang-hyun and Tae-ju, Albine and Mouret celebrate first love. But, as in *Thirst*, their idyll cannot survive beyond the boundaries of a very circumscribed Eden. The banal misogyny of Mouret's confessor, an elderly priest, echoes the venial preoccupations of Madame Ra and her circle of friends. Mouret's eventual retreat into the sanctity of the Church is bought at the cost of Albine's life. *Thirst* similarly re-evaluates the importance of conventional ethics, and the price paid by individuals to sustain others' illusions.

The acting throughout *Thirst* is exceptional: Kim Ok-vin, in her first film role, evolves convincingly from apathetic domestic helot to sociopathic seductress, while Song Kang-ho, having tangled with a man-eating mutant carp in another South Korean blockbuster, *The Host* (Dir. Bong Joon-hu, 2006), is no stranger to supernatural scenarios. *The Host* was the only South Korean film ever to be praised by the North Korean authorities, apparently because it blamed the American military for everything. Park's *Thirst* projects a more subtle warning against all external influence, from transfused blood to the Catholic faith. Yet *Thirst* itself transfuses much-needed new blood into the anaemic genre of the vampire movie.

Muireann Maguire

Colin
(Dir. Marc Price) UK 2008
Kaleidoscope (2009)

Much of the pre-publicity for this new British zombie film places great emphasis on the budget: forty-five pounds Sterling. As the director, Marc Price, has commented, this small amount was a lot more than he anticipated spending, hoping to make the film for very little, if not for free. This over-expenditure went on purchasing tea and biscuits for the zombie extras, a pack of mini-DV tapes, a crow-bar and jars of golden syrup and red food colouring to make fake blood. While these facts regarding the production provide a unique, ready-made hook upon which to sell the film, it also, more covertly, celebrates the achievement of *Colin* and, by doing so, brings the possibilities of low-budget filmmaking to the fore. The availability of reasonably priced quality digital video cameras and the inclusion of video editing software with both Window and Macintosh computers now potentially provides us all with the opportunity to make a film. As Price has proved with *Colin*, all that is required are imagination, creativity, and reasonable writing skills in order to use this technology to make a film of some standing. For his part, Price initially shot *Colin* on a five-year-old Panasonic mini-DV but this broke during the eighteen month shoot. The camera was replaced by a ten-year-old mini-DV and the subsequent footage edited on an old PC with out-of-date software. To compound all of this, Price wrote and edited the film while working the night-shift for a courier company.

Working with low-budgets often forces filmmakers to rule out certain genres and narratives and instead forces them to work with a limited cast, a limited crew and equally limited locations and effects. While these parameters may seem restrictive, they can often work to the benefit of the film itself, making the writer and director focus their narrative and work creatively with what is available in order to achieve a film of quality. With this in mind, choosing to make a zombie film – a genre which is heavy on zombie extras, requiring varied locations which should, preferably, be empty of people, and a whole host of realistic and gory effects – initially seems an ill-fated endeavour. Yet Price's debut film takes the genre and gives it new life by positioning the film from the titular zombie's perspective. The premise is this: for an unspecified reason, the undead are returning to life and consuming the flesh of the living. Zombies roam the streets as survivors either barricade themselves within their homes or form large groups to hunt down and slaughter the undead hordes. While fighting a zombie in his home, Colin (Alastair Kirton) is bitten and soon dies. Returning from the dead, he joins the undead masses and stumbles along the streets looking for flesh, encountering other zombies, violent survivors and, eventually, his sister (Daisy Aitkens). As Colin's undead life unfolds, fragments of his human life are revealed alongside the barbaric acts of the survivors, culminating in a film that subtly meditates on the emotional impact of death and subsequent mourning.

When I interviewed Price about the film on 10th September 2009, we discussed this sombre quality, with Price commenting that the way in which both he and the actors approached the film was to consider the zombies not as the traditional lumbering, flesh-eating monsters of popular cinema but more as if these were people with a terminal disease, one that has shut them off from their world in terms of memory and emotion. As a result of this, the scenes between Colin and his sister play out as a dialogue of dementia as one struggles to recognise the other in this new mental condition. Such a quality is amplified by the manner in which Colin is both presented and acted: from the first moments of his undead life the camera follows him through the streets, tracking his movements and recording the events and people he

encounters with a measured distance. His encounters with other zombies, survivors and the many lonely images of him staggering down empty streets, present Colin as a sympathetic creature, one far removed from the countless flesh-thirsty undead of George A. Romero's cinema and its countless imitators. And, while an obvious reference for a sympathetic zombie would be Bub from George A. Romero's *Day of the Dead* (1985), Price cited *King Kong* (1933) as a more direct influence:

"What I really liked about *King Kong* was the connection between Kong and the audience is only said between Kong and the audience… I thought that would be the way to go so the idea with *Colin* was to find ways to put on the audience the awareness of any danger that Colin would be in that the character wouldn't be aware of because of the of cognitive thought."

As the film draws towards its seemingly predictable end, this emotive quality comes blatantly to the fore: * * * * SPOILER BEGINS * * * * having stumbled from one increasingly dangerous incident to another (being attacked by two muggers who attempt to steal his trainers; a group of masked men who capture him at his sister's request, her sister's ruthless boyfriend), Colin staggers into a street and joins a shambling mass of the undead. As they all lurch mindlessly forward, a group of heavily armed survivors emerges and begins a lethal assault on the undead. As this 'battle' draws to its end, a makeshift bomb explodes, tearing half of Colin's face off. Left for dead, Colin lies in the gutter. The camera drifts way from him, seemingly implying he is, finally, dead yet his body stirs and he drags himself to his feet once more and stumbles off towards the film's melancholy end: stumbling into a house, Colin steadily begins to recognise details of his surroundings, eventually clawing his way upstairs to find a corpse. He sits down, his back to the body, looking out of the window as, in what may be a memory or merely a flashback for the audiences benefit, the body is revealed to be his girlfriend, a girl he had to kill for she too had become a zombie. With this end, the film makes clear Price's intentions:

"…[*Colin* is] about what it means to be human through the eyes of something that isn't human and that idea of Colin 'knowing' or just having a vague shadow of a memory of this connection with this girl at the end but not knowing what it is. It was really important when we got that shot of him kneeling next to the body that he not look at it. I remember saying to Alistair everything I want to do is have him look at it, pawing at it and not understanding but clearly trying to and that would be great but it's wrong because he wouldn't be able to. It's important that he doesn't do that because that makes everything so much more tragic."

* * * * SPOILER ENDS * * * *

Such a critique of the film implies that *Colin* is devoid of the prerequisite content of zombie cinema yet, in its own way and with its incredibly small budget, the film manages to include these defining moments: there are (seemingly) masses of zombies, grotesque scenes of flesh eating, survivors defending themselves either on the desolate streets with any available weaponry or within barricaded houses. People are pulled out through windows and eaten, a man simpering in the corner is attacked and eaten, a woman falls into a mass of zombies and is devoured, each deathly moment unfolding almost real-time as rotting hands claw at clothing and flesh to tear away warm and bloody chunks. Yet for all the gory spectacle, this content does not detract from the narrative's emotional core and, instead, competently grafts it on without detracting from these emotional resonances. This is perhaps because the deaths that are witnessed by both camera and audience are of those they have no knowledge of. They are simply anonymous citizens yet * * * * SPOILER BEGINS * * * * the deaths of the central characters – namely Colin, his sister and what can

be assumed to be Colin's girlfriend – * * * * SPOILER ENDS * * * * all take place off screen. Their deaths are private, quiet and unseen. There is no spectacle or celebration in these moments. Instead there is only loss and consequential mourning. Such is the effect of *Colin* that the film has the potential to mark the arrival of a new genre talent, with the film's narrative, images and subtext raising the question of what could Price do with a bigger budget.

Additional Information

Colin went on general release on 23rd October 2009 and was released on 26th October on DVD.

James Rose

Jennifer's Body
(Dir. Karyn Kusama) USA, 2009
20th Century Fox / Dune Entertainment

Despite its horror inflection, the second film written by Diablo Cody, is actually not much of a departure from her Oscar-winning *Juno* (2007), with a similar focus on high-school life and the female body. *Jennifer's Body* is told in flashback from a mental hospital to which Needy (Amanda Seyfried), a young woman with seriously violent tendencies, is confined. We learn that she was once the mousy best friend of the glamorous Jennifer (Megan Fox), the most popular girl in school (though she does seem only to hang around with Needy). We begin when Jennifer drags her friend to a concert by indie band Low Shoulder, who are performing in a bar on the outskirts of their small town. To the chagrin of her friend, Jennifer is fixated on hooking up with the band's lead singer (*The O.C.*'s Adam Brody) and, after the bar burns to the ground, abandons Needy and drives away in a van with the band. Later that night, in a scene with a wonderfully suspenseful build-up, a bloodied Jennifer arrives at Needy's house, eats some of her Mom's chicken and vomits torrents of black goo. Next day at school, she is seemingly her brassy self again. And then she starts seducing, killing and eating her male classmates. It is later revealed that Low Shoulder performed a satanic rite in a bid for fame and success which involved sacrificing Jennifer to the Devil. Since the ritual required a virgin, and the victim is played by Megan Fox, Jennifer was not killed but became a sort of demon who must eat people in order to stay vibrant.

Visually, the film's unyielding focus is Jennifer's body, while thematically it charts Needy's complicated, dependant relationship with her friend, and the tension that develops as the bodies mount. There is a solid emotional core to the friendship which is charmingly established by flashbacks to their childhood. The extent of their unequal dynamic is nicely suggested by a psychic connection Needy has with Jennifer (at certain points, Needy can "sense" what Jennifer is up to and where she is) but which does not appear to be reciprocal. At one point, Needy is distracted during lovemaking with her boyfriend Chip (Johnny Simmons), psychically sensing that Jennifer is killing another boy, a far more suggestive scene than one in which Jennifer and Needy kiss. The film flaunts a self-conscious knowingness about the voyeuristic nature of horror movies. In one sequence, a freshly sated Jennifer swims languidly the full length of a lake towards the camera and emerges like an amphibious predator from the water, fully naked. If, as has been pointed out by some theorists, voyeurism in its strict definition is disabled by such awareness, scopophilia certainly isn't – this scene and the film's other meta-cinematic strategies hardly disturb or interrogate with any conviction those impulses that lie at the heart of cinema, horror films and female representation. In fact, in many ways, *Jennifer's Body* is paradigmatic of that apathetic, ideologically passive/complicit brand of postmodern fiction.

Pop culture references (of which the title, taken from a song by Hole, is a slightly more obscure example) rigorously enforce a facetious tone throughout. One of the few genuinely distressing moments, in which a bound and gagged Jennifer whimpers as the band of Satanists advance on her, is rendered toothless by a reference to the American rock band Maroon 5. Not that relentless referencing isn't an accurate reflection of how people behave these days (I'm wearing my Iron Maiden T-shirt as I write this). But it's the uncomfortably Tarantino-esque nature of this tonal venting that gets to me. At least the audience is spared from watching Jennifer being raped, though in a more general way Cody's girls do seem to be informed by Tarantino's own weird fixation on dubiously empowered women. Nevertheless, *Jennifer's Body* handles the Tarantino influence quite well overall, and manages to contribute quite a bit of its own

aesthetic, which can't be said for the innumerable dreadful films that try their hand at mixing humour and violence; nor does *Jennifer's Body* display the sense of moral depravity that so often accompanies the mix. Also, the depiction of Low Shoulder's greed and popularity suggests that Cody is sensitive to cultural vacuity, or some of its manifestations.

Pop culture references are also put to thematic use, quite cleverly. The last sequence of the film, in which an empowered Needy seeks out the rock band that facilitated her friend's outrages, plays to a cover of Blondie's "In the Flesh". As well as playing on the various connotations of the word flesh, the song is covered by a male vocalist, which complicates the gender dynamics. Considering the film's unremittingly scopophilic agenda, the lyrics resonate perfectly: "Darling, I can't wait to see you. Your picture ain't enough; I can't wait to touch you in the flesh". The subject matter of indie bands ties in nicely here; a male dominated musical and cinematic terrain is subverted efficiently and satisfyingly.

I don't mean to invest this particular song too heavily with meaning, to the neglect of diegetic elements of *Jennifer's Body*. It's a risk Cody courts in a film this intertextual, with a setting as iconographically replete as the American high school. The film is wonderfully shot throughout; in one scene the camera is poised above a shadowy street, offering an extensive view of a young man tentatively searching for Jennifer – the sequence is tense, amusing and aesthetically pleasing all at once. Also, Megan Fox is excellent as Jennifer – perfectly coy, brash and flippant. A number of motifs are entertainingly developed; true to teenage life (and life in general), there are times when Jennifer and other characters look far less glamorous than usual. This is usually attributed to the long time Jennifer has spent between eating boys, yet this can also be easily incorporated into the film's metaphorical framework. There are echoes throughout of plot elements from various earlier high school fictions, most clearly*Heathers* (Dir. Michael Lehmann, 1989) and *Freaks and Geeks* (1999-2000). Indeed, murder and cannibalism aside, the film is another rehearsal of the story of erstwhile best friends Lindsay and Millie from *Freaks and Geeks*, told from Millie's perspective (albeit with a little less warmth and less acute characterisation than that found in the underappreciated *Freaks and Geeks*). And of course, the high school setting also resonates with Cody's earlier *Juno*, which garnered far more positive responses than *Jennifer's Body* has received so far. Her latest film's gaudy and confrontational aesthetic, as well as the weighty implications of its subject matter and technique, explains why it has been less well received than *Juno*. To my mind, in terms of humour and characterisation, it's no better or worse.

Eoin Rafferty

Highlights from Horrorthon, October 2009

Grace
(Dir. Paul Solet) USA/Canada 2009
ArieScope Pictures

If there is a central conflict in Paul Solet's feature film debut *Grace* it is between instinct and intellectualism. Both essential parts of the human condition, the primordial needs of love, food and protection often exist in stark contrast to the lofty ideal that people can moralise their way out of any unpalatable desire. Here this tension is played out when Madeline, a fragile academic, struggles to cope with her duties as a new mother to an infant whose very existence defies logic, and has needs far beyond her ability to deal with.

Grace begins with a soft focus love scene that goes from romantic to antiseptic as the camera slides along with curve of intertwined bodies. The vacant, indifferent expression on Madeline's face (played to the edge of reason by *Cabin Fever*'s Jordan Ladd) as husband Michael (a chastened Steven Mark) withdraws tells us all we need to know about their relationship in thirty seconds. With a practiced motion she lies back, hugging her knees close to her chest to promote the flow of semen to her uterus. This lack of interest in her other half, and Selot's attention to detailing female biology, nicely foreshadows the coming 80 minutes of 'gyno-centric' horror, and is one of the many potshots directed at his male characters.

It's not just Madeline and Michael's sex life that reeks of Dettol, however. Outside the bedroom their dynamic comes across as a goal-oriented contract good for one trip around the baptismal font. From the too-clean house to their white/beige/grey wardrobe, everything speaks of an existence bereft of passion. Even their diet has been reduced to a tasteless vegan mulch, quaffed down with a large glass of soy milk. It's a horrific arrangement quickly seized upon by Michael's mother Vivian (a matronly Gabrielle Rose), a judge with more than a few words of choice old-school advice in the meat and two veg tradition. A conservative authoritarian, Vivian's overt distaste for her son's supine lifestyle is offset only by Madeline's ethereally passive aggression. Laced with razorwire, their polite dinner table banter renders Michael and his father unable to do anything but stare into their plates with all the enthusiasm of smacked toddlers. The mood is further darkened when Madeline reveals she has opted to forego the traditional route of having a obstetrician attend the birth in favour of employing flaky academic midwife Patricia Lang, a feminist with a yen for soft lighting, cultural studies and vegan cookies. The decision seems justified when Vivian's scalpel-happy specialist of choice (Malcolm Stewart) almost conducts an unnecessary Caesarean section when a case of cramping is misdiagnosed as pre-eclampsia. All seems well until the trip home when a freak car accident kills Michael and leaves Madeline with what appear to be serious internal injuries. Despite being told the foetus no longer has a heartbeat Madeline refuses to accept defeat and carries the child to term. In a truly gut wrenching scene she gives birth to a stillborn child that, when pressed against her mother's breast, takes in a gulp of air and breathes. After quickly naming the infant Grace, Madeline shuts off contact with her critics to care for the child on her own, a task she seems singularly ill-equipped to do. Mired in post-natal depression, Madeline struggles to care for newborn until a feeding accident uncovers its true appetite: a taste for human blood. Running in tandem with Madeline's journey, Vivian rediscovers her own maternal longings in scenes as uncomfortable as any stalk and slash sequence. At the same time there are hints the relationship between Madeline and Patricia is much more complex than a simple patient/quack dynamic.

Something of a slow burner, Solet's picture uses crisp, almost TV movie-style lighting to set up a world of comforts tinged with grisly violence. Constant references to the Animal Channel, with its intermingling of pieces on animal experimentation and reproduction, underline the point that savagery is a shared part of the human and animal conditions. Solet also balances out the gender bashing by casting an eye over the pseudo-gestalt therapies of birthing pools, scented candles and the virtual denial of masculinity. Mischievous surely, but nothing is played for laughs. The characters are cold, humourless creations; the script never deviating from a tone of quiet desperation and barely-in-place facades. This approach cuts both ways. On one level viewers will be surprised at a film that plays more on a mother's reaction to her creation as the creation itself. Grace, the child, is not an insatiable creature howling at the moon but an infant too low maintenance for its own good. With the reveal on the halfway point one fears more for what Madeline will do to maintain her veneer of competence and 'right-on' liberal values.

It sounds great on paper but for a film with so much to talk about it's interminably slow. Expanded from a six-minute short, Solet makes the most of his premise, but at 85 minutes it feels like a much longer film. There are also a few Screenwriting 101 narrative tricks in there (I won't spoil them) that tidy things up a little too neatly but are hardly cardinal errors. If only it provided as many plot points as ethical quandaries.

If you like your viscera accompanied by social comment and polite conversation then this could well be your very own little bundle of joy.

Niall Kitson

Tony
(Dir. Gerard Johnson) UK 2009
Abbott Vision

Gerard Johnson doesn't do sensationalism. Having already established a penchant for 1980s-style social realism with his portrait of a petty criminal in the short film *Mug*, Johnson moves on to far darker territory with his first feature, *Tony*. Understated from the first minute, we follow our eponymous protagonist through the streets of a decaying, morally bankrupt London. Using a series of tracking shots direct from the Alan Clarke playbook (or Gus Van Sant depending on when you grew up), we see the city through the eyes of a welfare sponger unable to deal with even the bare basics of urban living. A pair of plastic shopping bags never far from his reach, Tony is just another face in the crowd. Did I mention yet that he's also a serial killer?

The build-up to the film's core revelation is a series of random encounters, beginning with Tony (Peter Ferdinando) trying to engage a disinterested DVD street vendor in conversation to no effect. Thankfully he fares much better after offering to play host to a pair of junkies in a 'drugs are on me' exercise in goodwill. After an awkward meeting with a kingpin, Tony brings his confidantes home for skag and an afternoon of action movies on VHS. When his guests reveal themselves to be less than reputable characters things, take a turn for the worse and Tony lets rip with a heretofore unhinted-at brutality.

The rest of the film is constructed around a series of vignettes loosely tied together by the disappearance of a local boy, an event that throws Tony's reclusive lifestyle into sharp relief. When not under scrutiny by concerned neighbours and chavs with anger-management issues, Tony looks to the gay scene for solace but learns that, while he may find it easier to relate to men, the kind of relations they want back isn't something he's capable of dealing with.

Tony's paucity of life skills is best illustrated in his encounters outside the relative safety of his drab, smelly flat (the only attempt to mask the odour of death being a rotting bunch of bananas in the front room), where what little self-confidence he has is ripped away. In danger of having his social welfare cut off he gets a job in a tanning salon only to blow off his first day of work. Instead he tries to pass time in a brothel only to get kicked out and branded a pervert when he finds out hugs and chats are not on the menu.

Ferdinando commands his role brilliantly, teasing out Tony's life of the mundane and the macabre with something approaching humanity. Far from being a quintessential man in a long coat, Ferdinando's bowl chop haircut and heavy glasses make him look almost too ordinary, too familiar. It's easy to imagine Ferdinando cutting up bodies, pausing only to sip from a mug of cold tea with a Jean-Claude Van Damme movie supplying the background noise. Indeed the biggest laugh (and there are a few to be had) comes courtesy of some pillow talk with an uncomplaining, decomposing partner. Close your eyes and the 'dialogue' could be from *Terry and June*.

Final note must go to the haunting score from The The. A repeated piano refrain serves the tone of the film well, without lapsing into drone or becoming distracting.

It would be easy to argue that Gerard Johnson has produced a monster but that would be to miss the point. Tony is a failed human, more Roy Cropper than Henry Lee Lucas, a collection of ticks and quirks, incapable of self-analysis or maintaining a relationship. He murders out of a desire to push beyond his passivity, to take a dominant role in his relationships. It's a sympathy card Johnson plays remarkably well. Again, following in the tradition of psychopath movies there is usually a historical model for the protagonist (Ed Gein in *Psycho* for example). One wonders how large a shadow Brian Masters' seminal *Killing for Company*, an account of English serial killer Dennis Nilsen, cast on the script, such is the fine balance between subtlety and menace.

Would Alan Clarke approve? The audience I saw it with certainly did – maybe that's a more relevant barometer.

Niall Kitson

The Horseman
(Dir. Steven Kastrissios) Australia 2008

Revenge dramas have an all-too-familiar trajectory: some unforgivable sin is committed (usually rape or murder); a lone hero, fuelled by righteous anger and/or a sense of familial duty, takes up arms; through a series of coolly planned set pieces vengeance is exacted; and, if done correctly, said hero is removed from society through death or imprisonment, closing the circle of violence that stirred them to action. From *Elektra* and *The Revenger's Tragedy* to *Deliverance* and *Dead Man's Shoes* the formula has been refined to such a point that one wonders if there is anything, or anywhere, new to explore in it. The evolution of the concept of family and the dangers of contemporary society, however, still manage to throw up a few new nightmares, no better exemplified than in Steven Kastrissios' uncompromising debut, *The Horseman*.

The film begins with an all-too-regular scene. A teenaged girl stumbles her way around what appears to be an industrial estate by a motorway at night. Obviously tired and drunk she clutches at her mobile phone. Suddenly the action moves to a small house in the Australian Outback. A handyman calls in to check on a bug infestation, only to use his tools on the man of the house in a manner certainly not specified in their respective manuals. Our handyman, Christian (Peter Marshall), is interested in two things: a selection of videotapes and the whereabouts of a man named Derek.

Through a series of intercut scenes, we learn what ties these two incongruous incidents together. The young girl was Chris' daughter, who after a night of alcohol, hard drugs and sex, collapsed and choked to death on her own vomit. Some time later the grieving single parent receives a video in the post from an anonymous source showing his daughter's ignominious last hours as a stoned porn actress getting gang banged by the clientele of a local gym.

Stirred to action by paternal rage, Chris begins a one-man crusade to honour his child's memory. First he attempts to buy up every copy of the video ever produced, a straightforward transaction of some 300 units sullied only when enquiries as to its origin reveal a clue to another person involved in the production before coming to a brutal conclusion. It's a pattern that permeates the film, as the protagonist begins each interaction with a workmanlike efficiency before moving to a grisly toolbox interrogation that leads to the reveal of a new piece of information and a final decision on the battered victim's life. In turn a distributor, producer, editor and a series of cast members get the same treatment before he finally reaches the director/instigator, the aforementioned Derek (Brad McMurray), deep in the Outback, surrounded by a pack of 'actors'.

That's all well and good but if that were it, the film would make for relatively straightforward, if extreme, viewing. A welcome complication arrives in the shape of Alice (Caroline Marohasy), a pregnant runaway looking to connect with the father of her baby. Hardly a choir girl herself, Alice and Chris develop an awkward bond, each filling the other's need for the kind of unconditional love felt only between parent and child. It's only as this relationship cements itself on the backroads that Chris must face a decision between abandoning his self-destructive crusade for his dead daughter and moving forward with a living girl clearly in need of help. Only then does he find that the decision has been taken out of his hands.

It's fair to say *The Horseman* is nothing if not a determined piece of work. Each scene feels truncated to the point of claustrophobia, the camera so often in the actors' faces to feel like the audience itself is gearing up for a fight. No line is dwelt on; there is no time for humour or remorse; and every character seems in danger of falling apart at the seams once Chris gets loose on them. No detail is shirked but Kastrissios is smart enough to balance the visceral interrogation scenes while still serving the plot. The final scenes are a particularly hard-to-stomach sequence of torture and sexual violence made all the more unnerving by their lack of *Hostel*-style self-awareness. Marshall's performance manages to carry every scene through his unpredictable cocktail of rage, tenderness and anguish – any or all of which can manifest themselves within a heartbeat. McMurray, when we meet him, is a formidable opponent, a 'roided up predator with a heaving physical presence that underlines his capacity for hatred and his willingness to debase his 'actresses'. Anyone interested in analysing performances of pure evil in contemporary cinema should take note.

Harsh, abrasive and not afraid to make hard choices, *The Horseman* is an endurance test, but a satisfying one nonetheless. Looks like the revenge drama will be with us for some time yet.

Niall Kitson