FILM REVIEWS

Credit Crunched:
***Drag Me to Hell* (Dir. Sam Raimi)** USA, 2009
Lionsgate

Drag Me to Hell is Sam Raimi's first horror film since the workmanlike supernatural thriller *The Gift* (2000). Given that the only vaguely horrific project the *Evil Dead* director had been associated with since then was the truly awful *Spider-Man 3* (2007), it was only natural that fans and critics alike would harbour some doubts as to whether mainstream success had robbed Raimi of the energy and inventiveness which infused his early work. It's a relief to report, then, that *Drag Me to Hell* is not only a return to form for Raimi, but also the most enjoyable American horror movie in quite a while, a witty, gleefully over-the-top film that, while never exactly *scary*, is nevertheless highly entertaining. Crucially, there is also an enjoyable element of *schadenfruede* at work here. After all, given the current economic climate, who in their right mind *wouldn't* want to see a film in which someone who works in the banking industry is tormented for two hours?

Indeed, the film's economic subtext helps elevate it above the level of entertaining but ultimately shallow multiplex fodder. It may well be the first example of full-blown credit crunch horror, a film in which the uneven battle between those who wield economic power and those who conspicuously lack it is dramatised in a manner as timely as it is amusing. In *Danse Macabre*, Stephen King rightly pointed out that the mediocre 1977 haunted-house movie *The Amityville Horror* resonated with middle-class American audiences because it was a prime example of the horror movie as economic horror story. The unlikely catalogue of supernaturally induced domestic disasters undergone by the Lutz family paralleled the post-oil crisis economic uncertainties of an entire generation of baby boomers. In a similar fashion, *Drag Me to Hell* functions as both revenge fantasy and cautionary tale for a generation for whom the current fiscal crisis has come as a profound, if not exactly unheralded, shock.
The film's protagonist is an unassertive but quietly ambitious loan officer named Christine Brown (Alison Lohman) who hopes to be offered the position of assistant manager of her local branch. As Rami makes clear in the opening scenes of the movie, Christine is used to denying herself in order to get ahead. She's an insecure country girl who has left behind her alcoholic mother and moved to the big city, and what stands out most in these introductory scenes is her capacity for self-denial. A former over-eater who now assiduously watches her weight, she is seen looking longingly into a bakery window, and she gazes at unaffordable clothes with a similar hunger. Her long-term boyfriend, an up-and-coming young psychology professor named Clay (Justin Long), comes from a wealthy family, something which causes her much anxiety. Christine has painfully managed to reinvent herself, but her insecurities clearly lie close to the surface. However, even though she commits many deeply questionable acts during the course of the film, she never becomes a wholly unsympathetic character, largely because Lohman's performance is such an appealing one. Indeed, Christine is that rarest of creatures: a female character in a genre movie who comes across as a genuinely nuanced individual.

Christine is ultimately doomed by her own (understandable) ambition. Fearing that she will lose her promotion to a smarmy new (male) co-worker, she heeds her manager's advice to be more aggressive with her clients and denies a needy old gypsy woman, Mrs Ganush (Lorna Raver), an extension on her overdue mortgage. Guaranteed not to be viewed in a positive light by those for whom shamelessly old-fashioned ethnic stereotyping is a turn-off, Mrs Ganush may well be one of the most grotesque

characters Raimi has ever essayed, a veritable caricature of the monstrous feminine who hacks up putrid phlegm incessantly into a dirty old handkerchief, has one milky false eye, and claw-like finger nails. Old age, infirmity, and ethnic difference here become markers of monstrosity.
And yet, despite the fact that she is transformed into a completely unsympathetic fiend shortly thereafter, the scene in which the desperate, and desperately proud, old woman gets down on her knees and begs to be allowed to stay in her home is still affecting. In an act of self-serving cowardice, Christine pretends that the final choice is down to her boss, and not herself. In fact, she is very much the bad guy here, and there's an appealing moral complexity at work throughout most of the film, even though it essentially becomes a rather standard 'vengeful old hag versus pretty young girl' story of the type seen in countless fairytales. Christine may be a victim, but she's by no means an innocent, and many of the film's funniest scenes are those in which it is made clear that she will do practically *anything* in order to escape the consequences of her callous actions (there's a scene involving her pet kitten which demonstrates Raimi's refreshing willingness to showcase his protagonist's ruthlessness). And the consequences are certainly severe. Having failed to terrify Christine into reversing her decision during a supernatural assault in an underground car park, Mrs Ganush unleashes a curse which will mean that her young nemesis will be dragged to hell within three days.

There follows a succession of witty set pieces in which Christine becomes aware of the truth of the old woman's curse and tries to avoid her terrible fate. The trouble is, she can no longer ask Mrs Ganush to lift the curse, because she died shortly after pronouncing it. What's particularly interesting about the film as it goes on is that the differences between her and Mrs Ganush are ultimately not as great as they first appear. Indeed, the elderly, physically grotesque, poverty-stricken and needy old woman represents everything that Christine herself has tried to leave behind and fears becoming in the future. Given her profession Christine knows only too well that those who fall between the cracks will soon get stood on, and has no intention of letting this happen to her. Her series of bruising, nasty, and amazingly *gooey* encounters with the old woman could be seen as a battle against marginality, against the hard-drinking mother she left behind, and against those aspects of herself she would rather painfully repress This is the return of the repressed at its most obvious.

Tropes of consumption and appetite are prominent features of the film. Mrs Ganush's attacks repeatedly climax with gross-out moments in which she clamps her gaping, toothless mouth onto Christine's face, as though trying to eat her head first (like the fairytale witch she evokes). One could also see disturbing psychosexual connotations at work here, in addition to the obvious trope of the all-consuming monstrous mother. But consumption (both quasi-cannibalistic and consumerist) is referenced in plenty of other ways as well For example in one well-executed and genuinely amusing scene, Christine must sit though a formal dinner with her boyfriend's snooty parents and try not to lapse into hysterics even though Mrs Ganush's false eye turns up in her dessert. Furthermore, it soon becomes obvious to Christine that if she wants help, she must be prepared to pay a high financial price for it. She goes to a fortune-teller named Ram Jas (Dileep Rao) to seek advice, but is told that the only woman who can lift the curse demands ten thousand dollars for her services. The ambitious young banker must then gather up all of her worldly possessions and hock them at the local pawn shop, like one of her cash-strapped customers desperate to fund a mortgage repayment. Even good witches needs cash, it seems, and tellingly, this one lives in a palatial Spanish-style mansion, a stark contrast to Mrs Ganush's cramped and dirty old house. Humiliatingly, the money Christine raises at the pawnshop isn't nearly enough to pay the fee, and her blandly supportive, Platinum card-wielding boyfriend steps in to provide the rest of the cash. It's fitting, then, that the film's rather obvious final twist hinges on the possession of a rare coin (which has become confused with a cursed button); crucially whether or not someone has an item of currency on their person becomes a matter of life and death.

Christine's ruthlessness and willingness to go to any lengths mean that by the end of the film, the ordinary, likably flawed girl we met at the outset of the story is actually well on her way to becoming the perfect cog in the corporate machine. Although Raimi makes it clear that she hasn't quite completely lost sight of her basic humanity (she does, at the last moment, balk at passing the curse on to anyone else), the previously mild-mannered Christine has displayed a survival instinct to rival that of any traditional Final Girl, and tellingly, she is ultimately rewarded by that long-hoped for promotion at work – it seems that her aggressiveness will have a corporate outlet after all. One would have thought that having encountered at first hand the consequences of hard-hearted business decisions she would have run a mile, but instead Christine is delighted that she can finally satisfy her materialist appetites – it is notable that the first thing she does after receiving her promotion is finally to buy herself a stylish new coat. But Raimi has one last (rather obvious) trick up his sleeve. Long-time fans of the director will know that the moment a character in a Raimi film talks about heading to a cabin in the woods, things will soon go badly wrong, and the same applies here. Though we may feel that it's a disproportionate punishment for one act of foolish ruthlessness, Christine must ultimately pay a terrible price for her uncharitable behaviour at the beginning of the film. What makes her fate truly poignant is that we know that those who were truly responsible for her actions – the bosses who encouraged her to put profits before people – have escaped scot-free. Here, as in real life, it is the ordinary citizen who pays the price for corporate greed, and for naively abetting a system which privileges profits over humanity.

Bernice M. Murphy

***Not Quite Hollywood* (Dir. Mark Hartley)**: **The Wild, Untold Story of Ozploitation!**
Australia/USA, 2008
Optimum Home Entertainment

Throughout the 1970s, a generation of Australian directors (Peter Weir, Philip Noyce, Gillian Armstrong and others) produced a series of home-grown films, garnering international plaudits aplenty and putting Australian filmmaking firmly on the map. Bolstered by the introduction of government funding schemes, there emerged a national film industry intent on fostering local talent and generating a cultural Australian product aimed at a local and an international audience. While *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), *Newsfront* (1978), and *My Brilliant Career* (1979) typified the so-called 'New Wave' of Australian cinema, another collection of filmmakers (George Miller, Brian Trenchard-Smith, Anthony I. Ginnane and more) were also hard at work grinding out a very different tradition, taking their influence primarily from 1970s US exploitation cinema. In *Not Quite Hollywood*, Mark Hartley offers an entertaining and affectionate homage to the untold story of this other Australian cinema, one that did not seek to depict the country as 'nice girls in white dresses vanishing into rocks', as Barry Humphries (Dame Edna Everage herself) wryly puts it.

Hartley's encyclopaedic knowledge of the subject helps assemble an exhaustive and well-researched catalogue of underground films as well as an impressive role-call of contributors. He traces the emergence of genre filmmaking in Australia from 1971, a year which saw the relaxation of censorship laws and the introduction of the R-rating, invoking it as evidence of a seismic shift away from a conservative to an apparently more liberated society that was game for the development of locally cultivated 'Ozploitation' cinema. The film comprises three main sections, starting with the aptly-named 'Ockers, Knockers, Pubes and Tubes', which focuses on bawdy sex comedies such as *Stork* and *Alvin Purple* (Dir. Tim Burstall, 1971 and 1973 respectively). It's not till the second segment that the film really comes into its own, though. 'Comatose Killers and Outback Chillers' charts the production of horror films and thrillers (the 'universal currency of the movie market', according to Trenchard-Smith) for export to international territories, including the inevitable marketing strategy of casting non-Australians in high-profile roles in films. So Jamie Lee Curtis and Stacey Keach took top billing in *Roadgames* (Dir. Richard Franklin, 1981), while Donald Pleasance and George Peppard teamed up in *Race for the Yankee Zephyr* (Dir. David Hemmings, 1981), and *Harlequin* (Dir. Simon Wincer, 1980) boasted the impressive pairing of David Hemmings and, um, Robert Powell. The final segment, 'High Octane Disasters and Kung Fu Masters', details outrageous disregard for human safety in the making of such notorieties as *Turkey Shoot* (Dir. Brian Trenchard-Smith, 1980), the chronicles of stuntman Grant Page, and the biker movie tradition (including *Mad Max* (Dir. George Miller, 1979)). Finally, it marks the death of Ozploitation in the mid-80s and the recent resurrection of its spirit in the work of Greg Maclean (*Wolf Creek*, 2005), James Wan and Leigh Whannell (*Saw*, 2004) and the Spierig brothers (*Undead*, 2003). Throughout we're treated to a barrage of clips running the gamut from ribald sexploitation flicks, biker movies, kung fu thrillers and of course blood-spattered horror, all edited together at breakneck, ADD-friendly speed. These are intercut with talking heads from a large number of key players in the production of these films, as well as chief-enthusiast Quentin Tarantino. In particular, Tarantino just can't contain himself when talking about the subject of any film that showcases cars, and anyone who's sat through *Death Proof*, his self-indulgent and misjudged contribution to *Grindhouse* (2007), won't be surprised to hear him gush that Australians have a talent for filming cars with, ahem, 'this fetishistic lens that just makes you want to jerk off'…

Tarantino's involvement with the project has no doubt helped secure a broader release for the film than might otherwise have been likely, but his contributions actually prove the least enlightening of any on display here. In fact, he proves so effusive and apparently indiscriminate in his enthusiasm for the subject that it almost becomes redundant, effectively tarring the dross (a sizeable amount) with the same brush as the forgotten gems (*Long Weekend*, Dir. Colin Eggleston, 1978) and the established classics (*Mad Max*). Far more interesting are the often irreverent contributions from the filmmakers themselves, recounting tales of shoe-string budgets and gonzo filmmaking of the highest order, such as the decision to pay a group of Hell's Angels in beer in exchange for their work as extras in biker movie *Stone* (Dir. Sandy Harbutt, 1974); Henry Silva's reluctance at dangling from a helicopter for a stunt leading instead to him being hoisted 70-feet and dangling from a crane instead in order to film a climactic scene for *Thirst* (Dir. Rod Hardy, 1979); and there's some eye-popping footage of Dennis Hopper with a blood alcohol level so high that he was actually declared dead on the set of bushranger classic *Mad Dog Morgan* (Dir. Phillipe Mora, 1976), and was banned from driving *and* being a passenger in a car in the state of Victoria. Throughout, there's a healthily candid honesty about the status of quite a few of these 'forgotten classics', such as from effects man Bob McCarron on *Howling III: The Marsupials* (Dir. Phillipe Mora, 1987), who confesses 'We all knew it was rubbish'. In particular, sardonic writer and filmmaker Bob Ellis is on hand at every turn to balance Tarantino's enthusiasm with a litany of razor-tongued putdowns ('Tony Ginnane and his films should be burnt to the ground and the ashes sown with salt').

Not Quite Hollywood proved one of the highlights of both the Horrorthon festival in Dublin in October 2008 and the Dublin International Film Festival in February this year, and its recent release by Optimum Home Entertainment is now giving it a deserved opportunity to reach a wider audience. That said, it does lose some of its charm on a repeat viewing, in particular in its slightly blinkered gloss of the gender politics of the early sexploitation material (a fact not helped by the fact that John D. Lamond, director of many of the sleaziest films under discussion, such as 1974's *Australia After Dark* and 1979's *Felicity*, is interviewed in a strip club while an exotic dancer performs in the background). This first section is by far the weakest of the film as a whole, and it proves much more illuminating on the subject of later forays into horror, kung fu and biker movies in particular. There's also something of an interpretative sleight of hand at work in its division of 1970s Australian cinema entirely along the lines of genre filmmaking and highbrow 'New Wave' material; after all, Peter Weir made the genteel *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (which is in fact one of the best slices of Australian gothic, a restrained, ambiguous and deeply unsettling film) and the weird *and* wonderful *The Cars that Ate Paris* (1974), a fantastic genre flick in its own right. Overall, though, Hartley has produced a good-natured and nostalgic celebration of an under-exposed body of work, at least some of which merits rediscovery, and which is now beginning to find an audience thanks to his stellar preservation efforts.

Jenny McDonnell

The Roger Corman Collection
***Five Guns West* (USA, 1955) / *Gunslinger* (USA, 1956) /**
Premature Burial* (USA, 1962) / *The Haunted Palace* (USA, 1963) / *The Masque of the Red Death
(UK, 1964) / *The Wild Angels* (USA, 1966)
(Dir. Roger Corman) USA, 2008
Optimum Classic

Once upon a time there were B movies. From the early days of the Hollywood Western and Horror in the 1930s and the Poverty Row thrillers and chillers of the 1940s right through to the exploitation boom and midnight movie of the 1960s and 1970s, cheaply produced, quickly made movies (often genre movies or movies with an eye on exploiting certain cultural niches) entertained, bemused and offended millions. With a handful of writing credits and small acting roles to his name, Roger Corman's life-time association with the B movie began in earnest in 1955 with his directorial debut, *Swamp Women* (not a horror movie, as the title may suggest, but a women's prison break picture with the statuesque noir bad girl Marie Windsor). Now 83 years of age and still in the biz, Corman has some 56 directorial credits and an astounding 386 producer/executive producer credits to his name. With titles such as *The Beast with a Million Eyes* (1955), *It Conquered the World* (1956), *Sorority Girl* (1957), *Attack of the Crab Monsters* (1957), *Teenage Doll* (1957), *Not of This Earth* (1957), *Teenage Cave Man* (1958), *She Gods of Shark Reef* (1958), *War of the Satellites* (1958) and the marquee-friendly *The Saga of the Viking Women and Their Voyage to the Waters of the Great Sea Serpent* (1957), Corman soon established himself as a resourceful and efficient director of B features – so much so that, to this day, he is often referred to as 'King of the Bs'. Of course, such catchy titles have a habit of being applied to more than one person. Edgar G. Ulmer, the director of such stylish and wonderfully loopy films as *The Black Cat* (1934) and *Detour* (1945) has also been referred to as 'King of the Bs'. But while Ulmer was frustrated by the compromises he made as a Poverty Row director, once saying "I really am looking for absolution for all the things I had to do for money's sake", Corman apparently delights in his ability to turn out a movie on time and on budget (actually, he often beat the deadline and came under budget), as his 1990 autobiography, *How I Made a Hundred Movies in Hollywood and Never Lost a Dime* attests.

Leaving aside the niceties of artistic integrity versus commercial success, Corman's cinematic legacy is, much like a bug-eyed multi-limbed B movie monster, hard to classify. A number of noted film directors have worked with him, usually early in their careers; they include Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, Peter Bogdanovich, Jonathan Demme, Joe Dante, Ron Howard (may God forgive him – Corman, that is), John Sayles and James Cameron (may God forgive him again). Actors who found some of their earliest acting roles in a Corman picture include Jack Nicholson, Peter Fonda, Bruce Dern, Dennis Hopper and Robert De Niro.

All this namedropping is rather meaningless, however, in terms of attempting an evaluation of Corman's own work. If I were to attempt to categorise his directorial work (admittedly, a somewhat foolhardy endeavour), I would say that his career has a number of distinct, if overlapping, phases within specific genres. In the earlier part of his career (up to the earlier 1960s), there is a preponderance of fantastical movies – Horror and, to a lesser extent, Science Fiction (though by the mid-1950s these two genres were often impossible to disentangle from one another); there is also a good smattering of 'action' movies, in the form of Westerns and Gangster/Crime movies. The third film category of this early period is Juvenile Delinquent movies like *Teenage Doll* (1957) and *Sorority Girl* (1957) (a surprisingly good JD film starring Susan Cabot (aka Wasp Woman) as a poor little rich girl whose unpopularity at school causes her to bully and brutalize her fellow sorority girls in a merciless fashion). It should be noted, of course, that

the JD film itself can trespass into other cinematic territory, as is evidenced by Corman's 1958 movie *Teenage Cave Man*, starring a neatly groomed, twenty-something, Robert Vaughn as a confused and rebellious teen Hominid.

The first half of the 1960s saw some of Corman's most celebrated directorial outings, in particular his liberal adaptations of Edgar Allan Poe stories at American International Pictures, many in collaboration with writer/scenarist Richard Matheson – *House of Usher* (1960), *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1961), *Premature Burial* (1962), *Tales of Terror* (1962), *The Raven* (1963), *The Haunted Palace* (1963) (despite lifting the title from a Poe poem, this one is actually a loose adaptation of H. P. Lovecraft's 'The Case of Charles Dexter Ward'), *The Masque of the Red Death* (1964) and *The Tomb of Ligeia* (1964). With the exception of *Premature Burial*, with Ray Milland (aka the *Man with the X-Ray Eyes*, 1963) in the lead role, all of these movies starred the urbane Vincent Price at his serio-comic best. This period of Corman's career also saw the release of the cult classic *The Little Shop of Horrors* (1960) and his most explicitly political film, *The Intruder* (1962). The latter stars William Shatner (in one of his earliest lead roles) as a virulent racist determined to stir up trouble in a small Southern town. Often considered to be one of Corman's finest films, and one of his most personal in terms of its undeviating attempt to engage with the issue of racism in modern America, *The Intruder* was one of Corman's few box-office failures, despite garnering excellent reviews. It seems that after the commercial failure of *The Intruder* Corman began to shy away from films with an overt message, focusing instead on genre films with solid commercial potential, thereby leaving social commentary (if any) firmly embedded within, supposedly foolproof, genre entertainment.

The latter part of Corman's directorial career, from the mid-to-late 1960s took on a distinctly grim tone, with films like *The Wild Angels* (1966), *The Wild Racers* (1968) (uncredited), *The Trip* (1967), and *The St. Valentine's Day Massacre* (1967). While *The Wild Angels* was a bleak documentary-style depiction of the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang, *The Trip* (written by Jack Nicholson and starring Peter Fonda, Bruce Dern and Dennis Hopper) was the first major studio film to deal with the effects of LSD. In particular, drug/road movies such as these spoke of a new disaffected era, not just in terms of 1960s counterculture but also in terms of filmmaking (at least for Corman). Having been faced with editorial interference from AIP, who wanted to push *The Trip* as an anti-drug tract, once again Corman seemed to back away from a committed stance and, as the late 1960s turned into the 1970s, he vacated the director's chair, instead focusing on his role as a producer.

Now, you may ask "What exactly has this potted history of Corman's directorial career been in aid of…?" Good question. In part, such a lengthy preamble seems necessary in order to review a DVD box-set of a director with such an amorphous identity as a filmmaker. Like it or not, DVD box-sets based on a single director's work will always have a whiff of 'director as auteur' about them. And, as I hope the above has at least suggested, Corman, as director, is certainly a 'mixed bag'. Having said that, this box-set is a mixed bag too. It includes some of Corman's best known and critically acclaimed movies, most notably *The Masque of the Red Death*. One of (if not *the*) best of Corman's AIP Poe adaptations, *Masque* is a lush, baroque tale of cruelty, injustice, perversion and debauchery, with Vincent Price at his very best as Prince Prospero, a medieval Satan-worshiper who terrorizes the local peasantry while using his castle as a refuge, for himself and his privileged guests, against the 'Red Death' plague that stalks the land. As if that wasn't enough, it's got Hazel Court and Jane (I-was-Paul-McCartney's-girlfriend-before-Linda) Asher; the most mindboggling sumptuous cinematography by Nicolas Roeg; and a chilling epilogue more than a little reminiscent of Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*. While not in the same league as *Masque*, *The Haunted Palace* is another solid outing for Corman and Price. It tells a creepy enough tale of Price as a nice fellow who, upon moving into an ancestor's palace/castle with his lovely young wife (Debra Paget), finds his mind slowly taken over by said ancestor who is – you guessed it – a cruel Satan-worshiper determined to

wreak revenge on the descendants of the villagers who burnt him at the stake. *Premature Burial* is a so-so film, which suffers from a plot with not quite enough going on in it. Ray Milland is obsessed with the fear of being buried alive; the rest of the film is taken up with his attempts to avoid this fate and his increasing monomania. Milland could certainly be said to have camp-value in this film (he's a veritable hock of ham), but, unlike Price, one feels he's not enjoying such a possibility, and considering the smug and reactionary nature of his odious little directorial jaunt, *Panic in the Year Zero* (released the same year as *Premature Burial*), my guess is concepts such as black humour and gentle irony were a little bit beyond the purview of his X-ray vision.

Well, that's the horror done… or is it? The rest of the box-set consists of two early Westerns, *Five Guns West* (1955) and *Gunslinger* (1956), and the aforementioned Hell's Angels' flick, *The Wild Angels* (1966). As an avid fan of Westerns, I secretly delighted in getting the chance to infiltrate the pages of *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies* with my thoughts on *Five Guns West* and *Gunslinger*. I only wish they were better. *Five Guns* is a serviceable Western that gets pretty dull half way though. Starring John Lund, Dorothy Malone (collars turned up and pouting, of course) and Mike Connors, it tells the story of five condemned Southern prisoners who are saved from the firing squad and promised pardons on the condition that they undertake a mission to head west and bring back a treacherous Confederate who has a stagecoach full of Confederate gold. They take a rest stop at the farmhouse of Malone and her infirm father and things start to unravel, both for the characters and, unfortunately, the plot. *Gunslinger* is a rather terrible little film; more's the pity because I really wanted to like this one. This no-budget Western stars Beverly Garland, one of the B feature's leading ladies, with titles such as *Swamp Women* (1955), *Curucu, Beast of the Amazon* (Dir. Curt Siodmak, 1956), *It Conquered the World* (1956) and *Not of This Earth* (1957) to her credit. Starring alongside Garland, in the baddie role, is Allison Hayes (the 50 Foot Woman herself), another leading lady of the 1950s B movie, starring in films such as *The Undead* (1957), *The Unearthly* (with Tor Johnson) (Dir. Boris Petroff, 1957), *Zombies of Mora Tau* (Dir. Edward L. Cahn, 1957), *The Hypnotic Eye* (Dir. George Blair, 1960) and, of course, *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman* (Dir. Nathan Juran, 1958). John Ireland is floating around in there too as a gun for hire. The basic plot is quite clearly an attempt to bring a 'feminist' twist to this male-dominated genre. With all the men either too dumb or too cowardly to assume the role, Garland takes over the job of town Marshall when the previous Marshall (who is also her husband) is shot dead. Hayes runs a goodtime saloon (with some of the saddest excuses for cancan dancers I've ever seen). Of course, the two soon come to loggerheads, and John Ireland is caught in the middle when he falls in love with the woman he's hired to kill (or as he refers to her at one point, "The busty Marshall"). Everything is in place here for a rollicking piece of camp, but like so *very many* films with camp potential the howlers are just too few and far between and what we're left with is a boring film that's a soggy mishmash of plot devices and dialogue lifted from other (inevitably better) films – my advice is, if you want to see a good Western with decent gun-toting women look no further than Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* (1954).

And now, to Peter Fonda and Nancy Sinatra... to be perfectly frank, I didn't hold out much hope for *The Wild Angels*. And while it turned out to be a bit of a stinker I have to admit it wasn't entirely for the reasons my prejudicial attitude had in mind. With Peter Fonda in a pre-*Easy Rider* biker role, I expected the usual pseudo-philosophical, social dropout, counterculture garbage from him, but with Nancy Sinatra in tow (quite literally), I had prepared myself for something even more cringe-worthy (perhaps even in a good way). Alas the pseudo-philosophical misfit stuff was just about discernible but if I cringed at the film it wasn't in a good way. It's a fairly nasty little film about a fairly nasty bunch of people, replete with savage violence, meaningless death, gang rape and the desecration of corpses. You certainly couldn't call it social commentary, as its tone is, for the most part, guided by its semi-documentary slant. You'd be hard pushed to call it a social document either as its depiction of the motorbike gang's activity may not be

completely beyond the realm of possibility but is nonetheless quite clearly souped-up to appear as outrageously appalling as possible, while slyly avoiding being overtly graphic. As such *The Wild Angels* is probably a perfect example of a mid-60s exploitation flick, and, as the twelfth largest-grossing film of 1966, I guess it did its job. For anyone who is interested, the excerpt from Primal Scream's song 'Loaded', which begins with the following lines, "We want to be free! We want to be free to do what we want to do!", is sampled from this film.

All in all, a mixed bag. I thought about the other Corman collections out there and how they had a similar potluck feel. And I also wondered how things could be done differently in order to give more coherence to future releases; perhaps collecting his films by genre or by actor? But it didn't take me long to come to the conclusion that the wavering quality of the films in Optimum's *Roger Corman Collection* and the lack of genre and thematic coherence that the films in the box-set display is all part of Corman's unique position in the moviemaking business, and as such is, in a sense, a fairly accurate reflection of his work. In all likelihood, if you already own some of the better films in this box-set you shan't be running out to buy it; and considering there are no extras to tempt you (apart from some original theatrical trailers), you can hardly be blamed. Having said this, the box set is reasonably priced with some high quality films on it and some undeniably weaker ones that are nonetheless curiosities for the Corman fan.

Elizabeth McCarthy

The Last House on the Left
(Dir. Dennis Illiadis) USA, 2009
Universal Pictures

If there's one thing that watching horror films has taught me – apart from the fact that one should never hold a costume party on the anniversary of a brutal massacre, coal mine collapse, or accidental drowning caused by negligent camp counsellors – it's that making a trip to a cabin in the woods is never a good idea (see *Drag Me to Hell* for further confirmation of this fact). And if that cabin in the woods is by a lake, well, frankly, you're just asking for trouble.

This certainly holds true in the recently released remake of Wes Craven's 1972 'classic' *The Last House on the Left*, which has as its protagonists a happy, comfortably well-off professional couple who, to their own ultimate detriment, have clearly never seen *Funny Games* (Dir. Michael Haneke, 1997), *Friday the 13th* (Dir. Sean S. Cunningham, 1980), or even pondered Fredo's fate at the end of *The Godfather: Part II* (Dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 1974). If they had, they'd know that lakes in horror films only exist so that bodies can be disposed of in them or giant crocodiles can lurk ominously beneath the waves. Disappointingly, there are no outsized amphibians here, but what we do have instead is a phenomenon that's almost as rare: a remake of a 1970s cult favourite which actually isn't all that bad. That isn't to say that it's a masterpiece; rather, that compared to the woeful likes of Rob Zombie's *Halloween* (reviewed in issue 3 of this journal) and Michael Nispel's ineptly banal take on *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, Dennis Iliadis' remake at least has a decent cast, a genuinely compelling storyline, and a tendency to come up with bracingly nasty uses for household implements. It also helps that unlike the other original films cited above, Craven's movie – in my opinion at least – isn't half as significant or as 'groundbreaking' as some critics and fans have made it out to be. In fact, I've always thought it as something of a murky, genuinely repellent, and fatally uneven mess, complete with ill-advised slapstick cops. Any interest lies not so much in the film itself but in its admittedly fascinating socio-cultural overtones and relationship to the rest of Craven's remarkably consistent oeuvre, which has consistently and effectively undermined the notion that the suburban milieu is somehow a particularly safe place for families, and in particular, children and teenagers.

The Last House on the Left (1972), his horror debut, remains the most controversial film of his career, and is still unavailable in uncut form in the UK. Filmed in the prototypically suburban town of Westport, Connecticut, the original version of *The Last House on the Left* was a gory, visceral update of Ingmar Bergman's medieval-set drama *The Virgin Spring* (1959); it centred on a pair of prosperous and complacent suburbanites, John and Estelle Collingwood (Gaylord St James and Cynthia Carr), whose peaceful existence is suddenly violated forever by a brutal act of violence which prompts them to commit terrible and irrational acts of their own. On her seventeenth birthday, the Collingwoods' sheltered daughter Mari (Sandra Cassel) and her wrong-side-of-the-tracks pal Phyllis (Lucy Grantham) leave behind the safety and security of the suburbs and head into the city to see a rock concert. However, while buying marijuana the girls naively fall into the clutches of the first of Craven's soon-to-become characteristic antifamilies, a deeply dysfunctional gang of escaped convicts led by the sadistic Krug Stillo (David Hess).

After enduring sexual abuse at the hands of the gang in a grimy inner city tenement, the girls are bundled into the boot of a car and driven to a wooded area, which, by coincidence, happens to be only a short distance from Mari's home. Phyllis makes a desperate bid for freedom, but is soon recaptured and graphically disembowelled. Mari tries to plead for her life, but is raped and then shot dead as she wades

into a nearby lake. (See? Lakes. It never ends well.) Perhaps even more shocking than the physical violence onscreen, which was here depicted in a notably gritty, realistic fashion, was the psychological torment and humiliation undergone by the girls at the hands of Krug's gang of misfits. Even Craven's murderers themselves look sickened by what they have done when the violence subsides; there are unmistakable echoes of similar real-life atrocities here, such as the Mai-Lai massacre perpetrated by US troops in Vietnam in 1968 or the murders committed by the so-called Manson 'family' in 1969. In an ironic twist inspired by Bergman's film, Krug's gang, now stranded in the forest due to car trouble, decide to seek help from the nearest house, and end up on the Collingwoods' doorstep. By now concerned about their daughter's prolonged absence, Mari's parents are initially quite hospitable to their unlikely guests, but are soon made suspicious by their odd demeanour and desperately unconvincing attempts to behave in a 'civilised' manner. When realisation dawns, the formerly sedate suburbanites decide that it's time to get their own back, and famously do so in a manner that leaves the boundaries between revenge and cold-blooded murder, savage and suburbanite, well and truly blurred.

The remake wisely sticks fairly closely to the original story, and the interest here once again lies in watching the manner in which the 'good' family, the Collingwoods, are opposed to their evil counterparts, Krug (Garret Dillahunt), Francis (Aaron Paul), and Sadie (Riki Lindhome), a vicious gang of criminals. The gang is first seen securing Krug's escape from custody and murdering a couple of jokey cops (a nice allusion to the original's ineffective comedy police who spend their time fooling around with escaped chickens and the like). The ill-fated Mari (Sarah Paxton) is a sensitive and driven seventeen-year-old who quietly resents the over-protectiveness of her parents Emma (Monica Potter) and John (Tony Goldwyn), an academic and doctor respectively. One way in which this version is an improvement over the original is that the Collingwoods are afforded significantly more character development this time round. Their anxiety regarding their daughter's whereabouts and activities derives not from sexual or social paranoia (as in the original) but instead stems from an understandable desire to protect their only surviving child: a son, Ben, has died just over a year previously.

Mari's friendship with local girl Paige (Martha MacIsaac), though only briefly enumerated, is rather more convincing than the working class bad girl/middle class good girl dynamic of Craven's script, as is the manner in which they fall into the hands of the gang. Upon a chance meeting with Krug's son Justin (Spencer Treat Clarke) in the grocery store, the girls adjourn to his motel room to smoke weed and hang out. Just as in the original, Krug's son is the sensitive one of the gang, but Justin is even more of an abused youngster than his template, the childlike and drug-addicted Junior in the original. Once more, the girls are driven into the woods where, as in the original, the film's most disturbing scenes take place. It could be argued that, were it not for the extremely unpleasant nature of the interlude in the woods in Craven's film – which includes scenes in which both girls are raped, humiliated and ultimately murdered in a graphic and realistic manner which remains shocking to this day – the film would not have aroused half of the critical attention that it did. One of the most interesting aspects of the remake, then, was always going to be how Illiadis handled this section of the film.

Certainly, it's still a deeply unpleasant scene, and although the sheer nastiness of the original has been toned down somewhat (there is no disembowelling here, thankfully) it remains difficult to watch, featuring as it does the sexualised torture of two young girls. The fact that the two young actresses portraying Mari and Paige are rather more sympathetic and human than the identikit starlets usually featured in such scenes does make their treatment here all the more disturbing, but as ever, the depiction of rape onscreen remains an inherently problematic issue. As in Craven's film, there's certainly nothing that could be seen as remotely titillating here (unless one has a very sick mind indeed), but Mari's assault by Krug is also fairly graphic and prolonged. One presumes that, as in the original, the fact that Paige and

Mari's ordeal constitutes one of the longest sequences of the film serves to prime the audience to cheer on her parents' revenge: the more the girls suffer, the more the audience can enjoy the brutality ultimately meted out to her abusers. Indeed, it's an inherently questionable dynamic which infuses the rape-revenge narrative in general, from *I Spit On Your Grave* (Dir. Meir Zarchi, 1978) and *Ms. 45* (Dir. Abel Ferrara, 1981) (in which rape victims turn on their tormentors) to the more male-centric likes of *Deliverance* (Dir. John Boorman, 1972) and *Death Wish* (Dir. Michael Winner, 1974) (in which the main character, like the Collingwoods, is avenging the rape of his daughter).

Once more Krug and the gang end up on the Collingwoods' doorstep (Mari has caused a crash which has wrecked their getaway vehicle), and are taken in by the somewhat wary but hospitable couple. Once their unexpected guests have been cleaned up and settled into the guest house, however, John and Emma make a shocking discovery: they find their gravely wounded daughter, who, unbeknownst to the gang, has survived a gunshot wound and managed to struggle home. They tend to her wounds, but the fact that Mari had taken the car that day means they have no way of getting her to the hospital: a severe storm has also (naturally) knocked out the phone lines. To make matters worse, when Emma finds a medallion worn by Mari that day lying on the kitchen counter (having been left there by the traumatised Justin when he figured out whose house he was in), the couple realise that their daughter's attackers are lying sleeping just a few yards away.

In the 1972 version of this film one had the definite sense that, in watching the Collingwoods exact a gory revenge, one was witnessing not just a battle between two opposing families but also a clash between two worlds – the stolidly bourgeois and the criminally countercultural. As the final moments of the movie made clear, Craven was emphasising the fact that the line between civilisation and savagery was one that could quickly be crossed: his middle-class avengers enjoyed their revenge just a bit too much, and having lost their daughter, the Collingwoods went on to lose their very souls. It was a bitterly nihilistic denouement which lent the film the vaguely apocalyptic tone common to many of that era's best horror movies.

Here though, many of the acts of violence perpetrated by the Collingwoods are committed out of genuine self-defence or in order to protect the gravely injured Mari. Right up until the rather silly but satisfying coda – in which John Collingwood finally puts his medical skills to macabre use – we never get the same sense that they have lost their humanity. The ending is also much more hopeful than that of the original. With Krug, Sadie and Francis dead, the Collingwoods make their escape from the last house on the left in a motorboat. Mari has been saved, and Justin, who ultimately turned on his abusive father, has been delivered from the clutches of his malevolent biological family, and will presumably find safe harbour with a new adoptive clan, the Collingwoods. It could be argued, with some justification, that this essentially optimistic rewriting of the original's decidedly downbeat ending waters down the impact of Craven's provocative debut, but I think that Illiadis was right to forge his own path here: his Collingwood family are warm, well-realised and above all, nice people who deserve a break, whereas Craven's suburbanites were smug, complacent and one-dimensional caricatures of middle-class morality. This version may not have the socio-cultural resonances or shock value of its predecessor, but it is a taut, effective, and relatively intelligent film which deserves to be considered on its own merits.

Bernice M. Murphy

Coraline
(Dir. Henry Selick) USA, 2009
Universal Pictures International

3-D films have been undergoing something of a renaissance in recent years, taking advantage of groundbreaking developments in digital technology to break free from the flimsy red-and-green specs and often flimsier movie monsters of its first golden era. Animated filmmaking in particular has embraced the process since the release of *The Polar Express* in 2004 (Dir. Robert Zemeckis), and this year has seen the likes of *Up* (Dir. Pete Docter and Bob Peterson, 2009) and *Monsters vs Aliens* (Dir. Rob Letterman and Conrad Vernon, 2009) make waves at the box office. The process has an obvious appeal for horror filmmakers too, and continues to generate interest; January brought the release of *My Bloody Valentine 3-D* (Dir. Patrick Lussier, 2009) while another instalment in the *Final Destination* series (Dir. David R. Ellis, 2009) will take its bow later this summer. In *Coraline*, the first stop-motion film to be filmed originally in 3-D, the two trends converge, with suitably impressive results. Adapted from Neil Gaiman's 2002 book of the same name and directed by Henry Selick, *Coraline* presents a memorable and meticulously crafted gothic landscape, as might be expected from the director of both *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993) and *James and the Giant Peach* (1996).

The film's protagonist is the titular Coraline Jones (voiced by Dakota Fanning), who must leave behind friends and familiar surroundings when she and her parents (Teri Hatcher and John Hodgman) move to a new home, the Pink Palace. Her distracted and busy parents make half-hearted efforts to keep their daughter occupied, setting her apparently pointless tasks such as counting the number of doors or blue things in the new house. Otherwise left to her own devices, Coraline sets about exploring her new world, populated by a collection of unhinged neighbours – Russian acrobat Mr Bobinsky (Ian McShane) and faded vaudevillians Miss Spink (Jennifer Saunders) and Miss Forcible (Dawn French). She also encounters a stray black cat (voiced by Keith Gordon) who will prove a useful ally, and the oddball grandson of the family's landlady, Wybie (Robert Bailie Jr), a character who did not appear in Gaiman's original (apparently introduced here to assuage fears that a female protagonist might not have enough general appeal). Soon, Coraline stumbles across a hidden door which conceals a passageway to what appears to be an alternative and luxuriant version of her own home-life, populated by friendly-seeming doppelgängers of her parents, with one suspicious difference. Her Other Mother and Other Father both have buttons for eyes, as do the Other versions of her neighbours that populate this world. Unperturbed, Coraline remains tempted and comforted by the exciting and apparently nurturing alternative reality into which she has stumbled, until she realises that the Other Mother preys on children like her, tempting them away from the family lives with which they feel dissatisfied, tricking them into staying in the 'better' world of her making, and replacing their eyes with buttons. Coraline's refusal to comply evinces a drastic change in the Other Mother – or the Beldam as she is otherwise known – who reveals her terrifying true form and tries to imprison young Coraline. She manages to escape, but on discovering that the Other Mother has captured her real parents, she must now find a way to save them as well as the souls of the Beldam's previous victims.

The film's tagline – be careful what you wish for – suggests that this is fundamentally a cautionary tale, a modern-day fairytale with instructional morals concealed within it. Thematically, the film has much in common with both *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Wizard of Oz*, in which a young girl's adventures in a fantasy world on the one hand prepare her for the necessary and inevitable experience of growing into

adulthood, and on the other teach her that, despite its flaws, there really is no place like home. For all its well-choreographed circus mice, angelic dogs and magical seeing stones, Coraline's fantasy world remains an idealised, domesticated one, prompted partly by her feelings of resentment for her parents, and partly by her anxieties within a new home, an uncanny space in which everything and nothing is familiar. This becomes even more pronounced when she travels to the alternative world, which morphs into a nightmarish corruption of her own home-life in which she must learn to stand on her own two feet in order to overcome and defy her 'Other Mother', at the same time accepting her real mother (and father) for what they are – fallible people. Coraline's ordeal enables her to accept this realisation, and grants her the ability to recognise the magnitude of their smallest gestures (as when her mother presents her with a small, but thoughtful, gift). Unsurprisingly, then, the film ends on a *Wizard of Oz*-like endorsement of the pleasures of a more realistic home-life.

It's in the invention of both of these worlds, both real and fantasy, that *Coraline* proves most successful, and the employment of 3-D techniques is crucial in bringing both to life. Selick and his team have produced a subtle 3-D world in which the technique is neither intrusive nor ostentatious, saving its showiest and most charming piece of 3-D trickery for the culmination of the end credits. Elsewhere, it is used to augment the visuals, granting depth to the animated worlds on display by fleshing out backgrounds and textures and rounding out the richer visuals which are introduced as the alternative reality takes over Coraline's experiences. Such nuanced use of the technique means that when Selick & co. *do* push the envelope a little more (as in a creepy opening sequence which features needlework that appears to stab its way out of the cinema screen in a direct assault on the viewer's sense of perspective) it is all the more startling. The film's visuals are not merely intended as an all-out attack on the viewer, then, and they prove all the more unsettling as a result. The gradual introduction of disturbing images into a mundane world (such as a creepy doll with buttons for eyes that looks uncannily like Coraline herself, or the fog-bound woods that surround the Pink Palace) eventually gives way to the full-scale terror of the revelation of the Beldam in all her skeletal and arachnid glory, as the film hurtles towards its climactic showdown. In the end, then, *Coraline* is a beautifully realised vision of childhood fantasies and terrors – terrors that continue to resonate for an adult audience that may never fully grow out of them.

Jenny McDonnell