FILM REVIEWS

Bat out of hell: The Dark Knight and Hellboy II: The Golden Army

***The Dark Knight* (Dir. Christopher Nolan)** USA, 2008
Warner Bros

***Hellboy II: The Golden Army* (Dir. Guillermo del Toro)** USA/Germany, 2008
Universal Pictures

Even a cursory glance over the films reviewed in the last issue of the *IJGHS* alone reveals the extent of the checklist of contemporary anxieties that recent horror films have voiced, ranging from terrorist attacks on US and European metropolises; the war on terror; religious extremism (at home and abroad); Hurricane Katrina, the Asian Tsunami and related natural disasters; SARS and contagion; and the erasure of human contact and individual identity in an age of user-generated websites and shaky-cam news footage. The times they are a-becoming quite anxious indeed, all of which is contributing to the generation of an increasingly dark strain of studio output, in which any franchise worth its salt seems compelled to adhere to one cardinal rule: each successive release must be marketable as "the darkest instalment yet" (see, for example, *Harry Potter*, *Spider-Man*, and *Star Wars* in recent years, as well as Daniel Craig's reboot of James Bond). What's more, there is no room for a straightforward hero these days (significantly, the second instalment of Bryan Singer's *Superman* franchise seems stuck in development hell), and this summer in particular gave the anti-hero his day in the sun, from Will Smith's *Hancock* (Dir. Peter Berg), (a hard-drinking superhero who has lost his sheen and is badly in need of a PR tune-up) to Edward Norton's *Incredible Hulk* (Dir. Louis Leterrier), via an older, grumpier Indy in *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (Dir. Steven Spielberg). Top of the list, though, were the figures of Batman and Hellboy, both of whom were granted darker sequels to quite-dark-to-begin-with first instalments this summer in *The Dark Knight* (Dir. Christopher Nolan) and *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* (Dir. Guillermo del Toro) respectively. Of course, the origins of both go some way back in comic book terms; but the rise to prominence of their cinematic interpretations at this juncture seems particularly timely, making them a pair of likely candidates that just might suit an anxiety-ridden contemporary world's increasingly complex superhero needs.

First up was Christian Bale's return to the Batsuit in *The Dark Knight*, which appeared in July to universal hype and hyberbolic acclaim. With *Batman Begins* (2005), Nolan and co. seemed intent on making this fantasy world seem real; the film sought to exorcise the ghost of Joel Schumacher's Day-Glo vision by virtue of a relentlessly grim origins tale, and banished all vestiges of campy theatrics in its gritty underworld of bad cops, organised crime, and übervillains in the shape of Cillian Murphy's Scarecrow and Liam Neeson's Ra's al Ghul. Culminating in the latter's dastardly plot to use Gotham's monorail to infect the city's water supply with a 'fear toxin' and bring about its destruction, a direct attack on the heart of the city's infrastructure and a literalisation of paranoia-as-contagion that served as a clear indication of the film's post-9/11 mindset. The first film ended with an inevitable sequel-baiting coda in which the only good cop left in Gotham, Gary Oldman's Lieutenant Gordon (as he was then known), handed Batman the calling-card of a new criminal figure with "a taste for the theatrical" who has begun to make his presence felt. Enter The Joker (Heath Ledger).

The Joker was always going to be the main focus of attention even before Ledger's untimely death in January this year, so when the film finally arrived, all eyes were on his last completed performance, widely tipped as an early Oscar contender. It remains to be seen if the Academy will opt for a rare double-whammy of awarding a posthumous Oscar *and* recognising fantasy filmmaking, but make no mistake: this is Ledger's film. From his first appearance in the film's opening bank robbery, through his warped and ever-changing accounts of how he acquired his signature scars, to his final confrontation with the Bat himself, he carries the film with a twitching and twisted repertoire of tics and unconventional magic tricks involving disappearing pencils. The most successful trick of all, though, is the sleight of hand he achieves whenever he's onscreen – of distracting from the film's flaws and making *The Dark Knight* seem like a better film than it actually is.

The Dark Knight's Gotham is still a city under the influence of a far-reaching mob presence, though the streets seem to have become a little safer under the vigilant gaze of Batman and his ally Gordon. Into the mix has now been added District Attorney Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart), also intent on clearing the streets of Gotham of its criminal elements. Clean-cut and filled with all-American derring-do, Dent seems like a stand-up guy, just the kind of law-enforcing 'white Knight' that Gotham needs to ease it through its times of crisis and a more comforting figure than the titular Dark Knight, Batman himself – though he *has* stolen Rachel, Batman's girl (Maggie Gyllenhaal, taking over from Katie Holmes). An elaborate set-up later, the Joker, intent on bringing chaos to Gotham City, has begun to wage all-out war, demanding that Batman reveal his true identity, or the people of Gotham will be forced to pay the price. Another elaborate set-up later, there's an initial showdown between Batman and the Joker, which leads to yet another elaborate set-up, and so on, until the Joker's scheme – and the film – has run its course.

The film really amounts to a series of show-stopping set-pieces, then – the bravado of the opening bank robbery sequence; a frenetic chase through the city; the dark humour of a dragged-up Joker in a nurse's uniform ministering to Harvey Dent (well on his way to becoming the infamous Two-Face into whom he must inevitably evolve). These are linked together primarily by a series of moral quandaries orchestrated by the Joker, which make the point – again and again – that in times of crisis, the lines between 'good' and 'evil' become increasingly blurred. So Batman must choose to maintain the very anonymity which allows him to protect the city of Gotham or give up both to save lives in the short term; he must choose between saving the woman he loves or rescuing the greater good (in the form of Harvey Dent); and a boatload of commuters and a boatload of criminals must each choose to save their own boat (at the cost of the lives on the other) or damn the occupants of both boats. In the end, the film begins to resemble a choose-your-own-adventure book of impossible choices, in which all roads lead right back to the Joker and his chaotic worldview. Like *Fight Club*'s Tyler Durden before him, it seems, he's introducing his own version of Project Mayhem – but apparently with no goal in mind other than to plunge the world into chaos and test the concepts of ethics and morality to their limits. Within the world of the film *everyone* is compromised in trying to fight the Joker's own brand of nihilistic amorality on its own terms – even last good cop standing Commissioner Gordon (as he's become by the end of the film), who should be the still moral anchor of the film, succumbs, puts his family through a fair few traumatic situations in order to play the Joker at his own game. Indeed, the film's focus on this theme has led to some critics (among them, the *Wall Street Journal*'s Andrew Klavan) suggesting that it amounts to little more than "a paean of praise to the fortitude and moral courage that has been shown by George W. Bush in this time of terror and war"... Whether or not such a reading holds true is likely to be long-debated, but nonetheless, the film's fundamental point – that in times of travail, it's sometimes necessary to make sacrifices and do the wrong thing for the right reason – is inescapable, bludgeoned home over and over again, with a relentless lack of subtlety.

None of this is to say that *The Dark Knight* is a *bad* film, but the frenzied, gushing accolades with which it has been met really do seem to be overcooked. In truth, it suffers from a fairly severe case of over-plotting (ironic, in a film that is so intent on ideas of chaos), padding the film out to a running time that more than outstays its welcome. Moreover, Ledger aside, many of the lead performances struggle to compete. Although Eckhart and the ever-reliable Gary Oldman are fine, the usually dependable Maggie Gyllenhaal fails to succeed in what should be an easy task of taking over from a rather bland Katie Holmes; her Rachel is even more insipid, which has crucial ramifications for any feelings of empathy we might have in a number of key set-pieces on which the emotional heart of the film rests. And then there's Bale himself, who's much more reliable as Bruce Wayne, since it gives him another chance to polish his Patrick Bateman characterisation, than he is as Batman, saddled as he is with the most ludicrously guttural and gravelly voice this side of Harvey Fierstein, making it very difficult to take things seriously. And this is a film that demands that we take it seriously. Its overly-contrived plotting; its layers upon layers of bad guys and 'gritty' realism; its efforts at probing society's moral principles; and its numerous casualties of 'the darkest instalment yet' syndrome all demand such gravity. But in the end, these are all presented with such a heavy-handed touch that the entire enterprise falls short of greatness, and it's possible that it might have benefited from taking one of the Joker's sound-bites a bit more literally: *why ... so ... serious*?

After all, what's wrong with a bit of fantasy in these troubled times? This is why *Hellboy II: The Golden Army*, following hot on the heels of *The Dark Knight* in August, seemed like such a breath of fresh air by comparison. Del Toro is a dab hand at investing the real world with fantasy landscapes and storytelling techniques, and the film makes both of these credentials clear from the very beginning with a flashback to Christmas Eve 1955, in which young Hellboy (Montese Ribé) listens to a bedtime story told by his adoptive father Professor Bruttenholm (John Hurt), as we watch a projection of the story in the form of a stop-motion animation sequence with wooden puppets. The story tells of the war between humankind and the magical realm, which led to the creation of the titular Golden Army, a brutal, mechanical and seemingly unbeatable force. The army now lies hidden and dormant, in the wake of an uneasy truce between humanity and elf-kind, which confirmed the split between the two realms, granting sovereignty of the cities to humans and the forests to elves. To symbolise this truce, king of the elves Balor divided a crown which controls the army into three pieces, giving one to the human world and keeping the others for the elves. However, legend has it that his son, Prince Nuada, was dissatisfied with this turn of events, and remains firm in his belief that the magical realm is in decline and in danger of being wiped out by the human world. When he surfaces at an auction in the present day, intent on acquiring the human world's portion of his father's crown in an effort to reunite the shards and reawaken the Golden Army, the stage is set for the adult Hellboy's (Ron Perlman) latest outing.

Hellboy and the other survivors from the first film – pyrokinetic Liz Sherman (Selma Blair) and amphibian Abe Sapien (now voiced by Doug Jones, who's also the man in the suit) – are still working to protect the world from all kinds of supernatural beasties, under the watchful eye of Agent Tom Manning (Jeffrey Tambor) at the Bureau for Paranormal Research and Defence. Joined by new recruit Johann Krauss (voiced by Seth Macfarlane) – a being comprised of ectoplasmic energy housed within a containment suit – their investigations lead them to the mythical Troll Market (located under the Brooklyn Bridge) and the discovery that Nuada has made some headway in his efforts to reawaken the Golden Army, having killed his father and acquired one more portion of the crown. The third piece (as well as the location of the army's hiding place) remains in the possession of his twin sister Princess Nuala (Anna Walton), pronounced Noo-alla (to the slight consternation of Irish audiences). When Nuada kidnaps her

from the BPRD headquarters where she has been hiding, the crew must pursue him to the Giant's Causeway for the final smackdown.

As we've come to expect from del Toro, *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* is beautifully made, populated with nightmarish beasties that are strikingly realised – a flock of scavenging, cannibalistic tooth fairies; Mr Wink (Brian Steele), Prince Nuada's troll companion; the haunting figure of the Angel of Death (Doug Jones again) – and shot through with visual flair in its realisations of elaborate set-pieces like the Troll Market and the realm of the elves (which should prove good practice for his next project, *The Hobbit*). But at heart it's also driven by the questions of morality and accountability that haunt *The Dark Knight*, and is underpinned by another source of contemporary unease that is ecological in focus. After all, Nuada's actions are prompted by the erasure of his people and their forest realm, which implies that his cause is arguably a sympathetic one, and that the categories of 'good' and 'evil' are once again not so easily differentiated. The film brings all of these strands together in what is probably its most memorable sequence in which Hellboy battles a gigantic forest elemental – the last of its kind, as much of a one-off as he is – and must choose which world deserves to survive – a scene that lingers longer in the mind than all of the moral quandaries of *The Dark Knight* put together.

Like Batman's well-meaning vigilante, Hellboy is a complex figure, a demon who devotes himself to protecting his adoptive world from supernatural figures that he actually has far more in common with than he does with the humans that shun him. Both seem to be appropriate poster-boys for these mixed-up times, then, and both films present us with two misunderstood outsiders who do their best to protect their respective worlds by thanklessly working within potentially corrupt systems of governance and authority; who are faced with difficult choices in morally questionable times and situations; and who struggle with the prospect of having to make personal sacrifices for the so-called greater good. But in the end, Big Red edges it – because for all its gleeful excess and revelry in its fantasy landscapes, *Hellboy II* actually handles itself with a tad more subtlety than *The Dark Knight*, and proves the more satisfying, the more accomplished, and possibly even the more thought-provoking of the two.

Jenny McDonnell

***Martyrs* (Dir. Pascale Laugier)** France/Canada, 2008
Canal Horizons

Martyrs may well turn out to be one of the most important horror films of the past decade. Then again, it may not. Having sat through the film, read about it, and talked it over with the few people I know who have also seen it, I still don't quite know what to make of it. Neither did they. Simply put, it's either deeply profound or incredibly pretentious. Perhaps it's both. Like I said, I still don't know myself. Maybe that's the point.

If you haven't had a chance to see the film yet, I suggest that you stop reading this review now and come back to it later, for *Martyrs* is best approached with as little prior knowledge as possible, and a frank discussion of the movie demands that I discuss the plot in some detail. The film opens with a horribly abused girl in her early teens running screaming down a gritty side-street. She is Lucie (Jesse Pham), who has been kept chained to a chair in a warehouse and tortured by mysterious assailants for an unknown length of time. Rendered almost catatonic by her ordeal, Lucie is sent to a children's home, where she forms a close bond with fellow inmate Anna (Erika Scott) narrative then moves forward about a decade. A happy, bourgeois family – mother, father, two kids – living in a luxurious, modernist house in the middle of the countryside sit around the breakfast table in a perfectly normal-seeming fashion when there is a knock at the door. It's Lucie (now played by Mylène Jamponaï), all grown up and seeking revenge for the abuse she endured as a child. She has seen a picture in the newspaper and decided that these are the people responsible for her captivity. Paying little heed to Anna's pleas that she reconsider her actions lest she has chosen the wrong targets, Lucie brutally executes the entire family with a shotgun in a scene which evokes the climax of Claude Chabrol's *La Ceremonie* [1995]).

While we get the sense that Anna (Morjana Alaoui) is appalled at Lucie's actions, it's significant that she does little in a practical sense to intervene, and after the killings she sets about cleaning the crime scene and tidying away the bodies. Anna is deeply in love with her friend – feelings which the terribly damaged Lucie will never be able to reciprocate – and she will do anything for her. It's a dynamic which at first seems like it will evoke the final act twist of another, rather more conservative French horror hit, *Haute Tension* (aka *Switchblade Romance*, 2003), and it is this poignantly rendered relationship which will help furnish the film with its ambitiously transcendent finale. The fact that Martyrs, at least initially, features two mixed-race women from the margins of French society engaging in violent and transgressive acts also brings to mind Virginie Despente's cult classic *Baise-Moi* (2000). Ultimately, though, Laugier's film proves to be a very different viewing experience to either.

Following the murders, Lucie endures disturbing hallucinations featuring a horribly-deformed woman which wouldn't be out of place in a Japanese horror film and, as seen at the beginning of the film, resorts once more to terrible, and ultimately fatal, acts of self-harm. With Lucie dead before the film has even reached its halfway point, Anna makes a discovery that takes the narrative in an entirely different direction and towards its brutal and provocative final act. She finds a secret compartment which takes her to a nightmarishly modern, neon-lit underground dungeon which proves that her friend was right all along. The walls are decorated with photographs depicting scenes of immense human suffering and torture. What's more, there are a series of cells, and some of them are occupied… Inevitably, Anna herself soon becomes a prisoner of the mysterious group in charge of the dungeon, and suffers an appalling and debasing series of ordeals over the remainder of the film.

Needless to say, if described merely in outline, the scenario which furnishes the rest of the narrative would sound dispiritingly similar to that of at least five or six other so-called examples of "Torture Porn". Indeed, *Variety*'s critic has reductively described *Martyrs* as "*Hostel* minus the laughs", a summary which is kind of right in the technical sense, but misses the spirit of the film entirely. The crucial difference lies in the sheer breadth of Laugier's intellectual ambition here, and in the fact that unlike the eminently dislikeable frat boys and sorority girls carved up by Eli Roth and his ilk, Anna is a genuinely sympathetic character. Furthermore, the ramifications of her graphically depicted ordeal are presented in a truly humane fashion, a facet of the film which underlies they way in which it deviates from more conventional "Torture Porn" treatments of similar scenes, tend to be about audience titillation and shock effect In fact, *Martyrs* has a lot more in common with a film like Steve McQueen's Hunger strike drama *Hunger* (2008) than the likes of *Captivity* (2007) or *The Strangers* (2008), both of which it superficially resembles, in that it attempts to delve into the effects that confinement and dehumanising treatment can have upon an individual, and interrogates the philosophical implications of the term "self sacrifice" at considerable length.

Those responsible for the incredibly brutal ill-treatment meted out first to Lucie and then Anna do not carry out their actions in order to satisfy twisted sexual or sadistic urges, but for reasons which are even more disturbing. They have a plan, a twisted agenda with distinctly religious overtones, and her suffering is a distasteful but necessary step towards achieving that goal. Confined to a concrete cell, chained to a chair with her hair shaved off, Anna becomes a kind of analogue to unjustly treated prisoners anywhere in the world, at any time in history, regularly beaten senseless by a physically imposing man clad in black, force-fed just enough to keep her alive for the next day's abuse, her very sense of self submerged in a tidal wave of suffering. It is at this point that some viewers may start to find the film either too difficult to endure, or alternatively, downright tedious, as scene after scene in which the main character is used as a punch bag passes with hardly a line of dialogue. And yet I think this sequence may be one of the bravest things about the film. The meaning of Anna's ordeal – and crucially, there is a perverse logic to her suffering – lies in the ramifications of the film's title, and in the meaning of the word "Martyr".

A martyr, in the general sense of the term, is one who undergoes death or great suffering for faith, a belief or a cause. This is precisely what Anna is enduring, except that the cause is that of the group that has imprisoned her, not her own. She is, like Lucie before her, merely the unwilling means to the most dramatic end of all, nothing less than a conduit to supreme enlightenment. Her fate in the film's final moments leads to a scene of bodily mutilation so extreme that it will surely become one of the films's most talked about aspects. Yet it is the scenes leading up to this one, in which friendship and love come to the fore again, which will, I think, linger in the viewer's mind even longer than the undeniably gory special effects set-piece which has lent the film so much notoriety (indeed, it was briefly banned in France). Whatever you may ultimately make of the film, it's hard to deny the ambitiousness of what is being attempted here, nor the fact that the true meaning of the last few minutes will be debated by viewers for some time yet. As I said at the beginning of this review, I still don't know myself whether Laugier fully succeeds in everything he attempts here, or whether the film is ultimately meant as a kind of existentialist deconstruction of the modern horror movie or functions as a secular (yet still defiantly spiritual) riposte to the propagandistic horrors of *The Passion of the Christ*. Similarly, I can understand why some viewers may find the unabashedly "profound" finale unforgivably pretentious. The fact remains that for better or worse, *Martyrs* is a horror movie with unabashedly philosophical aspirations, and anyone with a genuine interest in the genre should see it, if only to decide for themselves.

Bernice M. Murphy

***Les Yeux sans visage* (*Eyes Without A Face*) (Dir. Georges Franju)** France/Italy, 1960
Second Sight

E.T. summed up the whole ball of wax when he said "Ouch". The plain fact of the matter is that pain and hurt are universal, but it takes a low-life like Spielberg to make that particular truth digestible for large portions of the cinema-going public. Indeed, the history of popular cinema demonstrates that truth is a peculiar thing, and is seemingly most palatable in sugary morsels divulged from the foam lips of a Christ-like alien puppet. A case in point is the popular and critical response offered *Les Yeux sans visage* (1960) upon its initial release. Georges Franju's second fictional film served up a rather fecund mix of pain and hurt, truth and lies that proved unappetizing and disagreeable for the majority of its viewers. Famously, the film's unflinching scenes of facial surgery gained it instant notoriety when several audience members were stretchered out from the theatre during the film's first screening at the Edinburgh Film Festival.

Of course, Georges Franju was no stranger to upsetting his audience's physical or moral sensibilities. Prior to *Les Yeux sans visage*, Franju's most notorious film was *Le Sang des bêtes* (1949);a twenty-two minute documentary shot in and around a Parisian abattoir that evokes a lyrical surrealism by counterpointing scenes of graphic animal slaughter with scenes of quiet suburban landscapes. Tellingly, this extraordinary film's notoriety is probably less founded on its audience's response to animal slaughter per se, and has more to do with the transgression of filming such scenes at all. In this instance, scenes of real death reaffirm the mechanics of cinema, specifically, the camera's ability to reveal or falsify reality. *Le Sang des bête*s, like all of Franju's work, including *Les Yeux sans visage*, can be seen to engage with the form and mechanisms of film as a means of displacing a confirmed reality and exposing the uncanny within a realistic setting.

Based upon a novel by Jean Redon, with a script by Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narjecac, *Les Yeux sans visage* is a routine, if somewhat perverse, story told in an extraordinary manner. The plot revolves around celebrated surgeon, Dr. Génessier (Pierre Brasseur), who is aided in his abduction of young women by his devoted assistant Louise (Alida Valli), so he might attempt a series of experimental heterograft surgeries to restore his daughter Christiane's (Edith Scob) disfigured face. The plot outline is distinctly gothic, containing as it does, a crazily obsessive doctor, a disfigured and imprisoned daughter, an obedient and devoted assistant, murder, experimental science, and an unrequited love from beyond the grave (kinda). Yet for all this, *Les Yeux sans visage* is strangely devoid of melodramatic thrills. In fact, one of the most remarkable aspects of *Les Yeux sans visage* is the way the excesses of its gothic narrative are frequently foiled by Franju's sedate cinematic style.

At the time of its release, Franju stated his intention was to create an "anxiety" film as opposed to a "horror" film. It might be worth noting here the significant contribution that incidentals like ambient sound effects, silences, and Maurice Jarre's musical score make to the film's anxious mood. More significant to this end, Franju adopts a clinical and intellectual approach that is exemplified by extended shots, mute exchanges and a rather static photographic style. The combined effect conjures a kind of off-kilter realism. Additionally, Franju decides against using film techniques like rapid editing or jolting jump-cuts as a means of "guiding" his viewer's emotional responses or provoking more traditional horror-audience screams. Certainly, the infamous surgery scene is photographed with an appropriately steady, unflinching detachment worthy of a medical documentary. Needless to say, this is not an

educational documentary, but Franju utilises the long take to suggest a documentary *reality*. Accordingly, the scene plays on an audience's assumption that seeing is believing. Franju displaces the physical "horror" by the very act of showing it, but unlike a Herschell Gordon Lewis blood fest/feast which displaces its horror with comedy via an unrealistic slapstick of gore and body parts, Franju sidesteps any comic displacement by making the scene appear realistic and believable and thereby reconfiguring the emotional content of the scene towards a kind of helpless voyeurism.

Les Yeux sans visage was photographed by the celebrated Eugen Schüfftan and the film's beautifully still compositions undeniably contribute to its clinical mood. The camera photographs the macabre goings-on with a detached contemplation that becomes increasingly unsettling. There is a terrific series of shots early in the film that show Dr. Génessier walking quietly through the rooms and halls of his sterile mansion, ascending two separate flights of stairs, then continuing on to a small room in the attic of the house where his daughter Christiane resides. Arguably, the very length of the scene is unnecessary, but the slow deliberate pace and quiet ominous mood it establishes superbly conveys the shame, secrecy, and even the methodical aspects of Dr. Génessier's personality, while simultaneously suggesting the physical and psychological isolation suffered by Christiane. Franju's static framing helps undermine the panorama of his exterior locations while, conversely, they dispel a sense of intimacy within his interior sets, so that characters seem physically subdued and resigned to their fates as they forlornly enter and exit the frame. This feeling of resignation permeates the entire mood of the film and is only ever disrupted during short-lived moments of physical violence, assault, or terror, when abducted women struggle against an imposed fate. The scene in which Dr. Génessier chloroforms a young woman lured to his house to view a room (supposedly for rent) is all the more unsettling because of its brevity. The suddenness of the assault and the pitifully short struggle that ensues are contained ruptures in the pervasive deathly still mood of the film.

A character's scream of terror is frequently the first and last means of protest in traditional horror movies. In *Les Yeux sans visage*, screams are infrequent and short-lived. However, while it can be safely said that the film does not boast any Fay Wray moments, it still manages to evoke the cinema of the early thirties, and its transition from silent pictures to talkies. In this respect, *Les Yeux sans visage* is peculiarly like a silent film with sound. Certainly, the film's small but superb cast defer from the type of emotive acting commonly attributed to silent movies, but the film is full of extended silences and wordless exchanges between characters. Particularly memorable is the mute shake of the head Christiane gives a moment before she stabs Louise in the throat, which marks Christine's silent rejection of the fate imposed on her and triggers the events that end the film. Significantly, *Les Yeux sans visage*'s plot resolution hinges less on a series of authoritative actions and more on a prevailing mood of French fatalism and a healthy dose of arbitrary justice. Ouch indeed.

This latest edition of *Les Yeux sans visage*, released by Second Sight, has one extra; an extract from the 1987 French documentary 'Cinema of Our Time – Georges Franju: Visionary.' Rather disappointingly, this ten-minute "extract" is only about *Les Yeux sans visage*. It would have been far more interesting to include the documentary in its entirety. For my money, the Criterion edition of the film (Region 1) released in late 2004 is a much better buy with plenty of worthwhile extras, most notably Franju's gruesome documentary *Le Sang des bêtes*.

Paul Cronly

***Saw V* (Dir. David Hackl)** USA, 2008
Lionsgate

Since the rise of the so-called "torture porn" sub-genre of modern horror, the *Saw* franchise has become the staple Lionsgate release for the Halloween weekend since its gory genesis in 2004. With each annual outing, the franchise has become increasingly susceptible to the "demise-by-sequel" rules of horror cinema, in which victims are usually subjected to increasingly ludicrous deaths and situations, recalling other multi-sequel horror releases of the 1980s, in particular the *Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Friday The 13th* series. However, *Saw*'s demise is not due to the ridiculous quips of masked killers nor the assurance of a jaded villain's immortality in order to facilitate further sequels which ultimately ruined these slasher films.

Saw differs from these predecessors in two distinctive ways. First, its "traps" and elaborate contraptions alone are precisely what continue to draw in its target audience, forcing the audience to posit themselves within the film's structure of blood and flesh self-sacrifice to atone for previous sins. Second, at the core of the narrative, the mastermind villain Jigsaw is revealed as increasingly frail and human, unlike the seemingly immortal slashers Jason and Freddy. Indeed, it is the death of the villain Jigsaw in *Saw III* (Dir. Darren Lynn Bousman, 2006) that should have marked the finite conclusion to this cerebral franchise.

This postmodern horror series can be read on many intellectual levels. Its philosophical influences range from Schopenhauer's "will to survive" to Nietzsche's "will to power", Freud's "death drive" and Gilles Delueze's theories on "lines of flight" and potential (discussed in depth by Jake Huntley in our third issue, November 2007), and *Saw* is acutely aware of its need to satisfy these criteria if it is to distinguish itself from its equally gore-laden competitors. Yet with each instalment, the series dilutes this clever approach with misdirection, McGuffins, red-herrings and the introduction of numerous accomplices to substitute for the original Jigsaw John Kramer's (Tobin Bell) absence. Now on its fifth instalment and with rumours that a sixth is in pre-production, the Saw series runs perilously close to self-destruction.

The series is structured on a two-tiered narrative – the first narrative tier running from *Saw* to *Saw III* and concluding with *Saw IV* to *Saw V* (and potentially *Saw VI*). Beginning in a dank bathroom in *Saw* (Dir. James Wan, 2004), Dr. Lawrence Gordon (Cary Elwes) and Adam (Leigh Whannell) wake to discover that they are bound in chains and must cut through their feet to escape Jigsaw's prison. Jigsaw (who is eventually revealed in a fantastically gothic and macabre fashion) forces his victims to "cherish life" by testing their will to live at all costs. In *Saw II* (Dir. Darren Lynn Bousman, 2005) Jigsaw, now in the final stages of brain cancer, entraps a collective of criminals and a young boy in a house filled with poisonous gas to test police officer Eric Matthews (Donnie Wahlberg). He is aided by Jigsaw-survivor Amanda (Shawnee Smith) who, it is revealed, will continue Jigsaw's legacy after his death. In *Saw III* (Dir. Darren Lynn Bousman, 2006), a dying Jigsaw initiates a final test whereby he ensures his successor's worthiness to continue his legacy and concludes with a devastating and clever twist. The series should have concluded on this note as it would have provided the audience with a complete sense of the narrative by returning to the first film's crucial premise of will, grief and survival. While each of the first three films is dependent on the continuing narrative, each film can also be considered to be of a high quality on individual merit, which is rarely seen in modern trilogies. However, in *Saw IV* (Dir. Darren Lynn Bousman, 2007), the mood and tone of the *Saw* series drastically changes, and this is the pinpoint of the second tier of plot which unfortunately becomes its downfall. The common thread of traps and grisly

contraptions are still evident and creative but the centre of Jigsaw's perverted moralism is corrupted and lost by providing an unlikely personal history – a device which has undone so many of horror's celebrated villains – and by introducing a new successor to the Jigsaw legacy.

While *Saw IV* concludes with this revelation, *Saw V* (Dir. David Hackl, 2008) is concerned primarily with the notion of corruption and revenge disguised as Jigsaw moralism, and focuses on how the last cop remaining on the case, Agent Strahm (Scott Patterson), intends finally to reveal and capture Jigsaw's second accomplice. Revisiting the same situation as seen in *Saw II* where a collection of corrupt criminals are subjected to a series of torments, both stories run concurrently and cause confusion as they collapse the timelines of the sequels by re-entering the previous films and revert back to the second narrative tier begun in *Saw III* as Jigsaw/John Kramer lies dying. The confusion of re-entering the earlier films is wholly unnecessary and it creates a false sense of time, lending to a reading that these events are happening simultaneously (in one scene, it reads that the "bone twisting crucifixion" scene in *Saw III* occurs just moments before an elaborate group trap in *Saw V*). This effectively collapses the fourth instalment largely into both a flashback sequence and recruitment exercise which borrows the concept of a "real-time" countdown, familiar to viewers of the television series *24* (2001 –). This unnecessary overlay of plot hinders the flow of the film and intends to shock the audience by playing a double-bluff by unveiling the motives of Jigsaw's second accomplice (who is revealed at the conclusion of *Saw IV* anyway, effectively removing any surprise element from *Saw V*), and showing how his legacy as the new Jigsaw continues.

The overwhelming flaw of the film lies with the evident lack of John Kramer/Jigsaw (Tobin Bell) onscreen, which highlights exactly why the series should not have continued beyond *Saw III*. The central performances of Agent Strahm (Scott Patterson) and Jigsaw's accomplice are poor and provoke questions on how this accomplice, who does not exude any of John Kramer's intellectualism, is even capable of creating such contraptions for the victims. However, we are provided with some interesting performances by television stars Julie Benz (Darla from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*) and Carlo Rota (Morris O'Brien from *24*) which keeps the collective's "game" watchable and suitably hostile.

Overall, the sense of horror and revelation so familiar and expected in the *Saw* franchise is utterly lost at the conclusion of this film. Not only is there genuinely no huge surprise awaiting but, with the clear clear set-up for what will hopefully be the final instalment, one would not be completely surprised if there is an additional accomplice introduced to dilute it further and continue the franchise far beyond its original concept and brilliantly brutal beginnings. Unfortunately, the tag-line irks most of all: 'You won't believe how it ends!' it claims – and sadly, I didn't.

Sorcha Ní Fhlainn

***Blacula* (Dir. William Crain)** USA, 1972

***Scream Blacula Scream* (Dir. Bob Kelljan)** USA, 1973
Optimum Home Entertainment

One of the great joys of genre cinema is that occasionally an actor will give a performance so brilliant that not only does it threaten to overwhelm the film in which it appears, but it can define their careers and even, I like to think, justify their lives. Ernest Thesiger managed the unique trick of pulling it off twice, both times for his protégée James Whale, in *The Old Dark House* (1932) and *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) – and on both occasions succeeded in stealing the film from performers as iconic as Boris Karloff, Charles Laughton, Elsa Lanchester, and Colin Clive. Such a list would also include Michael Redgrave in *Dead of Night* (1945), Niall MacGinnis in *Night of the Demon* (1957), Margaret Johnston in Night of the Eagle (1962), Charles Gray in *The Devil Rides Out* (1966), Linda Blair in *The Exorcist* (1973), and Jim Siedow in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974). It would also include, with a vengeance, William Marshall's performance as the African vampire Mamuwalde in *Blacula*. The difference is that while most of the films I just listed are great, and those that aren't are not bad, *Blacula* is frankly rubbish. Thing is, nobody told William Marshall this, and so he thinks he's acting in an altogether better film, and possibly the greatest film ever made. While everyone else involved knows damn well that they're making a Blaxploitation quickie, as far as Marshall's concerned, he's Othello with fangs.

Blacula opens in 1780, with African Prince Mamuwalde and his wife visiting Castle Dracula, to seek the Count's assistance in ending the slave trade. (Told you it was rubbish, though in the film's sole moment of wit, Mamuwalde notes that he has been particularly impressed to meet a 'Dr Duvalier' at the Count's dining table.) In Charles Macauley, the film has possibly the worst-ever screen Dracula – worse than David Niven in *Vampira*, worse than John Forbes-Robertson in *The Legend of the 7 Golden Vampires*, perhaps even as bad as Marc Warren in the BBC's calamitous 2006 adaptation of Bram Stoker's novel. I wondered whether this wasn't deliberate, as a kind of inverse counterpoint to Marshall's magnificence.

Mamuwalde is vampirized by the Count and imprisoned forever in a locked coffin. The film then shifts to 1972, when Castle Dracula has been bought by a pair of gay antiques dealers, seeking 'the very *crème de la crème* of camp'; and so Mamuwalde's coffin is shipped Stateside. Honestly, what is it with vampires and gay antiques dealers? Stephen King must have been taking notes here, I think, as readers will already have spotted that this is the exact same premise which animates the vampire attack in *'Salem's Lot*, published not long after, in 1975. King's Barlow and Straker may be gay purveyors of 'old things, fine things', but they are nothing like the camp pairing in *Blacula* – it was as though Larry Grayson and Dick Emery had somehow wandered off the stage of *Sunday Night at the London Palladium* and into a Blaxploitation movie. I think one of them actually does say something like, 'Shut that door, you honky mofo! Ooh! You are awful! *But I like you*!', though I may be misremembering slightly. In fact, such is the stereotyping of this film that I did find myself wondering whether I wasn't watching some kind of rather subtle satire: at one point, one white cop actually turns to another and says, 'How can you tell? They all look alike.' After all, the film does have a kind of wacky anti-slavery message, and does refer in passing to Black Panther violence, as well as to the black middle class moving out of the inner city and into the suburbs. Perhaps, like Richard Matheson in *I Am Legend*, Crain, Marshall and company are actually using the vampire narrative as a comment on American race relations. After all, *The Omega Man*, the adaptation of Matheson's novel released the year before *Blacula*, had famously featured an inter-racial romance between Charlton Heston and Blaxploitation regular Rosalind Cash. Perhaps William Marshall knew something the rest of us didn't, and *Blacula* is rather a good film after all.

Well, perhaps not, but it does have all the usual reasons for watching Blaxploitation movies – huge Afros, great threads, a brilliant soundtrack (featuring disco legends the Hues Corporation), and a vivid feel for 70s urban cool. These are in themselves substantial reasons for wanting to watch any movie, though *Blacula* also has a number of incidental pleasures for us genre-hounds. Elisha Cook Jr's in it, of course, as a sleazy, one-handed mortuary attendant; as is Ji-Tu Cumbuka, less terrifying than usual, but still a badass dude. Perhaps best of all is former *chanteuse* Ketty Lester, easily the scariest thing in the film as vampire cabbie Juanita Jones. Lester's probably best-known for her 1962 transatlantic Top 5 hit, 'Love Letters'. You know the one: 'Love letters stake through your heart / Keep us so near while apart…' (At least, that's what I think she sang, though again I may be wrong.)

The pleasures of *Scream Blacula Scream* are, as a result of the Law of Diminishing Returns, all incidental, but still quite gratifying. Firstly, there's the unimproveable title, which justifies the whole endeavour by itself. William Marshall's back, as imperious as ever, and he's joined this time by an actual screen legend, Pam Grier (playing a voodoo priestess!). There are a couple of notable TV cops in supporting roles: Bernie Hamilton, Captain Dobey in *Starsky and Hutch*, pops up as a kind of voodoo hobo; and here's Michael Conrad as a police lieutenant, practicing the kind of ostentatiously formal diction that was to become his trademark as Sgt Esterhaus in *Hill Street Blues*. My favourite bit of the film has future Dynasty star Richard Lawson as Willis, Mamuwalde's superfly apprentice vampire, genuinely aggrieved that he can no longer see his spectacular pimp outfits in the mirror: 'This really ain't hip!'

The two *Blacula* films may not be aesthetic monuments to the human condition, not exactly, but I was very pleased to see them again. Well done to Optimum for releasing them in a double bill like this.

Darryl Jones

***THE MUMMY* (Dir. Karl Freund)** USA, 1932
Universal Pictures UK

When *The Mummy* was first released, in December 1932, it was poorly received and made only a modest profit, a fact that seems as surprising today, given its long-standing reputation as the third great horror film of the sound era, as it must have been to Universal Studios at the time. Seeking to capitalise on their success with both *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* of the previous year, the company had put together what today would be called the perfect "package": Karl Freund, cinematographer of *Dracula*, as director, John L. Balderston, who had adapted the stage versions of both *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* for the screen, as scriptwriter, and a cast drawn from both films, headed by none other than the Frankenstein monster himself, Boris Karloff – or "Karloff the Uncanny", as Universal's publicity department decided to dub him. And throughout the preceding decade, the world had been gripped by Egyptomania, in consequence of the discovery, by Howard Carter in 1922, of the unopened tomb of the Pharaoh Tutankhamun, an event itself followed by a press-generated conspiracy theory which insisted on greeting the death (however natural and explicable) of any member of Carter's expedition as a direct manifestation of the 'Curse of the Mummy'.

So why did *The Mummy* not do what was known as "boffo business" at the box-office? One reason may have been that it lacked the literary and theatrical pedigrees of its predecessors, allowing critics to treat it with the customary dismissiveness reserved for horror films. *The New York Times*, while praising the scenes of Imhotep's resurrection and burial, concluded, "But most of *The Mummy* is costume melodrama for the children." As Christopher Frayling has pointed out, many people's memories of the film extend no further than the first ten minutes, from which it can be deduced that even children may have found a film in which the main menace appears to do little more than look sinister and spout mumbo-jumbo rather a let-down compared to, say, Dracula's transformative abilities or the Monster's talent for mayhem. Furthermore, according to Leslie Halliwell, women "generally hated" mummy films, which seems rather odd in the case of the 1932 version, given that it is, as much as anything else, a love story, albeit of a decidedly "uncanny" bent. Considering these factors, then, it can perhaps be seen how a horror film with no claims to literary respectability, one which shot its bolt, in terms of shock value, in the opening sequence, and whose 3,700-year-old leading character was unlikely to pose a serious threat to Ronald Colman (or even Bela Lugosi) in the heart-throb stakes was always going to prove something of a hard sell to the film-going public of the day.

Whatever the causes of its initial reception, it can certainly be said that Universal have done their very best to extract every last cent from the film in the DVD era. Single-disc and *Legacy Collection* editions, a double-bill with *Creature From the Black Lagoon*, and now the inevitable 2-Disc Special Edition have all been peddled with a persistence that would make even an Egyptian street-seller pause for breath. So, what's so "special" about this Special Edition? Well, not much, actually. Disc One is exactly the same, even down to the *Classic Monster Collection* label, as the original single-disc edition, while Disc Two comprises three supplemental programmes of wildly varying quality. The first of these is a 25-minute profile of Universal's make-up genius, Jack P. Pierce, entitled *He Who Made Monsters: The Life and Art of Jack Pierce*. Perfectly acceptable, if unremarkable, it includes soundbites from the likes of Christopher Frayling, Kim Newman, and Stephen Jones, along with contributions from make-up artists such as Rick Baker and Tom Savini. All in all, it's rather short on biographical material (the fact that Pierce was born Janus Piccoulas, in Greece, goes unmentioned) and rather long on technical terms such as "collodion" – none of which adequately explains why his heirs, despite all the myriad technical advances available to

them, have failed to produce anything even remotely as memorable as, say Pierce's make-up for Karloff as Ardath Bey, as seen in what remains one of the most terrifying close-ups in cinema history.

Frayling also pops up, looking distinctly out-of-place, in *Unravelling the Legacy of The Mummy*, a remarkably trite, eight-minute waste-of-time principally cobbled together from publicity puffery for the preposterous *The Mummy Returns* (2001). Much more satisfactory, and perhaps the sole reason for investing in the 2-Disc Special Edition if one already owns the single-disc version, is the 1998 documentary, baldly titled *Universal Horror*, made by Kevin Brownlow for Turner Classic Movies in 1998. As one would expect from Brownlow, this is a proper documentary film, not to be confused with the moronic PR exercises all too often palmed off on the paying public as DVD extras, and one can easily imagine it coming as something of a shock to his TCM paymasters, who were probably expecting something rather more bland, to judge by their usual programming efforts. Informed by Brownlow's unsurpassed knowledge of silent film, *Universal Horror* not only paints a fascinating portrait of this most European (and eccentric) of studios, but also illustrates the often direct influence that earlier films, including Paul Wegener's *Der Golem* (1920) and Rex Ingram's *The Magician* (1926), had on directors such as James Whale. Equally absorbing are the first-hand accounts (from author Ray Bradbury, actor James Karen, and the late Forrest J. Ackerman, founder of *Famous Monsters of Filmland* magazine) of the impact the Universal films had on their original release. In addition to the deft narration spoken by Kenneth Branagh, the comments of film historian David J. Skal provide an historical and cultural context too often absent from the (frequently puerile) writings of many of his contemporaries and compatriots in this field. *Universal Horror* has been included as an extra on at least three previous releases, as part of the *Universal Monsters Legacy Collection*, and on the Region 1 75th Anniversary editions of both *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* (the latter still shamefully unreleased on Region 2, thereby depriving a significant portion of the English-speaking world from enjoying the insights of *IJGHS* stalwart Darryl Jones on the subject of Messrs. Lugosi and Karloff), and, if nothing else, one hopes that its inclusion on this Special Edition will spur the DVD release of Brownlow's earlier films, such as *Hollywood* (1980), *Unknown Chaplin* (1983), and *D.W. Griffith: The Father of Film* (1993), to say nothing of his and the late David Gill's restoration of Rex Ingram's *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.*

As can be seen, these extras, of whatever standard, are only peripherally connected to *The Mummy* itself, leaving those requiring further information to turn to Paul M. Jensen's commentary. Delivered in a rather dry and schoolmasterly manner not inappropriate to its deliberately-paced subject, it proves most interesting when examining the influence of Rider Haggard's *She* (1887) on the development of the reincarnation and "love across the centuries" themes in *The Mummy*, an influence explained by the fact that John L. Balderston was simultaneously working on an adaptation of the Haggard novel while writing the screenplay of the latter. (Mr. Jensen, however, seems to be unaware of Leslie Halliwell's contention that most of the elements found in *The Mummy* had originally appeared in two short stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle – 'The Ring of Thoth', 1890, and 'Lot No. 249', 1892.) The proposal by Mr. Jensen suggesting the uncredited participation of director Karl Freund in the writing of the script appears, on the evidence presented, to be entirely valid.

Despite certain faults – its leisurely pace, its staginess, and Freund's sometimes clumsy camerawork and editing – *The Mummy* remains the best film of its kind for three reasons: Karloff's subtle and mesmerising performance, Jack Pierce's remarkable make-up, and Balderston's decision to present Imhotep in the modern-day guise of Ardath Bey, thereby making the character both real and even sympathetic, as opposed to a lumbering brute in bandages (the later Universal Mummy films, and Hammer's 1959 version) or a mere prop for increasingly overblown CGI effects (Universal's "franchise" films of recent

vintage). So settle back, and let Karloff the Uncanny “awaken memories of love and crime and death” as only Karloff the Uncanny can . . .

John Exshaw