Pet Sematary (dir. by Kevin Kölsch and Dennis Widmyer, 2019)

Pet Sematary (2019) directly addresses an audience familiar with *The Conjuring* (dir. by James Wan, 2013). Audiences in today's horror-saturated film market can be expected to have achieved a level of genre-literacy perhaps only rivalled by that created by the American mainstream horror boom of the 1970s. *The Conjuring* marked a pivotal return to the stylistic and narrative techniques of this era, making use of such familiar tropes as the young family moving to a new house in need of refurbishment, underlying familial tensions, strange things going bump in the night, and the family pets somehow being the only ones to notice. Wan's *Conjuring* franchise returns flamboyantly to this golden era of 70s American horror, constructing worlds blatantly designed to frighten and sequences in which the jump scares are all but signposted for the viewer. It is similarly by continuing to evoke the structures and classic tropes of 70s American horror cinema that *Pet Sematary* succeeds.

The first five minutes of *Pet Sematary* are a masterclass of exposition. First, we are introduced to our central family, for the benefit of anyone who has managed to avoid Stephen King's ubiquitous source material (*Pet Sematary*, 1983) and its previous film adaptation (dir. by Mary Lambert, 1989). Louis and Rachel Creed (Jason Clarke and Amy Seimetz) are parents to nine-year-old Ellie (Jeté Laurence) and two-year-old Gage (Hugo and Lucas Lavoie), and the family cat. We see them moving in to their new home, uneasily settling in, and introducing themselves to the slightly off-kilter locals in rural Maine. Without further ado, Ellie finds her way into the eponymous 'Pet Sematary', following an eerie procession of children through the expansive forest behind her new home to the eponymous make-shift burial ground. Elderly neighbour Jud (John Lithgow) later warns Ellie and her parents away from the graveyard and the danger beyond, thus completing the 'ready-steady-go' expository opening sequence. While this technique is economical in its use of time, there are resultant narrative and atmospheric problems generated by such efficient filmmaking, which sacrifices depth and complexity in favour of immediate gratification. On the one hand, the directors avoid patronising their horror-literate viewers with an unnecessary guessing game as to whether or not sinister events are about to transpire. On the other hand, there is a loss in atmospheric crescendo, leading unfortunately to the creation of a diegetic world that feels as if it is still being formed as the plot relentlessly builds around it. The film as a whole is left scrambling to catch up with its own fast-paced plot.

For example, in the rush to get Ellie to the graveyard, the filmmakers miss a crucial mood-building opportunity, and focus only briefly on the eerily alluring aesthetic of the

children's procession to the 'Pet Sematary'. Each child dons an uncanny animal mask, and they march through the darkened woods in time with the slow, lulling rhythm of their drums. This highly effective and affective composition is under-utilised in the film, the atmospheric build up of which would have benefitted greatly from further exploitation of the tension and stylistic excess offered by this spectacle. The procession is only included in two scenes and the camera never lingers on it; it appears that Kölsch and Widmyer's desire to maintain the inexorable forward motion to the plot takes precedence over diegetic mood and style. The decision to limit the incorporation of stylistic excess such as the children's funeral procession seems out of place in a film that otherwise celebrates the horror genre's flair for the dramatic, as is seen with the mist that sweeps through each graveyard scene, or the devilishly indulgent scenes of gore and violence.

The latter are certainly impressive. Once Ellie has been killed, buried, and resurrected by the mysterious powers of the ancient gravesite that is hidden beyond its pet-centred counterpart, she embarks on particularly visceral sprees of violence. Lithgow's part-character, part-exposition machine connects it to the spirit of the Wendigo when explaining Ellie's transformation to Louis. This evil, hyper-violent, and necromantic creature stems from the folklore of the Algonquin tribes of Northern America. The concept of the Wendigo is not given extensive screen time in this film, which seems to be reluctant to expose itself to critiques of cultural appropriation or problematic fetishisation of native mythology. The legend of the Wendigo nonetheless pervades the events of the film; specifically, the creature's influence is said to incite 'grotesque' violent behaviour and severe cannibalistic tendencies in its victims.[1] This mythology in mind, if given the choice to eat before or after this film, I would advise the more delicate-stomached among us to choose the latter. It is a credit to Kölsch and Widmyer that such brutal scenes are incorporated in a controlled manner, maintaining a respectable distance from the gore-horror sub-genre. Story and violence are here interrelated, rather than the former being dictated by a preoccupation with bloodlust.

Nevertheless, the rapid-fire storytelling mentioned above is also to the detriment of character development. This is a pity, as the glimpses of character back-story that we are given are the most emotive and intriguing moments of the film. The most intellectually engaging scenes appear during a flashback sequence to Rachel's childhood trauma. We learn that, as a child, Rachel was left home alone, forced to care for her chronically ill sister, Zelda

[1] Robert A. Brightman, 'The Windigo in the Material World', *Ethnohistory*, 35.4 (1988), 337-79.

(Alyssa Brooke Levine). In this flashback, Zelda, who suffers from the crippling effects of spinal meningitis, seems to taunt Rachel spitefully. The able-bodied Rachel has access to all the life experiences from which Zelda's illness excludes her. The child Rachel, so tormented by her sister, resorts to sending her meals through the house's dumb-waiter. In a tension-laden sequence, Rachel witnesses her sister's death, as Zelda falls into the contraption. Rachel is haunted by the clamorous sounds of her sister's demise and the unsettling image of her corpse twisted and tangled in the constricting space. This is a dramatic departure from King's book, in which Zelda dies due to complications associated with her disease. Kölsch and Widmyer's decision to deviate from the novel is incredibly well executed and thought provoking. This change from King's original text allows the film to explore more deeply the film's overarching theme of young children dealing with the loss of a sibling, and indeed the trauma of grieving parents raising the child left behind. The jarring imagery in this sequence has the ability to haunt the viewer long after the final credits roll.

This same praise cannot be directed at the instant-gratification-orientated jump scares that characterise the rest of the film. Although these fulfil their immediate goal, they lack the emotional intensity and longevity of unease offered by the Rachel-Zelda sequence in particular. Ultimately, *Pet Sematary* is a decent (if somewhat too conservative) film. The jump scares hit their marks, the gory violent scenes are well integrated, the performances – particularly those of Clarke and Lithgow – are strong, and there are flickers of engaging characterisation that make one hope that Kölsch and Widmyer's rumoured sequel to *Mama* (dir. by Andrés Muschietti, 2013) reaches cinemas sooner rather than later. Nevertheless, the over-privileging of plot pace does a disservice to the film's glimpses at character complexity and atmospheric build-up. The commitment to the fast-paced, constant forward motion of the plot is a narrative technique also frequently observed in the work of Wan, particularly in relation to the *Insidious* (2010-18) and *Conjuring* (2013-present) franchises. In contrast to Wan's work, which consistently incorporates character- and atmosphere-building asides, Kölsch and Widmyer limit such asides to select, almost stand-alone sequences, such as the children's funeral procession to the Pet Sematary or the Rachel-Zelda backstory. This hinders audience identification with *Pet Sematary*'s characters, who, on paper, remain engaging. A natural result of this limited identification is the short-term quality of the scares, many of which cause a momentary jump but are soon forgotten.

The contemporary popularity of mainstream horror franchises risks lending a cynical 'production-line' quality to the large body of films produced. What must not be lost is the

sense of stylistic over-indulgence and excess that so compliments the horror genre, demanding as it does a balance of style, substance, and scares, in order most effectively to haunt its audience.

Rebecca Wynne-Walsh