Neil Jordan’s new vampire film BYZANTIUM takes its name from the ancient Greco-Roman city that later became Constantinople, known today as Istanbul, and like the city, its layers are deep and rich.

The “Byzantium” of the movie (a world premiere at the current Toronto International Film Festival) is the seaside English brothel where the vampire at the center of the tale, Clara Webb (Gemma Arterton), has created her base. She’s on the run from an ancient brotherhood of her fellow immortals, who gave her the dark gift. Its members are a misogynstic lot: They have a rule that females of their kind can’t create new vampires. But Clara broke the law: 200 years ago, she initiated her 16-year-old daughter Eleanor (Saoirse Ronan), and they’ve been on the run ever since. Eleanor, however, is now sick of hiding. Even more, she resents having spent two centuries as a teenager under the maternal thumb, and decides to break out.

With this premise as his starting point, Jordan returns to the vampire genre after 18 years away, and the result is satisfying, somber and moving. Jordan’s last movie on this subject, 1994’s INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE, was a lush, historical costume drama; BYZANTIUM, by contrast, is gritty. The magical and supernatural aspects of Moira Buffini’s screenplay are starker and more disturbing because everything happens in a recognizable

world. Jordan’s amazing sets veer from lurid nighttime carnivals and glossy shopping malls to windswept caves and Irish waterfalls.

Indeed, Sean Bobbitt’s nature cinematography and the accompanying sound design are two of the quieter and more unexpected reasons to buy a ticket for BYZANTIUM. Waves thunder. Birds scream. And the way Jordan films them, they’re scary. Every time a vampire is born in the world of BYZANTIUM, the aforementioned waterfall turns to blood—a combining of old-fashioned NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC-style camerawork with CGI that becomes more riveting each time the trope is used. These nature scenes are a bewitching locus—between the grit of the urban and indoor action that constitutes most of the film and the director’s more Romantic vision of the meaning of his characters’ lives.

Arterton kicks ass as Clara, and Ronan is wonderfully stoic as the 200-year-old vampire trapped in a teenaged form. Torn between the verge of reconciliation with her fate and a refusal that itself (like an immortal) won’t die, she veers hypnotically from anger to calm to love. The object of her desire is Frank (Caleb Landry Jones), a post-Goth teenaged waiter in BYZANTIUM’s haunted seaside town. His affection persuades Eleanor that freedom might be worth seeking. Jones is beautiful and simmering, never pretty, and always slightly disturbing. The aesthetic in the portrayal is that of the admirable yet fragile punk boys who seek out vampires in Poppy Z. Brite novels—but now with a young immortal woman in the role of biter.

On the bite, and fangs: BYZANTIUM will please all lovers of the vampire genre by virtue of its original thoughts. Buffini, who based this script on her play A VAMPIRE’S TALE, shone most recently (and darkly) in her adaptation of Emily Bronte’s gloom with the screenplay for the 2011 remake of JANE EYRE. In her first horror tale, she and Jordan take away their creatures’ jaguar fangs, giving them talon-like, single-digit ripping fingers instead. A bloodsucker reaching out for her love or her prey suddenly has new frisson. Further, BYZANTIUM gives us vampire cinema’s first central mother-daughter duo. (As if status-quo parent-child conflict in the adolescent context were not scary enough.)

Some will object to the slow parts in BYZANTIUM; others will raise boring objections to the movie’s use of flashbacks, which explain how the heroines became vampires. But slow parts give us time to breathe and savor—and chronological linearity is not what it’s cracked up to be. Jordan meditates in this film, rethinking his own work in INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE, among other things. As a stand-alone movie, BYZANTIUM works. For those who love good vampire cinema, the movie is a rapture.