When I was a teenager, I had this bad habit of dropping out of school. I must have gone to six different high schools before finally graduating. So what made me finally finish? Well, it was reading H.P. Lovecraft.

Lovecraft had this way of romanticizing academia, and I wanted to be a part of that club. I was sure that if I worked hard and graduated, I could go to Miskatonic University. This was before the Internet, and I still remember the despair I felt when, after graduating with a scholarship, I phoned Massachusetts directory assistance from the pay phone outside my apartment, only to be told that there was no such place as Miskatonic University.

Well, now there is.

The Miskatonic Institute of Horror Studies offers a variety of horror-theory and production-based workshops for students aged 14 to 29. Right now, courses are offered on demand, and individual instructors set their own rates and schedules and can elect to offer courses in their own city, or to travel to where their specific expertise is needed! By this summer, Miskatonic will have its own building, which will mean a more regular curriculum, in addition to specialty courses and one-off master classes. Stay tuned for developments.

The following reviews were written by participants in Miskatonic Course #102: Introduction to Horror Film Criticism for Teens, which took place at Aqua Books in Winnipeg, Canada this past March. The kids were aged 14 to 16, and over the course of three days, they watched five films, read writing samples from FANGORIA, *Deep Red*, *Rue Morgue*, *Video Watchdog*, *Eyeball*, *Flesh + Blood*
,
Diabolik
,
Giallo Pages
,
European Trash Cinema

,
The Dark Side
and THE PSYCHOTRONIC ENCYCLOPEDIA OF FILM, and took home DVDs of additional films for which they were asked to write a review of around 250 words.

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LET THE RIGHT ONE IN

Directed by Tomas Alfredson

Sweden, 2008

Reviewed by Owen Crilly, age 16

LET THE RIGHT ONE IN is based on the novel by John Ajvide Lindqvist and directed by Tomas Alfredson. It is a chilling love story set in a Stockholm suburb, centering on the relationship between Oskar (Kåre Hedebrant), an awkward, bullied young boy, and Eli (Lina Leandersson), a mysterious girl who moves in next door.

Unfamiliar with the genre, Alfredson decided to tone down many of the horror elements in favor of the romance between Oskar and Eli, focusing on the growing feelings of the two as Eli's secrets slowly come to light. Despite this, the film still contains many frightening moments, most based around Eli's vampiric nature. Somewhat atypically for a movie featuring a relationship between children, it comes off as sincere and realistic.

Alongside the romance, there are a few other stories unfolding during the course of the film: Håkan (Per Ragnar), an elderly man posing as Eli's father, who kills on her behalf and whose story implies a past similar to Eli's relationship with Oskar; several middle-aged friends dealing with the aftermath of a death at the hands of Eli earlier in the film; and the ongoing saga between Oskar and his school-aged tormentors.

Overall, the film thrives on atmosphere and sincerity. With a cold feeling throughout, most interactions feel as chilly and distant as the Swedish winter around them, with only a few brief moments of warmth that shine through in the latter half. Eventually, the film moves toward a climax as heartwarming as it is stomach-turning (involving the brutal dismemberment of three children) in a satisfying, if somewhat melancholy end.

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[REC]

Directed by Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza

Spain, 2007

Reviewed by Spencer Stefaniuk, age 14

[REC] takes on the role of a zombie-horror fake documentary with the Handicam-style filming used in movies like CLOVERFIELD and PARANORMAL ACTIVITY. Manuela Velasco stars as

a female reporter sent to follow the antics of a fire department on a routine night, but she soon stumbles upon a mysterious plot involving infections and contagions. Arriving at an apartment building with her cameraman, they follow the firemen, who try to safely secure an elderly woman who is acting hysterical and strange. The attempt fails, and the film crew ends up being quarantined along with the residents of the building, unable to escape due to the heavy government security surrounding the building. There are no chainsaw-wielding maniacs here, just mindless, violent, once-human monsters who want nothing more than to bite into your flesh.

The movie can be very frightening at times and relies heavily on the deliberately amateurISH camerawork, shock scares and the isolated atmosphere of a quarantined apartment block infested with an unknown disease. There is little time to get to know the secondary characters, unlike the 2008 remake of [REC] (called QUARANTINE); the characters are generally portrayed accurately, behaving as they would if a similar situation were to occur in reality. [REC] leaves very little to remind us we're not watching some scavenged videotape found in the remains of a bloodied apartment. It doesn't feel like a Hollywood blockbuster movie, perhaps because it was made in Spain. A few of the scares are predictable; however, this doesn't taint the quality of the film. Overall, [REC] is a pleasant addition to the zombie film and the Handicam subgenre alike.

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STUCK

Directed by Stuart Gordon

USA, 2007

Reviewed by Jaz Lindsay, age 16

STUCK, a film based on true events, was co-written and directed by the talented Stuart Gordon (RE-ANIMATOR, DAGON). It is centered on the characters Brandi Boski (Mena Suvari) and Tom Bardo (Stephen Rea), both leading their own independent lives when suddenly they collide—literally. The film is centered on the events after Brandi—thanks to a long night of binge drinking and Ecstasy consumption—smashes into the down-on-his-luck Thomas Bardo.

Frightened and confused, Brandi then takes Tom all the way back to her home, embedded in the windshield of her car. Through a series of unlucky and upsetting events, Tom suddenly finds himself at the mercy of this self-serving nurse.

Tom, as he is introduced to us in the film, is a very sympathetic character: on Friday morning he is feeling good, getting ready for a job interview, when he finds he is being evicted and the owner of the building is not about to give him back his things. In a daring theft, he manages to sneak out a few personal artifacts, including the good clothes needed for his interview. His day only goes from bad to worse as his arrival at the interview with all of his things in tow sends a bad image. Eventually, the employment office simply casts him out, telling him to “fill out some form.” He suddenly finds himself out on the street with nowhere to go.

On the other hand, Brandi is a young and cute nurse, working in a care home for the elderly. She has just found out late this Friday that she might be getting a very serious promotion, but she needs to prove herself by working overtime the next day. To calm down after work, she goes to a bar with her boyfriend Rashid (Russell Hornsby) and their friend Tanya (Rukiya Bernard). They get drunk, have fun—but on the way home, the two people’s worlds are brought together.

In the end, STUCK is a dark and twisted look at the “see no evil” attitude of our world. It is also a stunning look into human resourcefulness and just how strong and brave we can be when it comes to life or death. Brandi is constantly saying, “It’s not my fault,” yet she is doing these terrible things to Tom. In Tom, we can really read the desperation that being ignored puts into a man. All in all, STUCK is a twisted ride of shocks and a portrayal of simply despicable people working for their own preservation. Hold on, and be prepared to take a look inward after.

{jcomments on}