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MIFF 2012: “Sightseers” will tow you right into the dark heart of love

PUBLISHED ON AUGUST 11, 2012 BY **TOPE** IN **MIFF, REVIEWS**
TAGGED: **ALISON LOWE, AUDIO REVIEWS (COMEDY), BADLANDS, BEN WHEATLEY, CANNES 2012, DOUBLE INDEMNITY, GORE, GUN CRAZY, KILL LIST, MIFF 2012, PUNCH DRUNK LOVE, ROMANCE, SIGHTSEERS, UK**

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Sightseers

Directed by Ben Wheatley

Written by Steve Oram, Alice Lowe & Ben Wheatley (with additional material from Amy Jump)

2012, UK

Either Ben Wheatley is a boiling pot of pent-up rage, or he is the complete opposite and thus finds perverse pleasure in humouring the rage fantasies and violent tendencies of the frustrated working-class white English male. Even last year’s grit-fest, *Kill List*, is not entirely void of something approximating humour, even at its bleakest, blackest moments. But with this his third narrative feature, humour takes centre stage and everything springs forth from and brings forth comedy: the gory violence, the psychotic romance, the meat-and-potatoes relationship drama, the deranged road trip through northern England with a caravan in tow.



Thirty-something Tina (Alice Lowe) lives with her possessive, borderline personality mother in a house filled with countless photographs and sketches of their beloved deceased terrier Poppy, whose death by knitting needle is portrayed in the film’s one and only flashback sequence. Tina meets Chris, a nice and mild mannered Louis C.K. lookalike (not really) who claims to be on a six month sabbatical from who knows what. They fall in love (or something like it) and despite her mother’s very verbal misgivings about caravans and strange men invading her “sanctum”, Tina takes off with Chris on a trip. As they depart to the synth-bass growls of “Tainted Love” on the soundtrack, the film tonally establishes itself as one not to be taken too seriously while simultaneously demanding full investment in whatever is to come, if you are to enjoy yourself that is.

Like a guy sharing his passion for 80s low-budget horror with a new flame, Chris takes Tina on a tour through the Yorkshire region, introducing her to things close to his heart, such as heritage trams, the art of mobile living and the Derwent pencil museum. But what she is soon to find out – to the shocked/delighted laughs and groans of a Friday night crowd – is that Chris has a bit more on his chest and on his mind that the interests of a man twice his age.

For what it’s worth, it must be said right off the bat that *Sightseers* has some absolutely breathtaking images, and not at all in the grand, epic sense. As low-budget and DIY as his films are or seem, Ben Wheatley is a gifted visual stylist, and the way he chooses to build a sense of place, mood and character by the odd shot or two of an ominous landscape, a lone antenna or grasses shivering in the breeze is as effective a touch as it is in an Andrea Arnold film, and nearly – though not quite – as poetic. From the very outset the cinematography is striking, direct credit to DP Laurie Rose whose use of darkness in particular is masterful, not only in *Sightseers* but also in *Kill List*.

So, sheltered and lovably goofy Tina falls for a man who could be anything from a sufferer of pathological rage to an unrepentant sociopath and serial killer. Triggered by anything from jealousy and insecurity, to frustration, to a dropped ice cream wrapper defiling a third rate historical landmark, Chris embarks on a haphazard and blackly comic killing spree through Yorkshire leisure country, and Tina doesn’t seem overly intent on returning to her poor mum either. In fact, Tina turns out to be less of a meek mummy’s girl and more of an insecure, love-starved and rage-prone suburbanite herself. Like Walter Neff and Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity*, Chris and Tina’s romance/tryst becomes inextricably linked to the secret they share, to the glimpses they’ve had into the blackness of each other’s hearts.

Sightseers, at certain points during its 95 minute runtime, calls to mind some ultimately greater films (other than *Double Indemnity*), in particular *Badlands*, *Punch-Drunk Love* and *Gun Crazy*, keeping in mind that two of these are in themselves variations on the Bonnie and Clyde mythology. *Sightseers* has the cross-country carnage of Terrence Malick’s debut, the violent tantrums and giddy romance of *Punch*, and the psychological histrionics of *Gun Crazy*, in tiny doses that is. A dangerously angry man like Adam Sandler’s Barry in PT Anderson’s off-kilter 2003 jewel, Chris (played with hilarious conviction by Steve Oram) lets Tina believe that he is writing a book and that she is his muse, only to later bemoan his inability to express himself when he is in fact doing so perhaps a little too well. But unlike Emily Watson’s Lena, Tina cruelly learns that she may not be enough for Chris despite her unconditional devotion, which is when hell releases its bowels.

What is Wheatley, who co-wrote this film with co-leads Alice Lowe and Steve Oram, saying about discontent and discomfort and disappointment? What is he trying to say about being middle-class, mediocre and approaching middle-age? Is he trying to say anything at all or is he doing what artists do better than anything else: taking something complex and barely articulable and making it a little less so. Some do this with earnestness while others do it with blood and guts and gross-out gags. Many won’t take to the latter because it often stinks of exploitation and juvenility, and of this there are definite whiffs in *Sightseers*, but rather Chris and Tina than someone this side of the screen. But for all the talk of rage and gore though, this film is very funny, and it wants to be funny, in its droll, ironic, distinctly English way. It wants to make you laugh, even as blood squirts and skulls are pulverised against rocks. The crowd at the Forum Theatre in Melbourne ate this film out of both hands and then licked their fingers clean, or at least found it more than occasionally hilarious. Which raises the question: how much does the success of a tightly-strung gore romp like this depend on a generous audience response? Even a professed comedy which you might find breathlessly belly-busting can quickly cease to be funny in the face of hostile, deadly silent fellow theatregoers. Perhaps some audiences are more attuned to British humour than are others, but then *Sightseers* hasn’t earned too much love from its countrymen either, let alone non-English audiences. Curious.

Either way, the two leads, or rather three (because you must include the adorable terrier Banjo who won this year’s Palm Dog at Cannes for his spirited *double performance*) have splendid chemistry. As previously stated, the very amusing screenplay was co-penned by the two human leads and it shows. Accordingly, there is an ease to their performances, a naturalism that recalls the films of Mike Leigh, whose screenplays similarly originate from the actors. Lowe is an affable presence as Tina, perhaps being the audience surrogate for a sizeable chunk of the film. She is so vulnerable and doe-eyed; she just wants to love and be loved and she will do anything for love, and then she ends up doing too much.

The problem with a film like *Sightseers* is that it can be such fun to watch and such a visual pleasure to behold that one may fail to question whether it is simply an elegantly strung series of gags, belly-rolling one-liners and gore galore, and little else.

And then you consider the film’s strong emotional core and Ben Wheatley’s thematic preoccupations, and think to yourself that there’s perhaps more to it.

Tope Ogundare

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2 Comments

Tope says:
August 31, 2012 at 1:37 am

Philip, interestingly, this has already been brought to my attention.

I was referring to certain reviews I had read after the film premiered at Cannes, and I shan’t name any names here. These reviews weren’t damning, just a little lukewarm, particularly in regards to the brand of humour present in the film. Of course there has probably been an equal – perhaps even greater – number of positive reviews by British critics, few of which I was and still am privy to.

I agree with you. I think this film has some legs on it. Melbourne audiences loved it, as did I.

Those comments I made were more an expression of surprise at the responses I had read (having finally seen the film), not as a means of qualifying a belief that the film was mediocre, or that it would fail to impress UK audiences.

Reply

Philip Kemp says:
August 29, 2012 at 7:18 pm

Tope, I’m a little puzzled by your comment that “Sightseers hasn’t earned too much love from its countrymen either”, since the film hasn’t even opened in the UK yet. My guess is that it’ll do rather well – we’ve got a long tradition of deadpan serial-killer comedies reaching back at least to Kind Hearts and Coronets...

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Nigerian-Australian Sydney-based med student, film enthusiast and fledgling writer. Also a soccer fan and filmmaker in-utero.

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Sound on Sight Radio #330: ‘Compliance’ and ‘Tokyo Story’

PUBLISHED ON AUGUST 20, 2012 BY RICKY



Last week, we got to talking about the Sight and Sound poll, as well as its critics’ list topper, Vertigo. This week we switch gears to discuss Yasujiro Ozu’s Tokyo Story, which topped the filmmakers’ poll. That happens to lead ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

Sound on Sight Radio #331: ‘The Expendables 2’ / ‘True Romance’

PUBLISHED ON AUGUST 24, 2012 BY SIMON HOWELL



If you’ve been following Sound on Sight for any length of time, you’ll know that, for all of our love and affection for arthouse and foreign film, not to mention documentaries, we love a good terrible action film. So we ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

Best of Korean Cinema #1 – ‘Save The Green Planet’

PUBLISHED ON SEPTEMBER 1, 2012 BY RICKY



Best Of Korean Cinema is a new fortnightly article looking at the diverse world of the Korean New Wave. We’ll be looking at everything from romance to K-Horror and eccentricities to the revenge thriller that has become synonymous with the ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

Extended Thoughts on ‘The Parent Trap’

PUBLISHED ON SEPTEMBER 1, 2012 BY JOSH SPIEGEL



The Parent Trap Directed by Nancy Meyers Written by David Swift, Nancy Meyers, and Charles Shyer Starring Lindsay Lohan, Dennis Quaid, Natasha Richardson Who is The Parent Trap for, really? The more I think about the plot structure of the ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

Mousterpiece Cinema, Episode 60: ‘The Parent Trap’

PUBLISHED ON SEPTEMBER 1, 2012 BY JOSH SPIEGEL



Has it only been 14 years since Lindsay Lohan was a respectable child actor? Yes, friends, this week on Mousterpiece Cinema, Josh and Gabe move past the 1961 version of The Parent Trap all the way to its 1996 remake, ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

Awkward., Ep 2.10: “Pick Me, Choose Me, Love Me” reopens the care-frontation letter wound

PUBLISHED ON SEPTEMBER 1, 2012 BY DEEPAYAN SENGUPTA



Awkward., Season 2, Episode 10: “Pick Me, Choose Me, Love Me” Written by Lauren Iungerich Directed by Joe Nussbaum Aired Thursdays at 10:30 PM on MTV The explosion in reality television programming in North America over the last decade is ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

Seventh incarnation of Toronto After Dark Film Festival promises blood and laughs

PUBLISHED ON AUGUST 31, 2012 BY DEEPAYAN SENGUPTA



While the Toronto International Film Festival holds a well-deserved spot as one of the premier movie events in the city, fans of pulpier fare and cult classics never found a place for themselves the event. In 2006, however, these ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

A Beginner’s Guide to Doctor Who: Everything You Need to Know to Jump In with Series 7

PUBLISHED ON AUGUST 31, 2012 BY KATE KULZICK



Doctor Who is an international phenomenon. It’s the longest-running genre series in television history (2013 is its 50th anniversary) with a rabid fan base and, since its return in 2005, fairly wide-spread critical acclaim. With such a long history, it ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

Friday Noir: ‘Kiss Me Deadly’ is low on love, but high on attitude

PUBLISHED ON AUGUST 31, 2012 BY EDGAR CHAPUT



Kiss Me Deadly Directed by Robert Aldrich Written by A.I. Bezzerides U.S.A., 1955 Fear and danger frequently go hand in hand all too easily, be it in the world of the movies or in real life, the latter which serves ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

‘The Day’ a worthy addition to the siege horror genre

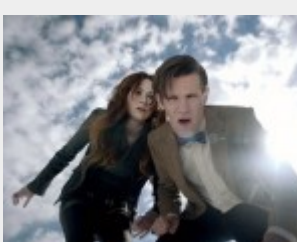
PUBLISHED ON AUGUST 31, 2012 BY GREGORY ASHMAN



The Day Written by Luke Passmore Directed by Doug Aarniokoski 2011, USA The Day delivers on the thrills one expects: splatter kills, seat-crunching suspense and visceral action set pieces are delivered in meaty portions, guaranteed to have audiences screaming and ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

BBC releases five webisodes ahead of the ‘Doctor Who’ season premiere

PUBLISHED ON AUGUST 31, 2012 BY DEEPAYAN SENGUPTA



The British television series Doctor Who has been a staple of the science fiction landscape since the 60s, and after a brief hiatus, has successfully re-established itself under the guidance of ex-showrunner Russell T. Davies. In recent years, the show has seen ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

The mesmerising ‘Berberian Sound Studio’ has Italian horror, Lynch and Polanski in its blood

PUBLISHED ON AUGUST 31, 2012 BY JOSH SLATER-WILLIAMS



Berberian Sound Studio Written and directed by Peter Strickland UK, 2012 Berberian Sound Studio is an unusual thriller with a very striking atmosphere. Set amidst the production of a 1970s Italian horror production, it is definitely informed stylistically by giallo ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

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