

## Cruel and Unusual

THE LOBSTER'S CREATOR COOLLY PROFFERS MORE PROFOUNDLY UPSETTING THINGS YOU CAN'T LOOK AWAY FROM

BY BRIAN HOWE

There's a certain type of movie in which chaotic strangers crash into an orderly family unit and unleash havoc. Recent specimens include Rachel Weisz vehicle *Complete Unknown* and Darren Aronofsky's *mother!*. Further back, there was *Funny Games* by Michael Haneke, the director who Greek auteur Yorgos Lanthimos, insofar as he resembles anyone, most resembles.

*The Killing of a Sacred Deer* is one of those movies, Lanthimos-style. If you saw *The Lobster*, you know what that means: an indigestible alloy of humor, cruelty, absurdity, rationality, cynicism, and pathos; an inexplicable premise that brooks no arguments and offers no answers; and characters whose unreal affect starkly outlines the psychological and ethical dimensions of their plight. This time, it's all sealed up in a Skinner box that probes the extremes of familial love and survivor's guilt, revenge, selfishness, and justice.

This is Lanthimos's second consecutive film starring a puffy yet alert Colin Farrell, who plays heart surgeon Steven with almost Swiss composure and efficiency. We meet him in a slightly strained conversation with clean-cut, sixteen-year-old Martin (Barry Keoghan, fresh off his *Dunkirk* breakout, who handles Lanthimos's blankly stylized prose with remarkable, vacuous menace).

Steven, arrogant and benign, presides over a tony little bourgeois household, while Martin and his widowed mother (a tremulous Alicia Silverstone) live in a shabbier part of town. But this doesn't sufficiently account for their relationship's stiff formality and furtive intimacy or the sense of inchoate danger around it.

Impeccably polite yet puzzlingly pushy, Martin insinuates himself deeper and deeper into Steven's life. Slowly and inexorably, Lanthimos metes out the context of their connection. The secret at its core is a time bomb ticking in the center of the film. When it goes off, with blurted abruptness, the second half rockets away into spoiler-



Barry Keoghan as Martin in *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* PHOTO BY JIMA/COURTESY OF A24

land, where a pageant of brutality awaits.

Lanthimos fires up all his devices to keep us off-balance in the relentless plot. Scary music pops up at the oddest times, more often during a dinner invitation than a threat or violent act. The voyeuristic camera is always creeping up on its subjects, down hallways and streets, redoubling our feeling of rushing to catch up with something we're not sure we want to see.

And there's the artfully artificial way in which Lanthimos people interact, a clashing blend of emotional neutrality and outrageous oversharing. "Our daughter started menstruating last week," Steven remarks to a colleague—this is what passes for small talk in Lanthimos. Steven's daughter, Kim (Raffey Cassidy), mentions the same thing to Martin, with just as little cue or reaction. The dialogue is one-size-fits-all: any character's lines

could just as easily be spoken by any other, which boils everything down to societal roles and individual motivations.

Lanthimos portrays a world full of arbitrary mandates that are always met with unhesitating, detached assent, which may be his way of telling us how to watch his movies. The characters here keep demanding to see one another's body hair. "You've got a great body," Kim drones to Martin, falling impassively in love. Steven's wife, Anna (Nicole Kidman, who intelligently fills Lanthimos's empty vessel with an inert scorn), habitually pretends to be under general anesthesia when she and Steven have sex, which is just the Lanthimostest.

Old white guys will be very keen on the film's classical framework (the title refers to the Greek myth of Iphigenia, who was sacrificed by her father, Agamemnon, to

placate Artemis), while a broader populace, fresh off *mother!*, will pick up on the glaring biblical references: there are crosses, there is the washing of feet, there are stained-glass impastos on fallen bodies. There is a man playing god and a malevolent deity cast down into a basement.

But this is all so much gold leaf on what is really a merciless rehearsal of the trolley problem, an ethical thought experiment that happened to memorably feature in a recent episode of the ingenious NBC sitcom *The Good Place*. A runaway trolley is barreling toward five people. You have the choice to either do nothing and let them die or pull a lever that diverts the trolley onto another track, where it will kill one person. Do you act and preserve the most life, or not act in the attempt to minimize your moral culpability?

As soon as I saw the strangely antiseptic close-up of open-heart surgery that begins the film, I knew critics were going to trip over themselves in the rush to compare it to cinematic open-heart surgery. (And they did.) But this is a rhetorical red herring. Lanthimos always shows us exactly what he's doing, but he never, ever shows us why. His heart is hidden, mysterious, supremely opaque.

Like *The Lobster*, *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* ends ambiguously. The person I saw it with has sent me at least six all-caps texts about its frustrations and inconsistencies in the weeks since. She's right. But she's still thinking about it, and so am I. I'm thinking about the knife Lanthimos twists into the classic dilemma: What if the helpless trolley operator is also the scoundrel who tied the people to the tracks? And aren't a lot of our accidents more like that than we'd care to see?

bhowe@indyweek.com