

Nick Davis
Film Discussion Group
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The Lobster (dir. Yorgos Lanthimos, 2015)

In the Hotel

David Colin Farrell: Best reviews in *In Bruges* (08); recently in *Miss Julie* (14)
Limping Man Ben Whishaw: Underseen gem: *Lilting* (14); now on B'way in *The Crucible*
Lisping Man John C. Reilly: Underseen gem: *Hard Eight* (97); nominated in *Chicago* (02)
Hotel Manager Olivia Colman: Big dramatic turn: *Tyrannosaur* (11); lots of comedy, TV
Nosebleed Woman Jessica Barden: *Hanna* (11), a thriller with Cate Blanchett and Saoirse Ronan
Heartless Woman Angeliki Papoulia: Launched into Greek stardom by Lanthimos's movies
The Maid Ariane Labeled: *Before Midnight* (13); another mainstay of recent Greek film

In the Woods

Rabbit Woman Rachel Weisz: Oscar winner for *The Constant Gardener* (05); *Youth* (15)
Loner Leader Léa Seydoux: *Blue Is the Warmest Color* (13); the most recent James Bond

Off Camera

Director-Cowriter Yorgos Lanthimos: Oscar nominee for *Dogtooth* (09); follow-up *Alps* (11)
Cowriter Efthymis Filippou: Co-wrote most of the recent "Greek Weird Wave" hits
Cinematography Thimios Bakatakis: *Dogtooth*; gay drama *Keep the Lights On* (12); *Blind* (14)
Film Editing Yorgos Mavropsaridis: oldest Weird Wave teammate; also the music editor
Art Direction Jacqueline Abrahams: vet of Gothic horror; shoots donkey in opening scene

Earlier films by Yorgos Lanthimos:

Kinetta (2005) – Not released in the US; about a man and a woman who stage purposefully unpersuasive reenactments of fights between men and women at an off-season hotel

Dogtooth (2009) – Oscar nominee for Best Foreign Film, about a contemporary Greek couple who keep their kids trapped in their compound and teach them wrong words for things

Alps (2011) – Drama about four trained dancers who devise a service wherein they study recently deceased people, well enough to impersonate them for families unready to let go

Also in the "Greek Weird Wave":

Chevalier (2015) – Festival hit by female director Athina Rachel Tsangari; comedy-drama in *Lobster* mode about six middle-aged men on a luxury fishing yacht, suddenly devising arbitrary tests to determine which of them is the "most manly," by completely unclear criteria

If you liked *The Lobster*...

Being John Malkovich (1999): Another surrealist comedy, albeit less dark than *The Lobster*, about the competing impulses to be yourself and gratify your own desires by learning how to “be” someone else. Remember, too, the flashbacks into the mind of a chimpanzee.

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (2004): My favorite movie of the last 15 years? Linked to *The Lobster* not only as a science-fictional satire of love—in this one, people pay to have their memories of former partners erased—but as a study of love enmeshed in bureaucracy.

Her (2013): Oscar winner, also set in a vague near-future, in which humans have come to rely ever more deeply on their computers’ operating systems—so much so that our lonely protagonist (Joaquin Phoenix) falls in love with his OS (voiced by Scarlett Johansson).

Some trivia about *The Lobster*

The Lobster won the Jury Prize at last year’s Cannes Film Festival, which sometimes implies a “third place” medal, and sometimes means some members of the jury loved the movie and others were strongly opposed to giving it the top award. Scuttlebutt from that year, when the Coen Brothers chaired the festival, is that the jury was torn half-and-half between *Lobster* and *Son of Saul* (which won the Grand Jury Prize). Since each movie had lovers and haters, they wound up giving the top award to a compromise choice, the French-Sri Lankan drama *Dheepan*, which I think is very good, and is quietly playing in the Landmark right now.

The Lobster was co-financed by the Irish, British, Greek, French, and Dutch film industries, which helps explain why at least one major cast member hails from most of those countries. The financing agreement also fostered job creation in each place: the movie was shot in County Kerry, Ireland, by a predominantly Greek crew and edited in the UK. The sound mix was finalized in Holland and the visual effects added in France, where it debuted. (BFI)

Foreign-born directors working in English are often assumed to have been pressured into joining a bigger market, to get access to resources and famous casts. Lanthimos describes himself as actively aiming for an English-language career (both of his upcoming projects are in English) even aside from the obvious difficulties of financing films in Greece, given the economics.

Lanthimos decided not to cast any actors who hadn’t seen at least one of his movies before, so they would understand what they were in for in terms of the surreal conceits and narrative strangeness. The two Greek actresses had starred in his previous two features. (IndieWire)

Lanthimos says he and his co-writer declined to imagine the rest of this near-future world beyond what’s in the story... so they did not ask, for example, whether the whole world is now organized this way or just one place, or where on the planet we are, etc. (IndieWire)

Lanthimos is prepping two more English-language features: one a period drama about the rise to power of England’s Queen Anne around 1700, starring *The Lobster*’s Olivia Coleman and Rachel Weisz; and a psychological family thriller with Colin Farrell and Nicole Kidman.

Broad questions about *The Lobster*

Chicken-Egg: Filmmakers and interviewers have described *The Lobster* both as a story of the untenable pressures and expectations that society imposes on human love (assuming that it already exists) and on ideals of human love as themselves artificial and imposed, burdening human relationships and forcing us through rituals that unite but also alienate us. Which do you think the film believes, and which particular scenes made you think so?

Realism and Surrealism: In the English and French-speaking worlds, *The Lobster* has largely been received as reviving a “surrealist” cinema that has not been very prominent since the days of Luis Buñuel movies like *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (about eight adult friends attempting a dinner party that constantly gets interrupted or moved) or *That Obscure Object of Desire* (a love story about a man and a woman in which two different actresses play the female role in different scenes and nobody ever notices). By contrast, *The Lobster*’s reception in Greece and in Eastern Europe has frequently viewed the film as a critique of massive bureaucracy and autocratic meddling in human emotions, linked to recent pasts or chaotic presents in those parts of the world. Which interpretation makes more sense to you?

Language: In Lanthimos’ *Dogtooth*, parents try to limit their children’s exposure to the outside world by purposefully teaching them the wrong words for daily objects. In *The Lobster*, to resist pressures both inside the hotel and within the rebel formation requires the Farrell and Weisz characters to step outside of language altogether and develop signals of their own. The problems or inadequacies of language are an especially rich theme for a filmmaker who has moved so determinedly away from his Greek “native tongue” and working in global English.

Compatibility: The conceit about being turned into an animal is the most famous “hook” in *The Lobster*’s plot, but what about the script’s critique of the idea that being in love requires sharing qualities in common, and even being able to tell people what your “best quality” is before getting to know them—exactly what many online dating sites compel users to do?

Singleness: Some academic writers like Michael Cobb have written about singleness as a kind of sexual minority, as intolerable to mainstream culture and its romantic ideals as LGBT love. In fact, many LGBT scholars like Cobb resented how the Supreme Court’s language in the *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision positioned marriage and partnership as universal aspirations, tightly related to citizenship. Do you think the film ultimately shares the hotel staff’s belief that people should want to be together or is it critiquing the world for mandating partnership?

Animals: Of all the different ways we could interpret the animals’ role in the movie, which did you think about the most: the way in which “picking your animal” revealed something deep about each person? the notion of being turned into an animal as an irreversible casting-out from humanity? the idea that living as an animal could be a kind of “second chance” at companionship, and was not *that* different in the film’s eyes from living as a person?

Rebellion: When I saw the movie, my first thought was that it was a unique satire of living under a totalitarian regime, followed by a second satire of all the rules and jealousies that arise within a “rebel” movement, followed by a stark test of individual conscience at the end. Yes, it’s hard to obey any “group,” but is it any easier to live a life of personal principle?

Key moments in *The Lobster*

Prologue: What do you make of the semi-standalone scene of the woman shooting the donkey? How did you interpret it before you had moved further into the film? Do we have any reason to believe that the woman knew which donkey to shoot? How could we connect this scene to other moments and themes of violence in *The Lobster* and what they signify about humanity?

Narration: What do you make of the Weisz character's sporadic narration of the movie, spoken from some distant point following *all* the movie's events, and introduced almost an hour earlier than our first glimpse of the character? From a plot perspective, does the presence of her narration give you any guesses as to what transpires after the movie concludes? From a tone perspective, did you have any reaction to the way Weisz reads the lines, or her awkward phrasing? From a moviemaking perspective, do you realize how rare it is to omit any scene where we "catch up" to the moment of narration, and to have a female narrator at all?

Editing: Lanthimos holds on Farrell almost entirely during his "intake interview" at the hotel, rather than cut back and forth to the person asking questions. Remember a similar technique we saw at last year's Oscar party, where Julianne Moore in *Still Alice* got to hold the entire scene in close-up as her offscreen doctor quizzed her about her early Alzheimer's symptoms. Not only is this a rare boon for actors, but we get to analyze their characters not just in the moments when they speak or hesitate (i.e., why does David pause so long before declaring himself heterosexual?) but also gauge their silent reactions to what they're being asked.

Music: Lanthimos has never hired a composer; though *The Lobster* has relatively little music, it features more than his other movies, all from classical sources. The most frequent motif is a short, sharp stroke of strings—not as harsh as the famous screeching-violin cue from *Psycho*, but in the same ballpark. How did you react to this music or to the scarcity of music, if you noticed it? What does it mean to you that the music changes so little over the course of the story, and that much of what the characters listen to on their headphones, we never hear?

Allusion: David is housed in "Room 101" in the hotel, and even referred to by that number—a wink, I think, to the famous room in Orwell's *1984* where subjects are forced to confront their greatest fear. What would it mean to imagine the characters in *The Lobster* as being *afraid* to find a partner, rather than yearning for it? Which scenes might this unlock?

Editing: The first time we see, from David's window, the scene of the captured "loners" being laid out in the street in the rain, the film cuts to a shot of David himself lying prostrate in his bed, as though establishing a link between him—at the very *outset* of his stay at the hotel!—and the image of the worst possible outcome. In what ways does David avoid this curse of being a loner, and a captured one at that? In what ways *is* that, arguably, his fate by the end?

"The Lobster": David says he wants to be a lobster because they live for over 100 years, they are "blue-blooded, like aristocrats," they remain fertile indefinitely, and, by being totally aquatic, they allow him to sustain his love of the sea. The hotel manager praises his unique choice. Aside from the sheer surrealism of this logic, what does this choice tell us about David? Does he seem to desire fertility? Does he seem all that drawn to aristocrats? What about aspects of being a lobster that David doesn't mention, like their incredibly hard shell?

Hunting: The forest hunt is one of several scenes in *The Lobster* that plays in such slow motion that, even if you fast-forward the DVD, the pace seems draggy. In this particular instance, what did you make of this choice? (Lanthimos has said this part of the script was inspired by reality TV, where the pursuit of “true love” is always linked to rivalry and aggression.)

Performance: The hotel makes darkly comic use of different “skits” to celebrate the virtues of togetherness: it makes the difference between choking to death and living, between suffering and avoiding sexual assault, etc. Beyond these overt moments of performance, where else did you notice “artifice” built into the first hour of the movie: think of the sets, the costumes, the performance styles, etc. What about in the woods? Did those characters “perform,” too?

The City: In studying LGBT movies, I can tell you that the moment of “coming out,” especially for young characters, is almost *always* linked to rejecting small towns or rural lives for the big city. *The Lobster* seems to share, and/or possibly make fun of, this same bias. The hotel staff keep invoking “The City” (unnamed) as the place where newly married couples will live happily ever after, and even the rebels keep trying to find opportunities to sneak into it and pass as couples, despite their violent punishment of *real* couples. What do you make of that?

The Maid and the Heartless Woman: Lanthimos’s two closest collaborators in previous films get smaller but fascinating roles here. Did you assume that the Heartless Woman truly did not desire companionship? If so, why did she allow herself to be coupled off with David to begin with? As for the Maid, she turns out to be a plant working on behalf of the Loners, but then turns out to betray some of the Loners to others, with knowingly awful consequences. How did you interpret her role thematically, especially given how things turn out for her?

Framing: *The Lobster*, like *Dogtooth*, has an odd visual style that often pushes actors all the way to the edges of the frame, or crops their heads out of the shot while they’re speaking, or places bodies in strange relationships to each other within the image. Did you notice any of this while you were watching? If so, how might this shooting style serve the film’s themes?

Animals: Most of the animals in the movie wander in the backgrounds of shots, like the surprise cameos by the flamingo and the camel in the forest. They never get their own close-ups, though we are cued to imagine (maybe?) what kind of person might have chosen these alter egos. The presence of so many rabbits in the woods may be a kind of joke, given their legendary pace of reproduction, and the unmet sexual appetites of so many folks in the hotel. What else did you respond to about the animals in the film—including David’s “brother”?

Costumes: When David tracks down the Limping Man, the Nosebleed Woman, and their assigned child, they live on a houseboat and are dressed identically in “nautical” tops. What did this say about their desire for conformity, even having achieved domestic “bliss”?

Finale: As David walks to the back of the restaurant to make his fateful choice, this seemingly small café appears as a vast, rectilinear space of long hallways and multiple corridors—just like the hotel from the beginning. The circular “booth” where Farrell and Weisz have been seated is clearly intended for more than one occupant. How do these callbacks to imagery from earlier in the film complicate our hope that these two characters have “broken free”?