

# ***Kinds of Kindness*: People are awful, it seems—Yorgos Lanthimos up to his old tricks, unfortunately**

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*Kinds of Kindness*, featuring Jesse Plemons, Emma Stone, Willem Dafoe, Margaret Qualley, Hong Chau and Mamoudou Athie, is a sordid little film directed by Greek-born Yorgos Lanthimos and written by his longtime collaborator Efthimis Filippou.

After a series of unappealing, pointlessly “weird” films, including *Dogtooth*, *The Lobster*, *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* and *The Favourite*, Lanthimos adopted something of a different, more promising tack in *Poor Things*, also with Stone in a leading role.

A combination of factors apparently explain the latter film’s positive features. The 1992 Alasdair Gray novel of the same title—on which Lanthimos’ work is based—is no work of genius, but it retains enough of the author’s history of socialist opposition and criticism (before demoralization made him susceptible to reactionary Scottish nationalism) to provide Lanthimos with more of a concrete historical and social framework than he had cared to work with previously. The temporary separation from screenwriter Filippou seemed to help as well.

Unhappily, *Kinds of Kindness* is a return to form. No, it is more than that. Having shown some humanity and elemental sympathy for suffering in *Poor Things*, Lanthimos cannot simply revert to his previous coldness and cynicism. He has to defend those qualities, become more “militant” and aggressive about his retrograde artistic decision, turn it, as it were, into an artistic-intellectual platform.

The title of the new film is—will this surprise the reader?—ironic, sophomorically so. We don’t suppose that anyone over the age of 8 has to be told that the milk of human kindness does not always flow in the world as presently constituted. It is a more taxing

enterprise to bring out and dramatize the social pressures and difficulties that produce acts of *unkindness*. Not many artists, only the important ones, are up to that challenge.

*Kinds of Kindness* is organized into three medium-length segments, the whole thing adding up to 164 minutes.

In the first part, “The Death of R.M.F.,” Robert (Plemons) works for the very wealthy Raymond (Dafoe), who controls every aspect of his life. Robert is given a list of everything he must do on a daily basis, including when he can have sex with his wife. He is ordered by Raymond to kill R.M.F., a middle-aged man, with his automobile. He tries, but the accident fails to prove lethal. When his boss orders him to try again, Robert refuses. This leads to his exclusion from Raymond’s business and social orbit. Robert also has to tell his wife that her previous “miscarriages” were actually the result of substances inducing abortion, which Raymond paid doctors to provide her. Eventually, desperate to get back in Raymond’s good graces, Robert succeeds in murdering R.M.F., by running him over several times with his car. Raymond embraces him and observes that he knew Robert would not let him down.

In the second episode, “R.M.F. Is Flying,” Plemons is a policeman, Daniel, whose marine biologist wife, Liz (Stone), has disappeared at sea. When she suddenly shows up, Daniel becomes convinced she is an imposter. He descends into paranoia and madness, starving himself and, ultimately, demanding that Liz mutilate herself. He first asks for one of her fingers to eat, and then insists she remove her own liver. She dies. Another Liz appears at his door.

The third portion, “R.M.F. Eats a Sandwich,” concerns a cult, presided over by Omi (Dafoe) and Aka (Chau) obsessed with sex, bodily purity and the ability to bring the dead back to life. Rape, suicide and an “ironic” car accident ensue.

*Kinds of Kindness* is very poor. The characters are all deluded and continuously pushed around, under external control of various kinds and *in love* with that control. They want to be enslaved and abused, they long or even beg for it. It is the only source of genuine pleasure for them apparently.

As we noted about *The Lobster*, the film’s critical sequences “suffer from a facile misanthropy, one of the ‘default settings’ of contemporary independent cinema.” In the earlier film, “more or less everyone turns out to be selfish and callous, in the establishment and anti-establishment alike.” The *Financial Times* gloated that the rebel figures in *The Lobster* “turn out to be just as awful” as the official moral guardians.

A recent volume devoted to Lanthimos’ artistic efforts (*The Cinema of Yorgos Lanthimos: Films, Form, Philosophy*, edited by Eddie Falvey) points to various concerns of the Greek director’s. It is worth citing some of the comments.

-“Themes that recur include the ruthlessness of parental and/or state authority, unbeatable systems, exchanges of power, animality and human–animal boundaries, legacies of loss and trauma, the absurd and its variations, false truths, the staging of violence, god-like egos.”

-His film work “presents an unflinching portrayal of undemocratic systems of power that are reflective of Lanthimos’s preoccupation with authoritarianism, proceduralism and disempowerment.”

-“So much of Lanthimos’s cinema seems to address rigorous systems of social governance and how to negotiate them. ... Lanthimos’s films seem to explore the psychic architecture of confinement.”

-“Lanthimos’s films do not shy from the notion that the world is a cruel place made up of cruel people and utilize disorienting forms to compound their theses, with the attendant

suggestion that ignorance breeds complicitness.”

“Lanthimos’s films shake the spectator into asking profound questions of human nature and its ongoing tendency toward barbarism.”

-“At our core,” according to Lanthimos, “we continue to kill and be killed like animals. It is inherent for Homo sapiens to compete, instill fear and obedience, and resort to either being sexual and/or violent predators or prey.”

It is necessary to explain once again that merely *identifying* the ruthlessness of authority, undemocratic systems of power, conformism, human cruelty and even barbarism, etc., is not the same thing at all as *explaining or shedding important light* on any of these processes or qualities. It can, in fact, be a means of firmly and precisely avoiding that artistic-intellectual responsibility.

As with a large number of other contemporary filmmakers, from the “Weird Wave” and European “extreme” film to Tarantino and various emulators, Lanthimos wallows in extravagant, bizarre, brutal goings-on and substitutes that for any serious effort to make sense of the world’s tumult and traumas. It is lazy and self-indulgent, and here, simply nasty and gross—and unilluminating.



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