

**FILM: POOR THINGS**

FDG RATING: 4.8 😊😊😊😊😊

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Yorgos Lanthimos: *director*
Emma Stone: *actress, Bella*
Willem Dafoe: *actor, Dr. Goodwin Baxter*
Mark Ruffalo: *actor, Duncan Wedderburn*

DATE: February 18, 2024

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: POOR THINGS

Congratulations to Emma Stone for her Oscar winning role as Bella in Yorgos Lanthimos's 2023 film, *Poor Things*. And if there was an Oscar for the weirdest film, *Poor Things* would surely win. Those of us who remember *The Lobster* and *The Favorite* were well prepared.

It's the story of Bella, who we meet for an instant as a young woman throwing herself off the London Bridge. A Yorgos version of Dr. Frankenstein, experimental surgeon, Dr. Godwin Baxter, brings her dead body back to life by implanting the brain of the baby that was in her womb, into her skull. And thus begins the evolution of Bella, her odyssey to self-discovery.

We see her acting infantile, babbling and toddling around in the Doctor's massive home. William Defoe was outstanding as benevolent Godwin, with his jagged, scarred, patch-work face, clearly the result of other experiments. His home has an operating room with a bizarre menagerie of creatures trotting happily around the rooms including a bulldog with the back end of a goose and a dog's rump attached to the *front* of a bird. It might seem like a house of happy monsters. Bella is his masterpiece. She has the body of a young woman but the brain of an infant. He has his assistant, Max, meticulously document her progress as she quickly evolves, from toddler to child to pre-teen. "Her mental age and her body are not quite synchronized," says Godwin. But after a very few scenes we see her as an inquisitive, naïve, completely inexperienced, young lady who wants to explore the world.

Obsessively protected by "God", as Bella's fondly calls Dr. Goodwin, she is finally allowed to explore the world in the guidance of his rakish, accountant, Duncan Wedderburn, an Oscar nominated performance by Mark Ruffalo. He is infatuated with the attractive, weirdly outspoken young woman. We loved Ruffalo's smirky, almost silly character and he played it perfectly. We also liked that although he introduces Bella to the world while seducing her, she ends up having the upper hand in their relationship, outsmarting him by her quickly maturing intelligence as he becomes more and more smitten. She informs him, "my heart has become *dim* towards your swearing, weepy person."

Across continents on a whirlwind adventure, first on a cruise ship, then to Lisbon, Alexandria, Paris, and finally back to British shores, it was fascinating to watch Bella mature at almost warp speed. Each location offers her life's lessons showing the best and worst of humanity. Paris was especially entertaining as Bella joins a brothel as an easy way to get back some of Duncan's gambling winnings that she naively gave away to help the poor after glimpsing real evil in Alexandria, slaves and dying babies. She gave the money to two sailors who promised to use it to help the poor.

We were curious about the actress who played Madame Swiney in the brothel. Her strange but engaging appearance was so intriguing. She actually offered Bella wise life advice saying, "We must work. We must make money. But more than that Bella, we must experience everything. Not just the good, but degradation, horror, sadness. This makes us whole Bella, makes us people of substance. Not flighty, untouched children. Then we can know the world. And when we know the world, the world is ours." One of our favorite quotes is when Bella says to the Madame, as male clients ogle the line- up of prostitutes, "Why do they get to choose? Why can't we choose?"

Lots of social commentary, observed one discussion participant who said the film was extraordinary, working on many levels. We all agreed there was too much emphasis on the purely performatory sex scenes or as Bella called it, ...furious jumping. Coupled with the age difference between Duncan and Isabella, some critics understandably described the film as disgusting. Some discussion participants chose not to watch the film for those reasons.

The rest of us hopped on the roller coaster ride appreciating the stunning visuals. Another discussion participant commented that if a young woman tried to educate herself, it would not end so well. But in this film we get a glimpse of how we are formed in the context of societal conventions, the body and the mind, and bodily pleasures. Bella becomes a liberated woman by the end of the film.

It's almost like following Alice down the rabbit hole and finding ourselves in another world that is a mash up of fantasy Victorian art deco steam punk. The unique cinematography, sets, and costumes were dazzling. Super wide angle and fish eye lens shots that bend and distorted the view added to the fantastical element.

Most discussion participants thought it was enchanting and fun to watch. Extremely Imaginative we bestowed *Poor Things* a rich 4.8 on our scale of 1 to 5 with six discussion participants rating it a solid 5. (5 is the best.)



See you at the movies!

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