

The Lobster: Relationships forced on—or forbidden—people

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Directed by Yorgos Lanthimos; written by Lanthimos and Efthymis Filippou

In Yorgos Lanthimos' absurdist *The Lobster*, individuals without a mate are sent to a "hotel" that is more like a well-furnished internment camp, where they have 45 days to find a partner or be turned into the animal of their choice.

After his wife leaves him for another man, David (Colin Farrell), a mild-mannered architect, is sent to the place. He brings his brother with him ... who is now a dog. Needless to say, unusual things go on at this institution, presided over by the formally polite but tyrannical Hotel Manager (Olivia Colman). During his orientation interview, David informs the Manager that if he fails to find love, he would like to come back as a lobster. She pronounces this a very good choice.

David soon makes friends with the Lispering Man (John C. Reilly) and the Limping Man (Ben Whishaw). The former is punished for masturbating by having his hand burned in a toaster. The latter, because the "guests" are encouraged to develop relationships with people with whom they have things in common, painfully pretends to be prone to nose-bleeds to win the affections of a young woman (Jessica Barden) who suffers from that condition.

The hotel residents attend presentations, which include brief dramatic sketches, that demonstrate the value of being part of a couple. A maid (Ariane Labed) regularly comes to David's room and rubs herself against him ... to excite but not to satisfy. The talkative Biscuit Woman (Ashley Jensen), after first offering herself to David, lets him know that if she cannot find a partner she will throw herself out a window.

The residents regularly go on hunting trips in the woods, armed with tranquilizer guns, to track down Loners, those who have escaped the clutches of the authorities. Each Loner captured earns a resident a little more time before he or she faces animal metamorphosis.

For some reason, David decides to pair off with the Heartless Woman (Angeliki Papoulia), who is known to have no feelings whatsoever. When she fakes choking on an olive and he fails to try to save her, she observes, "I think we are a match." Eventually, however, the relationship founders horribly and David is forced to flee and join the Loners. The latter live by very different, in fact, opposed rules: no relationships, no sex, not even flirtation. The Loner Leader (Léa Seydoux) is another despot. When David falls for the Short Sighted Woman (Rachel Weisz), a host of possibilities and dangers arise.

Lanthimos was born in Athens in 1973. He is known for *Kinetta* (2005), *Dogtooth* (2009) and *Alps* (2011). *Dogtooth* is another black-comic, quasi-surreal effort. A businessman-father keeps his family essentially under house arrest at a pleasant country home, complete with pool and large garden. No one aside from the father is ever allowed to set foot outside the grounds. He lies to his wife and three children about the great dangers in the external world to keep them terrorized and "safe." Eventually, his introduction of a female employee into the secluded home to instruct his son about sex leads to the household's implosion and collapse.

There are initially intriguing elements in *The Lobster*. The filmmakers treat the unreal, sinister goings-on, all occurring in a slightly shabby Irish seaside resort, with an agreeable matter-of-factness. David, placid and withdrawn, and his fellow residents seem at first object lessons in middle class conformism. They all want to please the authorities, whomever they may be, no matter how preposterous and demeaning the demands made on them.

The film's intelligent, carefully framed and shot oddness is one of its strengths, perhaps its principal one. However, the satire on forced couplehood runs its course before too long. And, after all, how telling (and pertinent) is such a criticism?

Asked about the origins of the idea for *The Lanthimos* told the *Washington Post*, “We make observations about the way we live and organize our lives—and structure our societies—so we wanted to do something about romantic relationships and how single people are treated within society. The pressure that is on them in order to be with someone and ... the pressure that they put on themselves to be with someone.”

But in the face of harsh economic realities, marriage rates have fallen sharply in many parts of the world, including most European countries. In Italy, the number of weddings fell by 24 percent between 2004 and 2014, reaching a level not witnessed since the first world war. A 2014 study found that almost half of Europeans 18-30 were still living with their parents. The marriage rate has also been declining in Lanthimos’ native Greece, exacerbated recently by the brutal austerity conditions, since the beginning of the 21st century. Some 60 percent of Greek youth are unemployed.

No doubt official society still preaches the value of marriage and family life, but the most intense pressure to enter into romantic relationships is felt primarily within more affluent layers of the population.

The viewer’s sense that *The Lobster* is not only about secondary matters, but also falls wide of the overall mark, is deepened by the portrayal of the Loners. Lanthimos and his co-writer Efthymis Filippou go out of their way to establish that the supposed rebels are just as unpleasant, and cowed, as the hotel residents and officialdom. The Loner Leader is more frightening and violent than her Hotel Manager counterpart. The punishments meted out for inappropriate sexual conduct among the escapees in the woods are cruel.

The physical and moral resemblance of Léa Seydoux’s Loner Leader to Anne Wiazemsky’s Véronique, the authoritarian-terrorist chief of the little Maoist cell in Jean-Luc Godard’s *La Chinoise* (1967), seems too striking to be a mere coincidence.

The scenes in the woods among the Loners represent *The Lobster*’s real intellectual and artistic downfall. Not only are they tedious and repetitive, and not only is the dialogue increasingly (and unconvincingly) stilted and affected; the sequences also suffer from a facile misanthropy, one of the “default settings” of contemporary independent cinema.

Intentionally or not, Lanthimos has organized the Loner scenes to resemble the final portion of François Truffaut’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1966), based on the Ray Bradbury novel, set in a future totalitarian society where

the job of firemen is to burn books. In opposition, groups of men and women, “book people,” live secretly in the countryside learning various works by heart for the sake of posterity. The difference between the two films, of course, is that the “resistance movement” in Truffaut’s film is self-sacrificingly dedicated to the preservation of literature and culture, whereas in *The Lobster* more or less everyone turns out to be selfish and callous, in the establishment and anti-establishment alike.

The *Financial Times*, always sensitive to such things, gloated that “*The Lobster* has a political undercurrent; as well as the politely brutal hotel management, a band of ‘loners’ exist in the woods surrounding the complex and turn out to be just as awful. ‘It’s hard not to be political,’ Lanthimos says. ‘Those links are there to be made.’”

Lanthimos has become one of Greece’s most internationally prominent directors. It is revealing that he has no comment to make about the ongoing crisis in Greece except in regard to the financial difficulties it has caused filmmakers like himself. (In an interview he specifically rejected the notion that *Dogtooth* signified any sort of comment on the Greek malaise, calling the appearance of his film in the midst of the economic meltdown “a coincidence.”)

Unfortunately, this silence does not come as a shock. Greek, and for that matter European cinema as a whole, has had very little to say about the endless suffering of the Greek working class and the perfidy of the pseudo-left Syriza government. Lanthimos and his fellow filmmakers are oriented at present in another direction.

The writers and directors think themselves terribly clever for concentrating on “more profound” issues such as love and relationships, in contrast to the merely “external” problems of social life. To borrow and somewhat alter a phrase from Franz Kafka: the filmmakers can hold themselves back from the sufferings of the world, they are free to do so and it is in accord with their nature, but perhaps this very holding back is the single greatest and most damaging error they could make.



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