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## Narrative Complexity, Lush Visuals Set Crimson Peak Apart

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Between the reds and blues of love and tragedy, filmmaker Guillermo del Toro finds his stride. He fathoms horrifying beauty in the macabre landscapes of the human mind, weaving tales as rich in narrative complexity as they are in visual sumptuousness. His obsession with the dark nature of life led him to probe immortality in *Cronos*, where an old man is confronted with terrible power. In *The Devil's Backbone*, he questioned the toll of power on the young, telling a tale about the ghosts left behind by war. *Pan's Labyrinth*, his crowning masterpiece, addressed our need to escape from the evil of humanity, positing that even in the face of death, the fantastical transcends the human condition. Now, *Crimson Peak* takes del Toro's explorations one step further, stressing that the fantastic arises from tragedy, allowing the horrific events of the past to pierce through the veil of time and haunt the heartbroken lovers at its core.

Though the first viewing may be underwhelming for some, *Crimson Peak* rewards diligence in its audience, proving to be the most layered, visually striking and narratively complex del Toro film thus far, and in this writer's humble opinion, one of the very best films ever made.

Edith Cushing, played by Mia Wasikowska, is haunted. The opening moments reveal that her mother, taken by illness, has returned from the grave in a gloriously creepy form to issue a single warning: "Beware of *Crimson Peak*." From the outset, the narrative layers on dense helpings of ominous foreboding that permeate its first act and the characters therein. Now a grown woman, Edith is set on publishing a work of fiction inspired by her own experiences. Though rejected by a potential publisher due to its lack of romantic flair, her story draws the eyes of Sir Thomas Sharpe, a nobleman who crossed the sea from England to pitch his potentially lucrative clay business to Edith's father, an investor. Through a series of wonderfully dramatic circumstances, Thomas and Edith fall in love, and our heroine is whisked across the ocean to the Sharpe estate, where she and Thomas are to live as man and wife under the shadow of Thomas' frigid sister, Lucille.

To say any more about the narrative would spoil a masterful exercise in shocking revelation and gruesome revelry. Suffice it to say that even those perceptive enough to predict the film's twists and turns will have plenty to sink their teeth into.

Visually, *Crimson Peak* is a feast. Del Toro oversaw the construction of Allerdale Hall -- the mansion used in the film -- over a period of six months, so very little digital enhancement was involved in the production. Unlike many recent period pieces, the direction doesn't rely on sweeping shots of cityscapes and scenery. Rather, del Toro relies on intimate, carefully constructed framing, always knowing exactly where he wants you to look. This requires a level of visual artistry that most directors aren't capable of producing. The likes of Peter Jackson may have the sweeping vision to evoke the expanse of Middle Earth, but del Toro is able to find beauty on a small scale, painting focused vistas that are just as captivating as any battle. The colors jump out from the screen, allowing his thematic and visual motifs to ring out loud and clear.

Thomas' industry hinges on a particularly strong but liquefiable red clay that naturally resides in the plains surrounding his homestead. Liquefied clay leeches through the soil, drips down the mansion's walls and sputters out of its sinks, acting as a recurring harbinger of the bloodshed to come. True to form for del Toro, this is a violent film; though death is used with discretion, blood gushes generously from horrifying wounds likely to make most of the audience cringe. The film's dramatic beats are generally punctuated with murder, attempted or successful -- a del Toro staple that serves the Gothic influences well.

As with del Toro's other films, *Crimson Peak* must be examined on the director's own terms. *Pan's Labyrinth* is required viewing before plunging into his most recent picture, as his style is wholly unique from other directors. A del Toro film is meant to be an exercise in immersion and artistry, like a tour through an art museum where the images spring to life and pull the viewer into the painter's twisted world. Both films begin with a teaser of the ending, stressing that the ultimate showdown does not act as the lynchpin moment of the film, as it does in most movies. Rather, every single moment in *Crimson Peak* is just as important, grave and as emotionally charged as the next -- a realization that could not possibly be reached with one viewing.

More so than *Pan's Labyrinth*, *Crimson Peak*'s underlying narrative pulses through every line of dialogue, every nervous glance and every breath. Here, the sheer force of the acting talent packed into the picture lends a much needed hand. In interviews, it was revealed that del Toro gave each of the three main actors their own 10-page description of their characters, along with histories, fears and motives. As a result, the actors bring a remarkable sense of self-knowledge to each scene, knowing exactly how del Toro's twisted characters would respond at any given time. The landscapes in which they deliver performances are just as nuanced, carefully arranged and as spectacular as the sets they occupy, making for a film that packs detail into every possible crevice.

Jessica Chastain deserves special mention for a performance that ranges from cold to leave-the-theater levels of terrifying. In fact, her most powerful moments are the quiet ones, where a slight cock of the head or mumble under the breath seems to warn of doom. Tom Hiddleston, too, is spectacularly comfortable on screen even when his character is not, playing Sharpe as a well-intended English puppy while simultaneously making it clear that he hides a terrible secret. And finally, Wasikowska has an excellent turn as Edith. Though she has nothing to hide, her transformation from bookish but outgoing writer to a desperate survivor clinging to the idea of life beyond the walls of her new home is captivating to watch.

Del Toro's films have always contained an element of, as he puts it, "horrible beauty." He is uniquely brilliant at exploring the intersection of fantasy and reality, but he is not a master of horror. Tragically, *Crimson Peak* was mismarketed as a horror film, when it is in fact a Gothic romance with horror elements. At one point, Edith, in reference to her story, says to a potential publisher, "It's not a ghost story; it's a story with ghosts in it." Here, del Toro might as well have run across the set bearing a massive red flag while screaming, "This is not a horror film." It's an important distinction that the director consistently made in every single press tour for the movie, despite Legendary Pictures' insistence on undermining him with cliché trailers befitting a standard horror flick. Do not make the same mistake many audiences and critics have. Just as one could not call *Pan's Labyrinth* a horror film for containing horrific scenes, *Crimson Peak* is through and through a slow-burning period thriller. Watch *Crimson Peak* for the romance, the visual beauty, the masterful performances and the enthralling narrative. It's worth forking over the additional cash for an IMAX ticket, though the squeamish may find this a bit too much to handle.

*Crimson Peak* is a masterpiece of modern cinema, hiding a beautifully twisted tale beneath a meticulously arranged Gothic landscape of rich colors, layered characters and sets worthy of nothing less than the del Toro masterpiece the film proves to be.

Credit: Christian Bolles

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