



MARTIN SCORSESE SELECTS HIDDEN GEMS OF BRITISH CINEMA

The Pumpkin Eater

The Pumpkin Eater

Director: Jack Clayton

Production Company: Romulus Films

Producer: James Woolf

Associate Producer: James Ware

Production Manager: Charles Blair

Assistant Director: Claude Watson

Continuity: Pamela Davies

Casting: Jenia Reissar

Script Editor: Jeanie Sims

Screenplay: Harold Pinter

From the novel by: Penelope Mortimer

Director of Photography: Oswald Morris

Camera Operator: Brian West

Supervising Floor Electrician: Maurice Gillett

Camera Grip: Ray Jones

Editor: James Clark

Art Director: Edward Marshall

Art Department Liaison: David Ffolkes

Set Dresser: Peter James

Costume Designer: Motley

Miss Bancroft's Furs by: Deanfields

Make-up Supervisor: George Frost

Hairdresser: Gordon Bond

Music: Georges Delerue

Sound Recording: Peter Handford, John Aldred

Boom Operator: Ken Ritchie

Dubbing Editor: Peter Musgrave

Trained Animals: John Holmes

Studio: Shepperton Studios

Cast:

Anne Bancroft (*Jo*)

Peter Finch (*Jake*)

James Mason (*Bob Conway*)

Janine Gray (*Beth Conway*)

Cedric Hardwicke (*Mr James, Jo's father*)

Rosalind Atkinson (*Mrs James, Jo's mother*)

Alan Webb (*Mr Armitage, Jake's father*)

Richard Johnson (*Giles*)

Maggie Smith (*Philpot*)

Eric Porter (*the psychiatrist*)

Cyril Luckham (*the doctor*)

Anthony Nicholls (*the surgeon*)

John Franklin Robbins (*the parson*)

John Junkin (*the undertaker*)

Yootha Joyce (*woman in hairdresser's*)

Lesley Nunnerley (*the zoo waitress*)

Gerald Sim (*man at party*)

Frank Singuineau (*King of Israel*)

Faith Kent (*the nanny*)

the children

Gregory Phillips, Rupert Osborn (*Pete*)

Michael Ridgeway, Martin Norton (*Jack*)

Frances White, Kate Nicholls (*Dinah*)

Fergus McClelland, Christopher Ellis (*Fergus*)

Elizabeth Dear, Sarah Nicholls (*Elizabeth*)

Sharon Maxwell, Mimosas Annis (*Sharon*)

Kash Dewar (*Mark*)

Mark Crader (*youngest child*)

UK 1964

118 mins

35mm

A BFI National Archive print

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SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

The Pumpkin Eater takes its title from the nursery rhyme: 'Peter, Peter, pumpkin eater / Had a wife and couldn't keep her. / He put her in a pumpkin shell / And there he kept her very well.' As this allusion suggests, one of the central concerns of the film is female entrapment – the experience of being kept 'in a shell'. The heroine, Jo, has all the ostensible trappings of a happy life: a handsome, successful husband, a beautiful house, an enviably affluent lifestyle, and battalions of healthy children. Yet she still comes to the conclusion that her life is 'an empty place'. She even suffers an emotional breakdown in the most unlikely of places – the luxurious Kensington department store, Harrods.

One could read the film as a proto-feminist protest against women's second-class status and limited opportunities, no matter which class they belong to. Certainly, Penelope Mortimer's original novel is animated by a sense of frustration and anger at patriarchal values: 'A womb isn't all that important. It's only the seat of life... At school the word "womb" used to make them snigger. Women aren't important.' However, Harold Pinter's adaptation has the effect of making the film less about Jo (the novel had been written in the first person from her point of view) and more about the relationship between Jo and her husband Jake: it offers a complete portrait of a marriage from first meeting and initial romantic idyll through betrayals and bitter disputes to a tentative reconciliation between the estranged couple. As the director Jack Clayton put it, the film investigates 'the infinitely simple idea of the difficulties in any married relationship while at the same time showing the tremendously strong relationship that grows almost inevitably.'

The film's treatment of angst among the sophisticated metropolitan bourgeoisie lead to a comparison with the work of the director Michelangelo Antonioni, chronicler of Italy's idle (and anxious) rich. Indeed, one review of *The Pumpkin Eater* was entitled (sarcastically) 'Keeping Up with the Antonionis', unfairly implying that the British film was nothing but a superficial copy of the European art film, lacking its profundity. Looked at today, *The Pumpkin Eater's* achievement can be seen more clearly: a remarkably honest film about love, sex, marriage, infidelity, reproduction and parenthood made by a director, writer and group of actors all at the height of their powers.

Melanie Williams, BFI Screenonline

Jack Clayton's *The Pumpkin Eater*, a film about the mid-life crisis of a middle class woman, received lengthy and in several quarters sympathetic critical treatment. But for *Sight and Sound's* editor, Penelope Houston, it was altogether too modish: 'Clayton inaugurated the whole British back-to-the-provinces movement with *Room at the Top*, and in *The Pumpkin Eater* I suspect that he is showing the same freakish instinct for the mood of the times. Probably with no more deliberate intention on his part, he would seem here to be ratifying the British cinema's entente with Europe.'

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Shooting Stars

Sun 1 Sep 11:30; Mon 9 Sep 20:40

Brief Ecstasy

Tue 3 Sep 18:30; Wed 11 Sep 20:35

The Man in Grey

Fri 6 Sep 18:10; Tue 17 Sep 20:40

This Happy Breed

Fri 6 Sep 20:40; Tue 24 Sep 18:00

The Seventh Veil

Sat 7 Sep 15:10; Wed 25 Sep 20:40

Green for Danger

Sun 8 Sep 15:40; Thu 26 Sep 20:55

It Always Rains on Sunday

Sun 8 Sep 18:10; Fri 27 Sep 20:50

Hue and Cry

Sat 14 Sep 20:30; Mon 30 Sep 18:15 (+ intro by Josephine Botting, Curator, BFI National Archive)

Uncle Silas

Sat 14 Sep 18:20

Terence Fisher Double Bill:

To the Public Danger + Stolen Face

Sun 15 Sep 18:10; Tue 1 Oct 20:30

Mandy

Mon 16 Sep 18:35; Sat 28 Sep 12:20

Yield to the Night

Fri 20 Sep 18:00; Sat 28 Sep 15:10

The Flesh and the Fiends

Sat 21 Sep 14:50; Wed 2 Oct 20:40

The Damned

Sat 21 Sep 20:40; Fri 4 Oct 18:30

Station Six Sahara

Sun 22 Sep 12:30; Sat 5 Oct 16:00

The Mind Benders

Sun 22 Sep 18:00; Wed 2 Oct 18:20

Went the Day Well? + intro by James Bell,

Senior Curator, BFI National Archive

Mon 23 Sep 18:20

The Pumpkin Eater

Fri 27 Sep 18:00; Sun 6 Oct 15:00

Dr. Jekyll and Sister Hyde

Sat 28 Sep 18:10; Thu 3 Oct 18:15 + intro by

Sam Clemens, son of Brian Clemens

The Legend of Hell House

Sat 28 Sep 20:40; Mon 7 Oct 18:20

Guns at Batasi

Sun 29 Sep 18:20; Sat 5 Oct 18:20

With thanks to

Martin Scorsese and Edgar Wright

SIGHT AND SOUND

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Houston's accusation that Clayton was unduly influenced by Antonioni and that *The Pumpkin Eater* is a shallow copy of a European art film now seems misplaced. Despite the casting of Anne Bancroft in the central role, *The Pumpkin Eater* looks quintessentially English and Clayton has proved to be the least fashionable of directors. He refused to repeat the success of *Room at the Top* with another Kitchen Sink subject and instead chose to make *The Innocents* for Twentieth Century-Fox. *The Pumpkin Eater*, though it reunited him with Romulus, turns its back completely on poverty and the working class. Its heroine is troubled by the malaise of affluence which causes her children to be tidied away in nurseries and boarding schools, and drives her to a nervous breakdown in Harrods.

Penelope Mortimer's novel, which unfolds as a series of imaginary missives from Jo to a school friend, is at times trite and one-dimensional. Jo's parents, friends, even her husband, are seen only through her eyes and are hardly more than ciphers. In the film Maggie Smith, Yootha Joyce, Richard Johnson, Cedric Hardwicke, Rosalind Atkinson, and Peter Finch give them solid substance and make Jo's crisis more real and less neurotic. And Harold Pinter's script retains the content of the novel but gives it a spiky and disturbing edge. Two incidents, the plea for help from a desperately unhappy middle-aged woman who has seen Jo's photograph in a glossy magazine and assumes her life must be perfect; and Jo's visit from an itinerant prophet, 'the New King of Israel', which in the book are little more than whimsical details, are used by Pinter to capture that opening out on to a world of pain and sorrow which occurs when one is jolted out of the rut of routine existence. Clayton is able to reconstruct Jo's life from the empty shell of her dreams. Her grief, her suffering, rather than her psychotherapy, cause her to heal herself.

The ending, where Jo is woken by the voices of her husband and children advancing on the old windmill she has retreated to, is moving not because it is a 'happy end' but because it embodies a matter-of-factness about life going on, that losses and compromise and betrayals are something one has to live with.

Extracted from *Sixties British Cinema* by Robert Murphy (BFI, 1992)

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