

(S4, E12) Letting in 'Talk to Me'

I watch a lot of movies – which I think is possibly obvious if you've listened to more than one episode of this podcast where I talk about how many movies I watch. But despite my love of a dark room and a large, beautiful face made huge and silvery, I have weeks that can only be described as "all media bad". Nothing sparks joy – I cannot fathom taking in a new plot or listening to characters noisily chattering. Which is not a super reasonable way to approach being in the world, so to try and break myself out of this I'll often return to comforting things – like action films with lots of punching and light homoerotic tension, or watching Point Break for the 417th time... which is an action film with light homoerotic tension, so same difference, I guess?

I also often find myself reaching for horror movies in these moments. Something about a final girl screaming and stabbing her way out of a pit of despair really speaks to me. Who could possibly say why. Don't worry about it. But horror can be a bit of a wildcard. Sometimes a horror film can be both fantastic and so traumatizing you never want to watch it again. And sometimes it can be an irredeemable cliché that you barely make it through for all the eye rolling. But when it's good, God it's really so good.

So, as I was casting my mind around for what to write this week, I kept returning the last thing I saw in the cinema. And, like Russel Crowe, I'm here, ready to

explain to you my passions... That is a niche pop cultural reference that I quote all the time, and no one ever gets. You're welcome.

I'm Alex – this is Pop Culture Boner, the podcast edition – and today, I'm thinking about Talk to Me.

Sometimes a movie will happen that features so many of my interests that it's like the universe is staring directly at me and saying, "here... have a little treat." So as soon as I saw a trailer filled with ratbag Australian teens and haunted objects, I knew I had to see Talk to Me. And look, I'll be honest, I wasn't really expecting much. My relationship with the horror genre is such that I can forgive a multitude of sins if it gets me good one time. I'm willing to sit through some absolute garbage if there's one bit that's just so scary it makes my skin crawl. So, to say that the bar was on the floor is an understatement.

But oh man... Talk to Me got me real good. I was creeped out, I was emotional. Plus it made me think about the idea of a horror renaissance and what that actually means. So, we're going to talk a little bit about both. Join me, as I remind myself that all media not, in fact, bad. Some media good. I'll try not to spoil too much of it, because it's worth a watch, but let's get into it.

The premise of Talk to Me is simple – a

group of ratbag teens have a hold of a hand that can channel the dead once the user takes the hand and says, 'Talk to me' and 'I let you in'. You have to let go of the hand after 90 seconds, or the entities get a little over-zealous and stick around, which is implied to be a bad thing, but none of the teens bother to check exactly how bad. It's a pretty classic set up – carefree youth accidentally harness the power of a cursed object to horrific effect. It's such well-trodden ground that it even forms the basis of the 2011 horror-comedy *Cabin in the Woods*, where the youth in question are being stage-directed by unseen bureaucrats toward different haunted entities so that they can take up the mantle of their doom and inadvertently sacrifice themselves to the old gods.

If you're going over such well-worn ground that it's already got a decade old, Joss Whedon-led meta send up, it's probably pretty easy to accidentally veer into the realms of 'forgettably average' or even 'noticeably bad', so I was a little apprehensive that the film wouldn't deliver what the trailer promised me. Plus, *Talk to Me* is the directorial debut of Australian YouTube duo RackRacka AKA twins Danny and Michael Philppou. Now, these two have about 6 million subscribers to their channel, have been steadily growing a following since 2013 and are connected to other big-name YouTubers that I'm sort of forced to be aware of by virtue of being online. I still had no idea who they were, which says either that the internet is a truly vast and unknowable place, or, more likely, that I'm slowly edging closer to becoming Grampa Simpson. I used to be with it. And then they changed what 'it' was.

Now what I'm with isn't 'it' and what's 'it' seems weird and scary to me. It'll happen to you.

Anyway, their usual content is horror-centric – it's clearly the thing that they're into – but it's also very... YouTube-y. It has all the hallmarks someone yelling 'WHAT'S UP GUYS?' into the camera without actually having someone yell 'WHAT'S UP GUYS?' into the camera. Does that make sense? Like the vibe is 'loud dudes capturing silly stuff they do' but with an added special interest in making bags of blood explode on someone's chest. And I'm definitely not the target demographic for that type of content. I was too old for it to imprint on my little duckling brain as important, so I'll reserve my judgement. But given that there's still such an intense divide between Hollywood productions and people who make their money being creative on the internet, it's kind of fascinating that they made a film that was not only picked up by indie-darling distributors, A24, but was also really good.

Talk to Me manages to hold a surprising emotional weight, given the simple premise. The film follows Mia, brilliantly played by Sophia Wilde, as she navigates life after her mother's death. She can't bear being in the house with her father and his depression, and instead spends her time with her friend Jade's family, including Jade's little brother Riley and her tough-as-nails mother Sue. Jade finds Mia's neediness off-putting, in the way that only a teenager could find the reasonable needs of a grieving friend off-putting. But Sue and Riley clearly think of Mia as part of the family, and

Jade is ultimately a nice girl, so they stick together.

Against this backdrop, the girls are dued into a group chat where their peers are posting videos of themselves partying and micro-dosing demonic possession. They don't think the videos are real, so they're not extremely concerned when Riley sneaks out with them to attend one of the parties. We get a little more context to Mia's standing in the social hierarchy of high school, when ring-leader delinquent, Hayley, pulls Jade aside and asks her why she brought Mia along when she's so needy. Jade brushes her off, but when Hayley and her off-sider Joss bring out the hand, Mia eagerly volunteers to be the first to have a turn. After initially being frightened, she says 'I let you in' and is instantly possessed – her pupils go black and her smile becomes menacing and pointed. Whatever has possessed her hones in on Riley in a way that feels particularly threatening. When the 90 seconds is up, they struggle to break the connection and the time is exceeded by a few tense seconds. No one is truly bothered by this turn of events – everyone keeps filming and posting to the group chat.

Rather than being put out by this experience or the footage captured of her, Mia is enthralled by the feeling of 'taking her hands off the steering wheel' and wants more. She badgers Jade into hosting Hayley, Joss and the hand at her place, which is when, behind his sister's back, Riley uses the hand to disastrous effect, becoming possessed by something that sounds like Mia's mother. Mia, allows him to stay possessed well over the 90 seconds so that she can converse

with her mum, but Riley starts to smash his face into the table. As the group struggles to disentangle him from the hand, he proceeds to beat himself half to death and winds up in a coma. The rest of the movie bounces between Mia being visited by the increasingly disturbing vision of her mother, and Riley regaining just enough consciousness to try and kill himself again as Mia apologises to her only friends over and over.

One of the things I really enjoy about horror movies is that the people who make the best ones are usually truly in love with the genre. They know it so intimately that they can subvert or lean into long-standing tropes to make something feel fresh and exciting. A truly delightful piece of the set-up for *Talk to Me* was that not one single person ever tries to find out more information on the backstory of the embalmed hand, allegedly from a powerful medium. It's covered in the scrawled names of every mongrel teenager who's had it in their possession previously, but at no point does someone go "Maybe we should get some answers about why there's an embalmed hand floating around our social circles." There's no moment of exposition where someone goes on the computer and types "channelling the dead through psychic hand" into a search bar. And when you really think about it, how many teens do you know who encounter a terrifying problem in the wild and go "I'm going to use my extensive capacity for reasoning and the powers of google to solve this problem." If you said anything other than "none" you're a liar or you've never met a teenager.

There are five minutes they do briefly

seek out Cole, the brother of the previous owner of the hand, who we saw be viciously stabbed by his sibling in an attempted murder suicide at the beginning of the movie, but he's not really any help. He mostly just gives us a litany of insults about how Hayley and Joss are bad friends for continuing to mainline demons for fun and frivolity. It's a great subversion of all the usual tropes and is also the most fantastically bored teenage thing ever committed to film. Consequences? What consequences?

But *Talk to Me* really does its best work in between bouts of violence, when it is slowly and methodically building up a picture of the intense and all-consuming loneliness of grief. Mia is simultaneously so desperate for connection that she digs her claws into the people around her, and so isolated by her pain that she can't acknowledge that those same people love her. Instead, she'd rather reach out to literally shake hands with the void and let herself become animated again by whatever she pulls out. There's a good chance that because I've said the word 'horror', you've already conjured up an image of a slasher film or something similar, but it's a surprisingly sensitive portrait of grieving for two loud Australian YouTube guys in their 30s.

Interestingly, in an interview with Max Cea for *Esquire* magazine, Danny Philippou, who wrote the script for *Talk to Me* with Bill Hinzman, mentions that a lot of what he drew on as frightening for the film, was actually just stuff he was afraid of himself. He references a near-fatal car accident when he was 16, where he didn't stop shaking until his older sister held his hand as the

inspiration for the film's cursed object, and the constant worry of hurting the people around him and being consumed by depression. Where Michael Philippou is a qualified stuntman who seems to revel in a kind of chaotic physicality, Danny seems to be more thoughtful. He had apparently taken a step back from their YouTube channel because he was feeling restricted by the expectations of their audience, who wanted a very exact formula from the twins. He says, "I couldn't be as vulnerable on the YouTube stuff. I couldn't be as personal. It was always specific content for a specific audience. The stuff we liked watching was very different than the stuff we liked making." Which possibly explains how they ended up with a something that is very clever filmmaking that balances the physical shock of a good horror movie with the emotional resonance of a great one.

Talk to Me has been a bit of sleeper hit at the box office, making \$55 million off a \$5 million budget. Most of that has come from word of mouth – people who connected with the film passing it on to their friends and loved ones. Given this success and how much I loved it, it's also made me think about the types of horror movies that are seeping over into the mainstream. I'm not going to call it a horror renaissance, because if you google the term 'horror renaissance', articles declaring that we're in the middle of one, start popping up all the way back to like 2010. If the internet's cultural commentators are to be believed, we have had a horror renaissance in the year 2000, 2011, 2018, 2019, 2021 and 2022. Which I don't think is how that works, frankly. But I have noticed a

certain quality in recent popular horror films that feels much more personal.

I've definitely said this at least once every season, but horror as a genre reflects our wider cultural anxieties back to us through the safe lens of a silly little plot and a campy little bloodbath, and the monsters are a stand in for whatever is plaguing us. Aliens are about xenophobia, zombies are about a bunch of different things depending on when the film was made, and so on and so forth. When I look back at the classic horror canon, a lot of what is being dealt with thematically relates to national crises brought on by things beyond our control. Like a lot of what drives the horror of 1974's *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, for example, is about the long slow collapse of the American dream, with *Leatherface* and his family being a literal inversion of the wholesome family unit, slowly being ground into further stages of depravity by the crumbling American economy. The Freeling's suburban lifestyle is slowly made untenable by the ghosts of tragedies past in 1982's *Poltergeist*, which has similar anxieties about the safety of the American family unit.

I'm just using two classic examples here but you can see the years are tracking against periods of serious upheaval for the US – in 1974 the stock market was crashing, Nixon was desperately trying to get inflation under control, people were still feeling the effects of the 1973 oil crisis, and the US were limping out of Vietnam leaving a bunch of traumatised veterans and footage of war crimes in their wake. In 1982, America was in yet another recession and unemployment was at an all time high. In both scenarios, the

dream of the white picket fenced house in the suburbs with 2.5 kids and no debt starts to become noticeably unattainable for those who previously might've gotten there. And you can see that underlying cultural anxiety manifested in both these movies.

This feels slightly different to what I'm seeing in a lot of current horror success stories – including *Talk to Me* – which seem to take on a more personal or self-reflective aspect in their approach. Ari Aster's directorial debut *Hereditary* is about family trauma and grieving, even as a family torn apart by the death of a child eventually spins out into something more typically supernatural. His follow-up, *Midsommar* touches on similar themes of grief, community, and betrayal. Even tried and true horror franchises like *Halloween* have shifted their perspective slightly to look at the impact of intergenerational trauma on the family dynamic – as it turns out years of being chased by an unkillable homicidal maniac will take a toll on your relationship with your daughter. Who knew? And in *Talk to Me*, the fear of loneliness and being misunderstood tears through the screen.

These are deeply personal fears about your relationship with yourself and those closest to you, and while it's not any more or less frightening than something that was worried about the impact Reganomics would have on your ability to comfortably house your family in the suburbs, I think it does speak to a chance in the way we consider our fear. Writing for horror site *Bloody Disgusting*, Ron Breton calls this *Greif Horror*, where the "protagonists are toiling with their melancholy or malaise

while simultaneously dealing with some external terror". He attributes the rise of the genre to a wave of film makers who grew up on immediate post-9/11 nihilistic horror, who have since come to find this abrasive mode of creating unsatisfying. Breton likens it to the actual stages of grief, where someone acts in ways that are dangerous or brash out of shock and then comes to feel guilt over the actions from their heightened state.

I think this is an interesting way of contextualising the 'why' of this genre, but I do also think it skips over the fact that as the decade has worn on, we've become increasingly trapped with ourselves. In the digital sense we've become unrelentingly contactable, and we're constantly reviewing our own performance of self through social media. And recently, in the physical sense, we've been locked in the house. I don't know if you guys heard but there was a global pandemic. We can't escape ourselves and so we're forced to reckon a little bit with the sadness sitting at our core. Talk to Me does it beautifully – you can recognise the burning need for connection in yourself and then see it slowly tear someone else apart.

Well, that's my little episode on Talk to Me. I love a spooky little film, and I love it even more when it features only the most feral Australian teens you can rustle up. What a treat. If you have some unresolved feelings about grief, the self and fear, talk to me about it next time you see me at the pub! Peace!

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