

The Lobster, 2015

I like to construct films in a way that makes you feel a bit uncomfortable, be able to enjoy them, be intrigued, start to think about the meaning of things - and hopefully by the end of it, you'll have some strong desire to keep thinking about them. – Yorgos Lanthimos

Major Credits

Director: Yorgos Lanthimos

Screenplay: Yorgos Lanthimos, Efthymis Filippou

Cinematography: Thimios Bakatakis

Cast: Colin Farrell (David), Olivia Colman (Hotel Manager), Rachel Weisz (Short Sighted Woman), Ben Whishaw (Limping Man), Jessica Barden (Nosebleed Woman), Ashley Jensen (Biscuit Woman), Ariane Labeled (Hotel Maid), John C. Reilly (Lisping Man), Léa Seydoux (Loner Leader), Angeliki Papoulia (Heartless Woman), Jaro and Ryac (Bob the Dog)

Production Background

The Lobster is Lanthimos' fifth feature, his first in English. Like *Alps* (2002) and the Oscar-nominated *Dogtooth* (2010), it pursues a bizarre premise—actors impersonating the dead to alleviate the pain of grieving loved ones; protective parents homeschooling their children in extreme isolation—governing a dystopian world. Lanthimos collaborates here with his favorite cinematographer, Thimios Bakatakis, and two actresses from earlier works, Angeliki Papoulia and Ariane Labeled, now his wife.

The film is mathematically divided in half, inside the Hotel and outside, framed by two long takes. Upon reflection, this artificial structure seems to reflect something about the rational ethos that governs the film's constructed world.

Cinematic Qualities

1. **Mise-en-scène:** The frame has been carefully designed to convey subtle associations. Note, for example, the first breakfast scene, with all the similarly dressed “guests” seated at individual tables facing the couples room. Later, strange animals—camels, Shetland ponies, flamingoes, peacocks—appear incongruously in scenes, enriching their meaning.
2. **Voiceover narration:** At first, the woman narrating the film remains unknown, then gradually reveals herself. How does learning her identity affect our comprehension of the story?
3. **Music:** The film's melancholy tone is reflected in the classical music, all in a minor key, of Beethoven, Shostakovich, Schnittke, and Stravinsky as well as the contemporary music of Nick Cave and Kylie Minogue, epitomized in the joyless hotel dance scene to Gene Pitney's “Something's Gotten Hold of My Heart.”
4. **Slow motion:** This synthetic effect seems to be used unconventionally in *The Lobster*, where it does not render human movement as “poetic,” “beautiful,” or a subject to be analyzed. At a basic level, it reminds us of an *auteur* manipulating the image. Does it serve any other purpose?

Questions for Discussion

As the director's observation quoted above suggests, this film raises a lot of questions about human relationships, totalitarian governments, and the efficacy of resistance. Here are a few more specific questions that might arise on the journey home or the morning after.

1. Almost none of the reviewers recalls the film's opening scene, the long take before the title. What functions does it serve as a prologue to the narrative? How is it relevant to your understanding at the end of *The Lobster*?
2. Consider the tone of voice employed by the actors in dialogue as well as that of the narrator. What does their flat inflection tell us about this imagined world?
3. A couple of reviewers have described *The Lobster* as a contemporary *rom-com*, a reinvention of the generic love story. Undoubtedly, the film has moments of both comedy and romance. What makes certain moments funny? In what way is the story of the Limping Man or David's story an authentic, even stirring tale of love?
4. In his preliminary interview at the hotel, David learns that there is no bisexual option and no half sizes for shoes. These seem like incidental details, but why are they significant for describing Lanthimos' portrait of a dystopia?
5. Granting its originality, *The Lobster* remains, for its director, a fundamentally *philosophical* film, what might be called a cinematic "thought experiment." But most movie audiences desire—or even require—that they "identify" with the characters, an empathy made difficult by the film's rational form and detached style. Is it possible to come away from watching for nearly two hours with both a feeling for the protagonist and a clear idea of how his world helps to define our own?