CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT L-R:
HOLLY (VICTORIA THAINE); MIA
(JESSICA MCNAIRY); LOLA (ROBIN
MCLEAVY); ‘BRIGHT EYES’ (ANNE
SCOTT-PENDELBURY); BRENT; ‘DADDY’
(JOHN BRUMPTON) AND LOLA; ‘DADDY’;
MIA AND JAMIE (RICHARD WILSON);
BRENT; HOLLY AND BRENT
Despite some missed opportunities and a somewhat American premise, Sean Byrne’s prom horror flick certainly doesn’t disappoint in terms of entertainment, writes Alexandra Heller-Nicholas.

If you have missed – be it through luck or design – the opening five minutes of Eclipse (David Slade, 2010), the latest instalment of the blockbuster *Twilight* series, it goes something like this: a young man named Riley walks down a dark Seattle street and has a feeling he is being followed. He looks around and sees nothing, but as his suspicions grow stronger, he begins to run. Reaching the edge of a dock, he looks around with large, terrified eyes, and just as he begins to think he has imagined the entire thing, a swift, powerful and almost invisible force attacks him. Now a vampire, Riley’s rapid metamorphosis from a ‘no one’ to a ‘someone’ within the film is not wholly dissimilar to the sudden limelight thrust upon the young Australian actor who plays him, Xavier Samuel. As one of the newest recruits to the hugely successful vampire franchise, Samuel is pegged to appear in the next instalment, *Breaking Dawn*, in 2011, and thus the actor’s pre-*Twilight* work is well positioned to receive a new promotional lease on life as it is opened up to this voraciously dedicated global fan base.

This all bodes well for *The Loved Ones* (Sean Byrne), an Australian horror film that was initially shown at the Melbourne International Film Festival in 2009 (where it was produced with the assistance of the MIFF Premiere Fund), but is only gaining cinema release nationally now. Samuel stars as troubled seventeen-year-old Brent, who turns to Metallica, marijuana and self-harm after his father dies in a car accident in the film’s opening moments when a bleeding boy forces them off a deserted country road. Despite the support of his attractive blonde girlfriend, Holly (Victoria Thaine), and his wacky friend and fellow pot-smoker Jamie (Richard Wilson), Brent struggles as his mother silently blames him for his father’s death. Six months later, the nervous and frumpy Lola (Robin McLeavy) invites Brent to the upcoming prom, but he awkwardly declines her offer, and later jokes to Holly about it while they make out. Unbeknown to him, Lola (who is later just called ‘Princess’) is dangerously unhinged and does not take the rejection well. With...
her equally demented ‘daddy’, Eric (John Brumpton), they kidnap Brent, tie him to a chair dressed in a tuxedo and torture him while they enact their own bizarre version of prom night. Brent’s evening of horror is intercut with the actual school dance, where Jamie has scored a date with his fantasy-girl, Mia (Jessica McNamee), and whose evening is far more successful (although perhaps no less strange) than his best friend’s. Meanwhile, Brent sits underneath a disco ball in Lola’s redecorated prom-themed living area, and in between bleach injections and power drill frenzies, Lola shows him scrapbooks full of photographic evidence of previous victims, demonstrating a long history of her and her father’s fiendish escapades. Dressed in pink and obsessed with fairytale Lionel and Kasey Chambers’ song ‘Not Pretty Enough’, Lola’s sadism is contrasted dramatically against her fantasy of innocent girlhood. It is this very fantasy that Brent is forced to contend with if he wishes to escape his captivity alive.

Byrne’s background in advertising comes as little surprise when considering the film’s glossy finish and succinct, yet eloquent, visual flair. Byrne has described the film as ‘a shiny, candy-colored-glam-nightmare’ and ‘a balls-to-the-wall pop-horror movie’, and these descriptions are accurate: The Loved Ones is Rob Zombie on ecstasy. With its slow-motion exploding disco balls and gleeful focus on heroes, villains, and bodily trauma, this is a visceral emo melodrama through and through. Combined with sharp visual effects and polished cinematography, the well-crafted soundtrack by the legendary Ollie Olsen results in less a horror movie with music video elements, than an hour-and-a-half-long music video with a horror movie narrative. In terms of pure generic bang for your buck, The Loved Ones will not disappoint: it is fun, it understands the mechanics of horror, it is not squeamish and it does not patronise its audience. It is these elements that no doubt won the film such acclaim when it played at the ‘Midnight Madness’ program of the Toronto International Film Festival last year (where it won the Cadilac People’s Choice Award) and at Austin’s SXSW soon after. Like the most interesting horror films, however, The Loved Ones is not flawless: Jessica McNamee’s performance as supposedly sensual and enigmatic goth Mia seems less a Suicide Girl than she does a jaded 35-year-old Vegas stripper. The contrasting between Jamie and Mia’s actual prom with Brent and Lola’s more deranged version is also structurally shaky: the twist at the end of the film that explains the connection comes too late, making it irrelevant at best. Partially, this may simply have resulted from external pressure to balance the undeniably heavy-going Lola/Brent scenes with something a little less intense, granting Wilson’s Jamie (the film’s strongest performer by far) much-deserved screen time and reminding audiences of what a ‘normal’ prom is. At the same time, it is difficult not to wonder if Byrne’s creative aspirations for the film were just a little bit too high: that he cites Paul Thomas Anderson, David Lynch, Gaspar Noé, Michael Haneke and Quentin Tarantino as some of his influences suggests that he may simply have intended to make the relationship between these two storylines a lot more sophisticated than what ultimately ended up on screen.2

Byrne’s other sources of inspiration are, of course, horror films. He freely admits to growing up as a horror movie fan and describes The Loved Ones as a blend of Misery (Rob Reiner, 1990), Carrie (Brian De Palma, 1976) and Evil Dead (Sam Raimi, 1981).3 The film ticks the boxes of many of the slasher cycle’s key iconographic elements: the school dance, blow job jokes, pun-drunk psychopaths a la Freddy Kruger, hot girls and geeky boys trying to get laid. The sequence at the dinner table with Lola, Eric, Brent and ‘Bright Eyes’ (Anne Scott-Pendlebury), an older woman, possibly Lola’s mother, who has also fallen victim to Lola and Eric’s DIY power drill lobotomy technique, pays a lovely tribute to the famous final scene of Happy Birthday to Me (J. Lee Thompson, 1981). Even beyond slasher, the tuxedo-print T-shirt that Jamie wears on his big night is also a clever wink to Carrie. While The Loved Ones certainly knows its horror heritage, it also has more recent genre stablemates. The most immediate points of reference locate The Loved Ones at the intersection of Tony Krantz’s gore prom fantasy Otis (2008) and Lucky McKee’s remarkable handicraft-themed vengeance tale May (2002). However, that May in particular also reflects the influence of Carrie raises the issue of gender, and it is here that The Loved Ones becomes somewhat problematic. Bluntly, while McLeavy’s performance as Lola is undeniably engaging, the construction of her character in terms of the broader narrative has not been thought out as adequately as it could have been.

In regard to Lola, if there is a take-home message from The Loved Ones, it seems to be that there is a very good reason why nobody loves the girl who thinks that nobody loves her. If she were ‘normal’ and attractive like Holly, it suggests, then she’d have a hot boyfriend, a cool car and would get a date to the prom like everybody else. The film is as indifferent to Lola’s struggle as Brent is when she asks him out, and it paints her as far too extreme a villain to allow her the same pathos afforded to Sissy Spacek’s Carrie. This is complicated by Lola’s incestuous relationship with her father. As the film portrays it, the sexual attraction between father and daughter is not only mutual, but also that Lola actively encourages by undressing in front of him. But the suggestion that incest here is not only consensual, but that it is the daughter who ‘asks for it’ opens up a whole range of murky ideological issues that the film not only fails to examine, but also uses only to add to its perverse and titillating depiction of Lola’s villainy. Her photo albums of earlier victims, her treatment of Brent and even the scrapbook of decapitated male bodies that she has cut from magazines all demonstrate her extreme feelings of violent hostility towards male bodies, and with its emphasis upon the incest theme, the film itself hints at a very real trauma behind Lola’s behaviour. Yet the attention lavished upon developing Brent, Jamie, Mia and even Holly’s character is not afforded to Lola, a character that the film itself implies may have a very real background of sexual abuse. So not only is there a reason why no one should love the girl that no one loves, The Loved Ones seems to say, there is also (unlike Carrie) little sympathy granted to a monster that itself suggests was born from a corrupted fantasy of normality in a desperate bid to escape from a weird and possibly even abusive environment.

Of course, none of this has anything to do with The Loved Ones status as an Australian film. The surface iconography is there: the repeated Kasey Chambers musical motif, the car chase through the Hills hoist and Eric’s declaration to Brent before he nails his feet to the floor of his kitchen that ‘this one’s for the Kingswood’. Byrne cites Greg McLean’s Wolf Creek (2005) as a source of local inspiration, and the bush setting and thick accents all add to what must be an added novelty for non-Australian horror audiences. This is, however, an American genre film, and this is nowhere clearer than its central fetishisation of prom night. In an interview with an American horror website, Byrne talks about the prom as ‘a rite-of-passage’ and even jokes that the film ‘could be re-titled Parallel Proms’.4 In Australia we do not have ‘prom’: we have formals, end-of-school dances and other variations, and while undeniably
a memorable element of every Australian adolescent’s school experience, they do not share the same cultural intensity as the prom mythos of the American cultural imagination. On one hand, as I have argued before, this should not necessarily be a problem – that so many Australian horror films appear to cynically graft a basic horror structure onto an Australian landscape in the hope that they will simply fluke being the next *Wolf Creek* results in movies that are ultimately neither very good Australian films, nor very good horror films. But in the case of *The Loved Ones* – a film that is shrewd and successful in so many other respects – there is a sense of sadness that it misses the opportunity to play up this precise point. There is an untapped creepiness to Lola’s obsession with such an Americanised notion as prom night as she sits in her rural Australian home. That the fantasy of the prom and all that it represents is such an imported idea, and one that does not fit into the reality of her actual environment, is a site of both horror and comedy that the film sadly shows no interest in capitalising on. The reasons for this are perhaps obvious: American audiences may not flock to see an Australian horror film pointing out how weird the US obsession with that particular ‘rite-of-passage’ is.

In retrospect, and in the face of the international audiences that will flock to see *The Loved Ones* based on its connection to *Twilight* alone, this perhaps was a wise decision. This is a high-energy film that amplifies the perversity and glee at the heart of the best horror experiences, and it is pitched perfectly towards its intended youth market. *The Loved Ones* is far from faultless: the structure is flimsy in places, it misses some obvious opportunities to deal with the Americanisation of Australian youth culture and, most of all, the character of Lola could have benefited from a more serious consideration of her ideological and ethical construction. Perhaps this is less a reflection of the film’s inadequacies than it is of just how high academic, fan and critical expectations of the horror film have become. At worst, *The Loved Ones* is a fascinating reminder that not all horror has to be intellectually rigorous or ideologically profound. Like *Twilight*, sometimes just good, silly fun can be as equally satisfying.

Alexandra Heller-Nicholas is writing her PhD in Cinema Studies at La Trobe University. Her first book is due for released in 2011 through McFarland & Co., Inc. and examines rape-revenge films.

Endnotes
2. Ibid.
4. Mr Disgusting, ibid.
5. Ibid.