



Suburbicon

★★★★☆

The dark side of the American Dream was a constant theme at Venice, and George Clooney's adaptation of an old Coen Brothers' script was the most naked assault on its current state.

I loved it, though there were plenty who felt it unsubtle. Clooney directs Matt Damon and Julianne Moore in a pastiche tale incorporating Hitchcock and films noirs (*Double Indemnity* etc) as well as the real-life events of a race stand-off that took place in Levittown in 1957, when a black family moved into a white 'cookie-cutter' housing estate.

The escalating racial protests provide the backdrop here for a story in which Damon and Moore fake the murder of his

wife in order to claim the insurance money.

It's all seen through the eyes of Damon's child, who witnesses murder, lies, sex, brutality and bloodshed, but for whom a nice game of catch and throw baseball with the black kid over the fence could still solve it all.

I liked Clooney's approach here – funny and scabrous, surreal and stylised. Moore is excellent (one flashes back to her more subtle work in Todd Haynes' *Far From Heaven* which had Venice in raptures back in 2002 and won her Best Actress here) and so is Oscar Isaac in the few scenes he has as the claims investigator. I can see why people claimed it was patchy and felt like two films stitched together and tonally inconsistent – but for me, it all came together deliciously.

The Shape of Water

★★★★☆

The Shape of Water seems an apt title to premiere at Venice, particularly one which endured its share of biblical downpours this year, and Guillermo del Toro's latest gothic, fairytale fantasy is of a piece with the Mexican director's earlier work such as *The Devil's Backbone* and *Pan's Labyrinth*. Although this one is in English and set in America, it still uses a naïf's point of view to find human connections amid the monstrosities of war.

Here, the war is the Cold War gripping 1962 America, a land of government agents in hats, Russian spies in back rooms and musicals on the TV. Sally Hawkins plays a mute called Elisa who lives in the sort of rickety, snickety rooms only characters in Tim Burton or Jean-Pierre Jeunet films inhabit, above a picture palace called the Orpheum.

She works in a top secret Government facility, as a cleaner; a black colleague played by Octavia Spencer her only friend. But her interest is piqued when a dangerous 'asset' is brought in one day, a fishy, scaly creature in a tank that Michael Shannon's scary agent Strickland begins to torture.

Of course, Elisa and the Creature (the 'Thing', as Strickland calls him, ramping up the B-movie references) strike up a friendship over hard-boiled eggs and Benny Goodman records played on her portable gramophone. She overcomes her

muteness and he overcomes his, well, fish-ness and they develop a tacit understanding.

It's all twee and quirky, with shades of everything including Woody Allen-style nostalgia and musical fantasy (Sally, herself a Woody alumna of *Cassandra's Dream* and *Blue Jasmine*, reminded me also of Samantha Morton's turn in *Sweet and Lowdown*), but there are some fine set pieces and quite superb production design from Paul D Austerberry (Oscar nominations assured).

It has oomph and heart and is in love with cinema as much as with the notion of love itself – a very romantic tale, as tender and strange as it is kooky, all about hidden desires, both sexual and political, as well as the lies, myths and legends in the stories we tell.

I found it charming and brilliant in parts – the instinctive, fascinating, ethereal performer Sally Hawkins is certainly as you've never seen her before, naked and masturbating and then having sex with a bloke in a ropey B-movie costume. That's when I was reminded of that old WC Fields gag: "I never drink water. Fish fuck in it."

Others at this Venice were in raptures over what can be read as yet another dark metaphor for current American fears and mistrust of the alien. It's not, for me, a complete success. It's also cloying and silly in other moments, like a naughty child. But this is, ultimately, uniquely of this director's vision, a film that refuses to be nailed down or contained, just like the shape of water itself.

WHEN IT COMES TO GREETING AND EATING, EUROPEANS DO IT BETTER

When it comes to the formulaic phrases used for greeting and eating, the English-language offers pretty slim pickings, says **PETER TRUDGILL**



We have a number of set phrases in English which we use in a rather automatic and semi-obligatory way at particular times and in specific social situations – such as 'good morning' and 'good evening', 'happy birthday' and 'happy new year'.

There are rules about how to use these formulae. We can say 'good afternoon' as a greeting at the appropriate time of day, but we can't use 'good night' in the same way: this can only be uttered as a leave-taking phrase when going home at the end of the evening or heading off to bed. In Catalan, though, *bona nit* ('good night') can be employed as a greeting if you meet someone after dark.

English speakers do not seem to have so many formulaic expressions at their disposal as many other Europeans, and those we do have are probably more optional than in several other languages. One example is the not-very-optional French phrase *bon appétit*: some French speakers seem to be almost totally unable to start eating their meal until their hostess or some other appropriate person has uttered this phrase.

Many other languages have an equivalent expression which should be used at the beginning of a meal, and which can also be used to greet anyone you come across who happens to be eating. In Polish it's *smacznego*, the Dutch equivalent is *smakelijk*, the Italian is *buon appetito*, in Spanish it's *buen provecho*, and Swiss German speakers say *en guete*. In Greek, the equivalent is *kalí óreksi* – but if you come upon someone who's just finished eating, you can still proffer them your good wishes by saying *kalí xónepsi*, 'good digestion'!

In English we really have no equivalent to *bon appétit* – we just begin eating, or perhaps wait for some other person to start first. Some hosts do now say 'Enjoy your meal', but there's no long-established tradition for this in British English.

Some Americans use the Yiddish-English expression 'Enjoy!', but for most British people that sounds ungrammatical because for us *enjoy* is a verb that

requires an object: we wait to be told what it is that we are expected to enjoy.

There are many other potential ritualised greetings which we can see that English speakers miss out on if we compare English with, say, Greek or Turkish: these languages seem to have a quasi-compulsory formula, if not for every conceivable occasion, then at least for many occasions which we would not even conceive of as being occasions.

In Turkish, when somebody arrives, you are supposed to say *hos geldiniz*, 'well you came', and they are supposed to reply *hos bulduk*, 'well we found you'. And when speaking to someone who is ill, you should say *geçmiş olsun*, 'may it be past'. In English we can also, of course, say 'get well soon', but the point is that we don't have to, and there are many other things we could utter instead, like 'hope to see you up and about before long'.

In Greek, it is very usual on the first day of every month to greet people by wishing them *kalo mina*, 'good month'. On Mondays people may wish each other *kalí vdomáda*, 'good week'. You can express the hope that a pregnant woman will have *kalí leftería*, 'good freedom'; and you can even say to people who are about to go to sleep *kaló ksiméroma*, 'good dawning'.

In Norwegian, it is really rather expected that when you meet up with somebody after having not seen them for a while, you should say *takk for sist*, 'thank you for (the) last (time we were together)'. And you should certainly utter the phrase *takk for maten*, 'thank you for the food', when you leave the table after a meal.

If you are now going to carry on reading the rest of this week's *New European*, then I wish you, as Greek speakers might, *kalí synécheia*, 'good continuation'!

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OREXIGENIC

Oreksi is the Greek word for 'appetite'. For Greeks, to have *óreksi* is 'to have an appetite for, be in the mood for' something. We are all familiar with term *anorexia* – a Greek word from the medical and an abbreviation of *anorexia nervosa*, which refers to a psychological condition involving absence of appetite. *Orexigenic* is a much less well-known medical term meaning 'appetite-stimulating'.