

Review**Pradip Biswas*****John And the Hole: Pascual Sisto's Empty Psycho-Thriller***

Pascual Sisto's new film JOHN AND THE HOLE narrates how a 13-year-old boy decides to trap his family in a bunker in a visually striking yet frustratingly crude ridden film with a modest yet wasted cast.

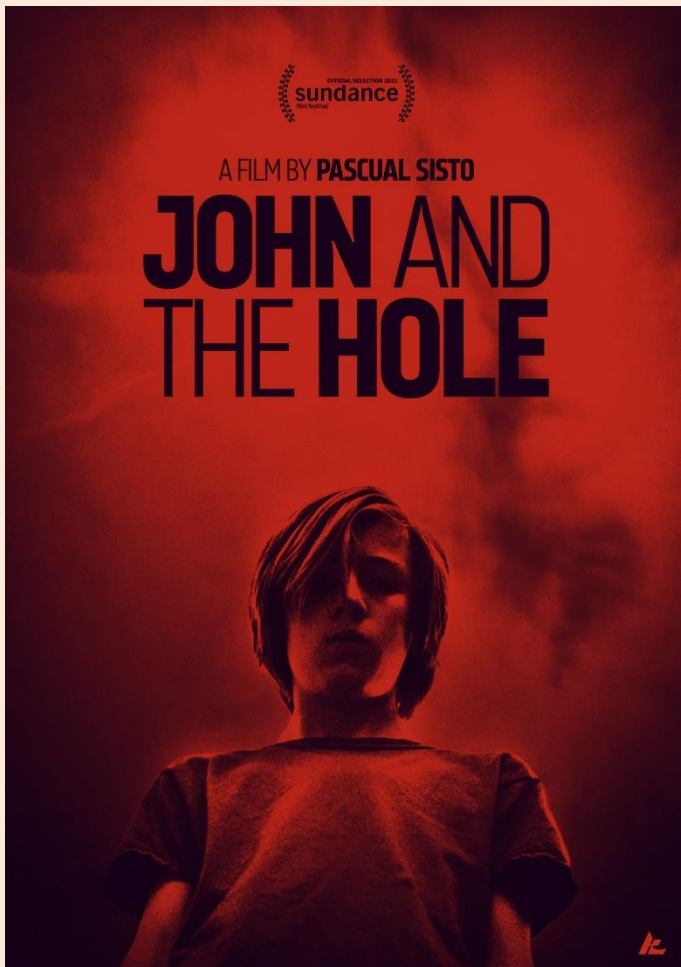
Based on the short story "The Well," Sisto and Academy Award-winning screenwriter Nicolás Jacobone (Birdman) updated the original more natural "water container" setting to a bunker. Sisto felt something explicitly "man made" — something built with an intended use that was now being subverted — was scarier in a different way than something like a cave which generates a more "primal" fear.

One of the most frustrating yet common slow genres of festival films is the kind that is presented with a high level of craftsmanship, an elegantly wrapped hamper urging us to see what's brewing inside. But once ripped opened, you find out there is nothing there, a cruel claptrap that disappoints the viewers and then aggravates a problem facing the debut director Pascual Sisto's surface-whelming psychodrama John and the Hole.

The script, from the Alejandro González Iñárritu along with collaborator Nicolás Jacobone, offers up a tantalizing trope. It meanders like a maze. John (Charlie Shotwell) is a dead-eyed 13-year-old living with his wealthy family in a luxurious house surrounded by woodland. After encountering a bunker close-by, John decides to drug his parents (Michael C Hall and Jennifer Ehle) and sister (Taissa Farmiga) and drag them down into the trap, the hole. As they scramble for a reason and wait patiently for infrequent food and water deliveries, John carries on with his new life, one without as many rules but with a great deal more responsibilities.

The crudest way to describe what transpires in John and the Hole would be Home Alone if re-envisioned by Michael Haneke in the broadest possible terms, a chilly, dreaded atmosphere successfully evoked but without any of the thought; or intellect that both film-makers would also plonk down on the table. Sisto and the cinematographer Paul Ozgur have created a visually effective trope here; we see it darting from the sleek yet soulless home where the camera glides through and around to

the menacing woods that cover it, a bizarre world we're eager to explore with more depth and mental skill, hoping that such distinctive style isn't just a cover for a lack of substance.



In the first act, it's hard not to be intrigued, an interesting escalation of boundary-pushing as John checks the limits of the world around him and tests what he might be capable of, the things he might be able to do and whether some form of conscience might stop him. There is a great deal of dream logic that is then required for him to drug his family and physically move them all the way down into the bunker, given his age and slight frame, but Giacobone intersperses his script with scenes of a mother telling her daughter a story, clueing us in that everything might not be as it seems. This genuine early creepiness though turns into a fear that actually, Giacobone doesn't really have much to say or do with his concept, like it was written on the fly, an elevator pitch panicked into production.

It is true Sisto takes a deliberate path to run the film through various funky tracks to the point of revelation. If is a murder mystery or Hitchcockian thriller of more fears and apprehensions enough to

dread the viewers!! One feels that the film hints at the juvenile crimes of the Globe often devastating and cruel denouement of sort. This cruelty being shown in films after films through the ages but fetch nothing inspiring for the society or social beings; the film is toned up to a height by helpless conditions confronted by the parents and the family. The film is said to have a flexible structure and sparks off no hidden run-away fusion. Seen in that, Sisto has come to realize the film in the open and yet mysterious amazement. In its run the film seldom seems to have halting mood but that of thickening wrought up atmosphere. In making the thriller Sisto thinks he has embarked on a new theme or innovative narrative sunk in Haneke-like fear psychosis.

It may be said despite dangers of pitfalls, the film eases of something more to grab on to come and go as the spooky narrative advances with John inviting a rambunctious friend to the house, both of them as fascinated by a morbid drowning game as they are by the idea of unlimited fast food, before the realities of adulthood start to dawn, a world of promise and agency. If you look at it, the going is often slow and sluggish. Besides, the treatment of the film looks messier and crueler than what came before. Investment starts to fade out as intrigue turns to boredom and as seemly hard. As 13 year old boy he's given so little to work with that he starts to seem as lost as we feel.

Said Robert Redford : "It's at this point that Sisto and Giacobone introduce the superfluous story-within-a-story idea, as 10-year-old Lily (Samantha LeBretton) looks skeptical about the vague reassurance of her mother (Georgia Lyman) that her father will be back. But she settles for a story, requesting "the one about the hole." The idea appears to have been to give the main narrative the quality of a dark fable, though the fussy set-up, especially coming so far into the running time, seems more of an intrusive distraction."

By the time we edge toward a third act realization that is remarkably similar to something Macaulay Culkin figured out in 1990, it's clear that we've been hoodwinked, a disappointment for us and a waste for Ehle and Hall, both better than the material they're attempting to elevate.

An important element of both traditional fables and John and the Hole, is a willful suspension of disbelief. Sisto's film is not all that interested in showing every detail of how John transports his family into that deep bunker. Sisto said "It wasn't as important to show how he gets the pulley and drags them in and anchors something and puts them in, because it's a story. It's a fable. We wanted to start with them in the hole already."



In fine it can be said how Sisto shows an assured hand and one can see him being snapped up to make an "elevated" arthouse horror, an ease with creating unease that will be utilized far more efficiently in the future, although his decision to use a 4:3 aspect ratio never manages to be anything but an inconsequential and frequently overused gimmick. For now, he's imbued with dressing up

what is revealed to be nothing much of anything, a hole that has been cleverly dug but remains completely empty, very empty.

Sisto followed the former interpretation for John and the Hole. "I take more of the American view, even though I am European and I do understand the heritage of bunkers there." Besides, this critic has a strong feeling Sisto most probably hinted at the "luxury" the pivotal cause of the teen aged John turning into a slime dog, criminal and a destroyer of domestic as well as the social balance!!!

John and the Hole

Director: Pascual Sisto

Writer: Nicolás Giacobone

Lead Actors: Charlie Shotwell, Jennifer Ehle, Michael C. Hall, Taissa Farmiga, Ben O'Brien

Music: Caterina Barbieri

Cinematography: Paul Ozgur

Editor: Sara Shaw

Duration: 98 minutes

Country: United States

Language: English

Premiered: January 29, 2021 (Sundance)

■ *Mr. Pradip Biswas is Film Critic and Author, a former Member of Fipresci-India, based in Kolkata.*