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# 'Club Zero' Review: Mia Wasikowska Stars in Jessica Hausner's Audaciously Disturbing Drama About Institutionalized Eating Disorders

The movie is set at a British boarding school where Wasikowska's nutrition teacher pushes a gospel of mindful abstinence, transforming her students into a cult.

By **Owen Gleiberman** ▾



Courtesy of Cannes Film Festival

[Jessica Hausner](#), the director of the supremely audacious and disturbing eating-disorder thriller “[Club Zero](#)” (yes, I used the words “eating disorder” and “thriller” in the same sentence – that’s the kind of boundary-smashing movie this is), has the potential to be an important filmmaker. Her last movie, “[Little Joe](#)” (2019), a sci-fi creep-out about a sinister strain of houseplant, was really a dark-as-midnight parable of the psychotropic-drug era. “Club Zero” won’t be for everyone, but Hausner,

channeling some combination of Hitchcock and Cronenberg and “Village of the Damned” and the Todd Haynes of “Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story,” has now made an even more gripping and provocative mind-fuck.

“Club Zero” is set at an elite British boarding school, where seven students, in the opening scene, sit around in a circle led by Miss Novak ([Mia Wasikowska](#)), the school’s new nutrition teacher. Each of the students says something about why he or she wants to eat better — to save the planet, to lose weight or shed body fat, to fight addictive junk-food consumerism.

Miss Novak, with her slight accent, her dimples and pert hair, and her serene authoritarian manner, is there to save the day. She’s going to initiate them into the ways of “conscious eating” — as opposed to unconscious eating, where you scarf whatever tastes good and have as much of it as you want. Conscious eating, by contrast, is healthy, rigorous, and above all *mindful*. It’s about making sure that every bite you take is good for you, and part of that is taking fewer bites. We all eat too much, says Miss Novak. When it comes to our relationship with food, less can be more.

Many of us have had these kinds of thoughts. In theory, conscious eating is probably better than mindless indulgence. But as the students sit in the cafeteria, scrutinizing the food on their compartment trays, holding each bite aloft on a fork for proper contemplation before placing it into their mouths, we can already see what’s happening. They’re being conditioned, by Miss Novak, to be culinary control freaks. They have already begun to turn eating into a ritual of virtue. They are already starting to mistrust food as a source of pleasure. In short, they’re learning how to be anorexic.

Anorexia, of course, is a deadly serious condition, and there are numerous dramas that have dealt with it. But the scaldingly subversive premise of “Club Zero” is that in this movie, anorexia has been institutionalized. It is being *taught* — as a form of dominating self-discipline, higher ethical values and religious zeal. The students, in eating less and less, think that they’re investing in the environment and speaking truth to power. The enjoyment of food gets replaced, for them, by the enjoyment of being high on abstinence. And Ms. Novak is just getting started.

Hausner, who co-wrote the movie (with Géraldine Bajard), taps into something about food that’s also bigger than food. Anorexia, in its dire hidden distress, has sometimes been described as a kind of individualized fascism, in which the person suffering from it becomes both master and prisoner. Mia Wasikowska, who is such a fine actor, plays Miss Novak with the unruffled coercive benevolence of a New Age guru, and the movie uses the insidiousness of her presence, and the students’ response to it, to suggest a new kind of mentality that’s starting to ripple through the culture.

It’s about people looking for saviors, for the reassurance of certainty, for extreme methods to counteract their extreme alienation and anxiety. And it’s about fighting an apocalyptic vision of

what the future is going to be: the running out of resources, the earth melting down. Is that paranoid mental illness or is it reality? It's part of the film's harrowingly funny yet deadly sincere design that in the context of current social-political concerns, eating disorders, with their coded patterns of *order*, could now almost be looked upon as something to strive for.

"Club Zero" is also a parable of kids being kidnapped from their parents by the bad ideas the culture spoonfeeds them. The seven students in Miss Novak's class have different reactions to her ideology. For Ragna (Florence Baker), a trampoline gymnast who already has a contentious relationship with her parents, the gospel of eating less immediately connects. Fred (Luke Barker), a non-binary ballet dancer, is a diabetic, and finds it appealing that abstinence could lead to his getting off insulin. But Ben (Samuel D. Anderson), whose very English single mum (Amanda Lawrence) — she looks like a "Wallace & Gromit" character — likes to cook big meals for him, is threatened by cutting off that connection. And so he resists. Which is why Miss Novak pressures the other students to pressure him, which they do, exploiting the fact that he has a crush on one of the girls. Elsa (Ksenia Devriendt) is already bulimic, so she's primed, as we will see, to become Miss Novak's most terrifyingly extreme disciple.

What we're seeing in "Club Zero" is the formation of a cult. And what makes Hausner, who is from Austria (this is her second English-language film), such a skillful and daring filmmaker is that she draws you into the cult mentality in all its interwoven layers of obsession, insecurity, conformity and faith. The kids are replacing themselves with a new version of themselves; that, in a way, is one of the stories of our time. And as they get seduced, Miss Novak introduces them to the next level of purity. It's called Club Zero, and it's a way of living that's so radical the culture would never allow it. But it's the ultimate in conscious eating: to realize that you don't need to eat at all.

"Club Zero" is a thriller because it's based on our desire to see these children of the damned lured back from the abyss. The musical score, by Markus Binder, is a spooky yet satirical wonder, full of drums that sound like the background of Hare Krishna drone chants. The movie turns into a series of power duels between Miss Novak and the school headmistress, Miss Dorset (Sidse Babett Knudsen), as well as the parents, who the more outraged they are the more ineffectual they become. You can instruct teenagers to do certain things, but you can't fight an eating disorder — or a cult — with force, especially if the cult is based on a cracked idea of one-upmanship. When Elsa, with her bulimia, faces off against her parents in her bedroom, showing them what her new food superiority really means, it's a scene so horrifying — and not for the squeamish — that it generates a queasy catharsis.

I think what's haunting about "Club Zero," and what links the movie to feelings that many of us have about our trashy processed food culture, is that the students are united in thinking that by giving up food, they're striking a blow against consumerism. As it turns out, though, they're really bowing down to consumerism. The consumer culture's ultimate aim is to divide us off from each other; the more isolated we are, the more we need products (including food) to connect us. And in

“Club Zero,” the students’ revolt against consumerism becomes utterly isolating, a way of locking their identities away. They have Miss Novak, their pied piper of sensual denial, along with their cult selves, but in every other way they’re starving.

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**Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (Competition), May 22, 2023. Running time: 110 MIN.**

**Production:** A Coop99 Filmproduktion, BBC Film, Essential Films, Parisienne de Production, Paloma Productions, Gold Rush Films, Cinema Inutile, Australian Film Institute production. Producers: Jessica Hausner, Philippe Bober, Mike Goodridge, Johannes Schubert, Bruno Wagner., Martin Gschlacht. Executive producers: Kristin Irving, Eva Yates, Vladimir Zemtsov.

**Crew:** Director: Jessica Hausner. Screenplay: Jessica Hausner, Géraldine Bajard. Camera: Martin Gschlacht. Editor: Karina Ressler. Music: Markus Binder.

**With:** Mia Wasikowska, Sidse Babbett Knudsen, Amir El-Masry, Elsa Zylberstein, Matthieu Demy, Ksenia Devriendt, Luke Barker, Florence Baker, Samuel D. Anderson, Gwen Carrant.

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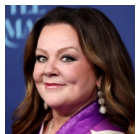
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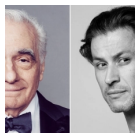
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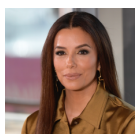
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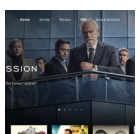
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