

Beyond the Pale: The Dark Night and the Soul

Written by Dave Canfield

Sunday, 22 August 2010 13:32



A recent back-to-back (and, I'm told, one-time-only) theatrical screening of [REC] and [REC] 2 was a real treat. I had loved [REC] and missed an opportunity to see the sequel earlier in the year. I wasn't disappointed. [REC] 2 was even more compelling, carrying the fright over from the first film along with the very interesting blend of religious images and a portrait of the human community in crisis, and thus reinforced something that's been at the spiritual core of so much of the really good recent horror cinema.

These days, horror at its most visceral and disturbing isn't about what destroys the body but what destroys the soul. Whatever the hell that is, right?



Is it glib these days merely to suggest that individual people are composed of more than just their chemical components? Horror films seem to suggest so.

In the great little UK zombie film COLIN (coming to the U.S. this fall), the undead protagonist generates audience sympathy via his connection to his former humanity. He wouldn't be "he" without the things and people he has loved. The implication is that this is the primary reason Colin himself matters and can generate sympathy at all. Without transcendence, he'd be nothing but a biological conundrum.

In THE HUMAN CENTIPEDE (FIRST SEQUENCE), our disgust lies as much, if not more, with the debasement of personhood as it does with the physical details of the surgery and subsequent existence of the victims, which are both handled with surprising visual delicacy. As if to underline its intent, the film constantly invites us to look outside the house at the bucolic natural setting of the woods, and consider the peaceful tranquility that lies just outside the front

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door. The universe, in other words, may be indifferent to these victims, but we are far from indifferent toward them—especially when, at one point, they comfort each other in their suffering and seek to escape. An image of two human hands connecting two souls in their suffering makes the film's ending even more awful to behold.

In *MIDNIGHT MEAT TRAIN* and *DRAG ME TO HELL*, we are asked what we are willing to sell in order to realize dreams, and how that might turn our dreams and the world itself into a nightmare. Is integrity for sale? Love? Forgiveness? Purity? Compassion? Do we live in an economy of eternity in which these things are valued above everything else, or are we happy to live without them? Without a soul, who cares about hell, or becoming the soulless provider of human meat to the demons that keep running things smoothly on the surface?

MARTYRS offers an astonishing look at human suffering. It's unavoidable, but it also has meaning. We run, we scream, but ultimately all of us must embrace suffering on some level as part of a path. Most major spirituality is built upon this precept. Transcendence can't come without it, because of what transcendence emerges from to begin with: brokenness, sin, chaos. *MARTYRS* is hardly easy to watch, but it is a deeply felt film and hardly exploitative, given its fundamental goal of asking what exactly could be the point of meaning in a fallen world.

TRICK 'R TREAT—Ah, if only all spiritual paths were equal, spirituality could be anything we wanted it to be. We'd never have to worry about nasty things like being judged for sin, or cosmic justice, or good and evil. But in the spirit of EC Comics, this collection of contes cruels reminds us that some things really are sacred, and we toy with them at our peril. As in *PARANORMAL ACTIVITY*, it's our lack of reverence for true spirituality that gets us into the most trouble ultimately—sometimes eternally.

The horror film, in fact, seems to suggest that we are on a spiritual journey whether we like it or not, and that the darkness of the world around us is there to be overcome, to teach, even to provide a backdrop, if you will, for the struggles that shape us as we choose what its stresses will do to us. Are we alone in the struggle? Human community would suggest not, and the fact that humans can have community would suggest there is an even higher connection to reach toward.

{comments on}

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