

## Fango Flashback: “POSSESSION”

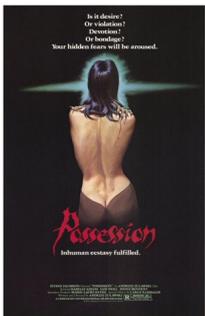
Written by Jack Bennett  
Friday, 06 April 2012 14:16

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“Oh, my *God*. You’re really finding the obscure ones now. [*Laughs*] Yeah, that was probably the most crazed thing I’ve ever done. It’s by a fabulously crazed Polish director called Andrzej Zulawski, with Isabelle Adjani playing my wife, who was pretty out there at the time as well. [*Laughs*] We were shooting in Cold War Berlin, and... It’s sort of a monster movie, but it’s more about the terrible destruction of a marriage than anything, and if you have the courage to sit through the whole thing, it has its rewards.”

—Sam Neill, when asked about POSSESSION in *The A.V. Club’s* Random Roles, March 2, 2012



Video stores in the '80s were like great equalizers, displaying movies in alphabetical order and completely divorced from concerns about budgets, publicity and marketing. Bootlegs and internationals were sometimes mixed in with the major releases, and if you didn't recognize a title, all you had to go on was the cover art and an inclination towards taking a chance. It was under these conditions that 1981's POSSESSION became a favorite of horror fans of a certain age, and an oblivious shrug to generations since. Cut from 127 minutes to 81 (!) for its 1983 U.S. theatrical play and that VHS release, it was first restored to its original length for a now-out-of-print Anchor Bay DVD in 2000, and a new 35mm print making the rounds (it plays New York City May 6; go [here](#) for details) reveals POSSESSION to be an unsung masterpiece of madness.

Zulawski, an obscure Polish director frequently championed by cult cinephiles, was able to get POSSESSION financed as an exploitation movie, but instead delivered a searing portrait of a dissolving marriage. Shot starkly and beautifully on a series of claustrophobic locations, the film is mesmerizing for its sheer craft and emotionally charged energy. It will also leave some viewers scratching their heads, but POSSESSION deserves comparisons to ERASERHEAD, THE BROOD, DON'T LOOK NOW and even MULHOLLAND DR., and certainly Lars Von Trier was thinking about it at some point during the creation of his ANTICHRIST. Yet Zulawski's film

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is entirely its own beast; shocking, absurd, poignant, surprisingly funny and overall mesmerizing. Neill is correct to undersell the "monster movie" aspects, as they take up maybe a third of the screen time, but no shortage of praise can be heaped upon the creature created by Carlo Rambaldi, featuring a pair of the most unsettling eyes ever photographed.

The scarcity of the monster FX doesn't diminish the power of the horror, which focuses on obsessed couple Mark and Anna (Neill and Adjani). Despite the care they show their young son, the two are completely emotionally unprepared for their marriage's impending end, unable to discuss what went wrong and what happens now without flying into explosive tantrums and self-abuse. As the emotional violence segues into the physical kind, the story becomes increasingly difficult to take literally. What pulls us through the bewildering events of POSSESSION's second half are arresting scenes that remain psychologically clear even while the story confuses, and the especially powerful performances by the two leads.



Throughout his career, Neill has always projected a combination of sinister focus and genuine warmth, but in POSSESSION he also shows heartbreaking vulnerability, somehow staying sympathetic while his character grows despicable. The incredibly beautiful Adjani takes on the more frightening character, her doll-like fragility cracking away to expose the monster caged within. Their chemistry is at times awkward and odd, but by the end of the film, the audience sincerely feels as though they've witnessed a couple lose their sanity. The scene in which Anna has a breakdown in a train station feels terrifyingly real, and Adjani's second performance, as a compassionate teacher named Helen, plays almost as a consolation prize, an opportunity for the actress to be inviting and charming. Her scenes with Neill as Helen take on such a sweet, playful quality, and the two actors suddenly appear so comfortable and in control, that you actively dread Anna's return and the ensuing ordeal.

The intention behind Adjani's dual roles goes unexplained, as does much of the film's imagery

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and dialogue; POSSESSION is not for audiences who anxiously await the plot to be clarified. There are plenty of implications to savor, however, such as the film's relationship to faith (Anna obsesses over God, while Marcus explicitly states that "God is a disease,") and how that ties into what we're watching. Entire scenes become driven by subtext, so when the aforementioned tentacled monster shows up and gradually takes the shape of one of the main characters, the meaning is open to interpretation. As is the title, which doesn't embody the definition you might expect going into an early-'80s horror film. POSSESSION is never as straightforward as that designation would suggest, but for those hungry for a unique film experience, this is a lost classic begging to be rediscovered. As Neill said to *The A.V. Club*, "If you have the courage to sit through the whole thing, it has its rewards." If you're a horror fan who prefers the brave and unique to familiar formulas, the rewards will be rich indeed.

