The ultimate terror for any even half-decent parent is the unthinkable—yet perfectly plausible—concept of losing their child. That primal fear is even more profound in a mother, she who miraculously grew this tiny person inside her and whose connection to her charge is one of the most powerful bonds known.

In Argentinean director Adrián García Bogliano’s shuddery new Mexican-made horror-drama HERE COMES THE DEVIL (a world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival), both the ferocity of motherhood and the nightmare of lost children are explored in grim, all-too-real detail. But this dark, domestic treatise is goosed by a genuinely skin-crawling supernatural streak, one that does not negate the realities of the story, but rather serves to accentuate it, boiling to fever pitch that by its final, delirious reel is almost unbearably intense.

The film stars Mexican superstar Francisco Barreiro (so memorable in the masterful WE ARE WHAT WE ARE) as Felix, husband to the gorgeous Sol (singer Laura Caro in her feature film debut) and father to two sweet preteen children, Adolfo (Alan Martinez) and Sara (Michele Garcia). When the family takes a road trip into the Tijuana hills, the kids go off together to explore the surrounding scenic caves. And never return.

As the couple agonizes over the fates of their pretty ones, Adolfo and Sara do indeed come back. But over the next several days, it becomes clear that something is wrong. Terribly wrong.

Initially thinking the children suffered some sort of predator-inflicted trauma (which leads the couple to commit a transgressive act), Sol soon unwinds and, in getting too close to the truth about her brood, seals her fate.

Echoing the ambiguous, sound-and-image-charged fury of cinema sensualists like Ken Russell and Nicolas Roeg, HERE COMES THE DEVIL hooks its audience immediately, with an intense, explicit lesbian sex scene followed by a vicious assault that sets the tone for the earthy, erotic and spastically violent texture that coats the picture like a sheen of greasy sweat. Sex and death and the dark link between the two are at the black heart of the film, with human coupling either preceding or accompanying bloodshed, and in many ways, it is sexuality that is responsible for the family’s nightmare to begin with.

The locations add much to the movie’s fabric, with simple, organic, natural imagery (the stony, cavernous hills that hide the movie’s wrenching secret are terrifying in their bleakness) combining with frank, lusty depictions of sexuality that make the unreal aspects of the movie disturbingly authentic. Unlike your run-of-the-mill American possession film—I’m looking at you, THE RITE—the true shock in HERE COMES THE DEVIL doesn’t lie in the spectacle of watching writhing bodies regurgitate warmed-over pea soup, it hides in the ordinary, and in the maddening idea that the babies who sit at the center of your web are not your babies anymore…and perhaps would even like to inflict harm upon you.

Most importantly, HERE COMES THE DEVIL—though aided by a devastating turn by Caro (whose mother-gone-mad downward spiraling performance is maybe second only to Charlotte Gainsbourg in another recent, similar art-house horror film, ANTICHIRST)—is most assuredly an auteur picture, a directorial tour de force. Bogliano (who also made the raunchy COLD SWEAT) knows the language of cinema and fully comprehends what makes a horror film work, even celebrating oft-abused tropes like smash cuts, sound blasts and wigged-out zooms, using them as surreal stings to mirror the psychological states of the characters. Literally every second of this film is controlled—and that includes the ample sequences when things are out of control.

We watch horror to have our id stimulated, to push our boundaries, and that’s the easy part of any filmmaker’s job; the craft comes from knowing how to expertly manipulate your audience, and Bogliano does both admirably. Because of this, HERE COMES THE DEVIL is one of the most interesting, frightening and thoroughly alive—both intellectually and viscerally—works of horror and dread this critic has seen in a very, very long time.