

FILM REVIEWS

Black Swan

(Dir. Darren Aronofsky) USA 2010

20th Century Fox International

“Done to death, I know. But not like this.” When Vincent Cassel’s leery ballet school director, Thomas Leroy, introduces his cast to the new season’s programme featuring ‘Swan Lake’, he describes how he will reinvent the classic ballet by stripping it down and making it visceral. To do this, he needs a new lead dancer, a woman capable of embodying the characters of both the innocent white swan and the seductive black swan. Darren Aronofsky’s *Black Swan* takes us on a journey from rehearsal to the stage as a delicate young woman, Nina Sayers (Natalie Portman), prepares for the role and undergoes a tragic transformation. Aronofsky’s latest film doesn’t so much delve into the world of ballet as use it as a pretty setting for his psychological tale of artistic obsession. Nina’s life consists of dancing and not much else. She appears to have no interests outside ballet and lives at home with her mother (Barbara Hershey as a truly terrifying composite of stage mother and classic horror psycho mother), whose grip on her daughter is far tighter than Nina’s own grip on reality. Already unpopular with the other dancers, and with suspicion surrounding her sudden elevation to prima ballerina, the introduction of a new dancer to the company (Mila Kunis) quite literally throws Nina off balance and forces the viewer to reel with her for the rest of the film as she tries unsuccessfully to regain her footing. When Nina’s obsessive efforts to be perfect come into conflict with Thomas’s insistence that she needs to lose herself, her descent into madness accelerates.

The tortured artist is a common figure in popular culture, almost as common as the portrayal of female artistic creativity being the result of a sexual awakening, and *Black Swan* flogs this tired cliché with the best of them. Lily’s fluidity and ease of movement in her dancing is aligned with her promiscuity whereas Nina’s inability to seduce the audience is attributed to her perceived crippling frigidity, so instead of suggesting that Nina perhaps needs to get in touch with herself, Thomas instructs her to go home and “touch yourself”. Of course, if *Black Swan* is about one woman’s psychological breakdown, then the choice of ballet, where dancers are required to be beautiful and dainty on the surface while covering up all kinds of things that society might consider ugly, like deformed feet and eating disorders, is an appropriate one. Nina is a professional athlete with a finely tuned body who hasn’t paid attention to her mental health and the deterioration of her mind manifests itself in the slow and subtle destruction of her body. Director David Fincher has called *Black Swan* “a werewolf movie, with a woman” but so wildly varying between subtle and obvious are some of Nina’s bodily mutations that hers in an unconvincing metamorphosis. Perhaps the problem is that before its release, there was a perception that this was going to be a film about ballet. Many of the more gruesome, teeth-clenching moments actually depict average day-to-day realities experienced by ballet dancers, such as damaged toenails and bone-cracking muscle stretches. Some of the violence Nina inflicts on her mother, however, is refreshingly shocking in its simplicity, as are her skin problems, but the decision to amplify these symptoms into full-on CGI transformation is a major flaw with Aronofsky’s film: *Black Swan* doesn’t know if it wants to be a body horror film or a psychological thriller and it fails as both. Despite the behind-the-head vantage shots and the sense of disorientation we share with Nina, we are still never fully admitted to her mind. Outside Nina’s head, gaps and inconsistencies leave the viewer questioning the plot as the film hurtles from one incident to the next without any smooth development; *Black Swan* struggles to decide if it is depicting Nina’s breakdown from inside her head or from without. It’s all a bit *Mullholland Drive* but without Lynch’s sense of

wonder. Aurally, though, *Black Swan* astounds with Clint Mansell's reworking of Tchaikovsky's 'Swan Lake' score. Over this is the unusual inclusion of organic sounds from the dance; movie-makers tend to record over or edit out the live sounds of dancers breathing and of shoes hitting the floor. These combine with the post-production sounds of muscle and skin stretching, contracting, snapping, blistering and writhing to create a meaty soundscape that keeps the viewer on edge.

The heavy-handedness with which many aspects of the film are presented is quite disappointing from the director of *The Wrestler* and *Requiem for a Dream*. The use of mirrors in heightening the viewer's and Nina's sense of paranoia is effective but rather obvious, as are Nina's creepily out-of-tune Swan Lake ringtone and music box. Similarly, the contrasts between the sinister urban scenes, in the subway, and Nina's womblike bedroom, where it is never night or day (only pink), continue the clumsy visual dichotomies in this film, exemplified by the costumes of the main characters. One can imagine some slapping of palms on foreheads when it was decided that Nina should always wear pink and white and Lily should be dressed in black – just in case the viewer doesn't realise which one is the good girl and which one the bad girl, which the white swan and which the black swan, the mommy's girl and the party girl, the virgin and the whore etc.

Perhaps most of all what Aronofsky's movie suffers from is what Thomas says of Nina's dancing: it is overstudied with not enough feeling. The casual acceptance, without comment, of issues and themes in the world of ballet such as eating disorders leaves giant chunks of unexplored areas. Neither does *Black Swan* say anything new about age and beauty. In particular, the character of Beth, Nina's predecessor (the woefully underutilised Winona Ryder), represents a wasted opportunity, and the story of a dying swan may have made for a more interesting film. All in all, you can't help wishing that Aronofsky had spent just a little more time developing his other characters – poor Vincent Cassel is given some of the hammiest lines in a 'backstage' movie since Mickey Rooney. Having said that, there are very few demanding and screen-dominating roles for women of any age in Hollywood and to his credit, Aronofsky has created a complete and nuanced female character that is in almost every frame of the film. Natalie Portman's Nina is a very carefully crafted and precise performance that suggests months of dedicated practice, with Portman making up for her lack of skill in ballet shoes by portraying what is going on in Nina's head (her minute changes of facial expression, in particular, are quite amazing). Don't see *Black Swan* if you're expecting anything along the lines of *The Red Shoes*, though. Despite the obvious comparisons, Powell and Pressburger's 1948 movie about ballet and obsession is a far more restrained and sophisticated affair than the rather obvious melodrama of *Black Swan*. "Done to death, I know. But not like this." Unfortunately Darren, done better elsewhere.

Niamh Dowdall

Confessions
 (Dir. Tetsuya Nakashima) Japan 2010
 Third Window Films Limited

This review contains extensive spoilers

John Aptly described on the poster as a “cross between *Grange Hill* and *Old Boy*”, *Confessions* is an energetic, compelling and often rather silly revenge flick in which a young school teacher is pushed too far and gets her own back by encouraging her former charges to do what they do best: inflict pain upon one another. It is also Japan’s official entry for the Best Foreign Film category at the 2011 Oscars, although it didn’t make the shortlist.

The film begins with an arresting 30-minute monologue which opens as the seemingly mild-mannered Miss Moriguchi (Takako Matsu) announces to her disinterested, milk-slurping students (all aged around 12 or 13) that this will be her last day as their teacher. Initially, they’re all too busy gossiping, flirting, text-messaging and bullying one another to take any notice of what she’s saying (and here, the sound design, which emphasises their ceaseless chatter, does almost too good a job of conveying their insolence: it’s like being in the classroom yourself). Nevertheless, Miss Moriguchi keeps talking, calmly, clearly and intensely, and as she does so, a deeply tragic story emerges. Having become pregnant four years previously during her relationship with a more senior colleague – a noted educationalist with a considerable cult following – she discovered that her fiancée had contracted the HIV virus. He refused to marry her or have anything to do with their child for the little girl’s own sake, so that she will not be subjected to the same kind of ignorant prejudice that the class display once their teacher mentions the disease. Nevertheless, Miss Moriguchi and her daughter have lived a happy, contented existence – at least until the day the child’s body was found floating in a swimming pool near the school.

Though the death was declared an accident, the teacher has, she announces, just realised that her daughter was murdered, and that two of her own students – who she dubs ‘Boy A’ and ‘Boy B’ – were in fact responsible. However, the Japanese penal code apparently means that minors convicted of even the most heinous of crimes receive very lenient punishment: even if she turns the murderers in, therefore, she knows that they will suffer very little. Hence the nasty little twist in Miss Moriguchi’s tale. She tells the class that she has deliberately contaminated the milk just consumed by the boys in question with HIV-infected blood from her late fiancée. Cue hysteria, and fade to black.

It’s a striking opening, to be sure, and one of the things that makes it so effective is that the teacher’s measured tone, composed demeanour and sober dress all seem so completely at odds with the horrific chain of events that she describes. For their part, although some of them are obviously disturbed by what she is telling them, Moriguchi’s students react to much of her account with derision or apparent indifference. Indeed, they must surely be one of the most unlikable group of youngsters assembled onscreen since *The Village of the Damned* (Dir, Wolf Rilla, 1960).

Where the film differs from many previous revenge thrillers is in its choice to follow, not the person seeking revenge, but rather the wrongdoers themselves; in fact, after her opening monologue, Miss Moriguchi is not onscreen again for another 45 minutes or so (although the ramifications of her actions obviously permeate all that follows). The middle of the film alternates between the very different ways in which ‘Boy A’ (mother-fixated electronics whizz Shuya, played by Nishii Yukito) and ‘Boy B’ (class

swot and frequent punching bag Naoki, played by Fujiwara Karou) react to their punishment during the following term, when the students (who have maintained a strictly enforced conspiracy of silence among themselves about what had previously transpired) are assigned their new homeroom teacher, the goofily energetic 'Werther'. ("But that doesn't mean I'm going to kill myself!" he tells them during their first meeting, in one of the film's sillier jokes).

Shuya has returned to school but is now a despised outcast, relentlessly tormented by the others, who see themselves as meting out a much-deserved punishment. Their actions are orchestrated by the anonymous sender of text messages who encourages them to see their bullying as part of a real-life video game in which points are racked up for each act of humiliation or physical abuse they inflict upon their classmate. Even worse off is Naoki, who has become completely obsessed with notions of contamination and refuses to leave his bedroom, or to bathe, lest he accidentally infect his beloved but overbearing mother.

Indeed, the relationship between mothers and children lies at the very heart of the film. Miss Moriguchi, devastated by the death of her own child, fails to consider the consequences of her vengeful actions, while Naoki's mother is aware of what her child has done but is unwilling to admit the truth even to herself. As the film progresses, we realise that everything that Shuya does is a way of trying to attract the attention of his long-gone mother, an electrical engineer who abandoned him so that she could return to academia. Their fathers – like the father of Miss Moriguchi's child – are all but absent figures in their son's lives. We never see Naoki's, who appears to be working away from home for the entire film (despite the fact that his son is clearly in the midst of a colossal nervous breakdown), and Shuya's father, now remarried and with a new family, moves him into an old shack outside the main family home so that he can 'study in peace'. The film seems to imply that it is hardly surprising, then, that both boys are, in their own ways, disturbed young psychopaths to whom empathy is simply a meaningless word. Even more alarming is the suggestion that their classmates differ only in the scale of their cruelty, having thus far confined themselves to vicious bullying rather than progressing to outright murder.

The only character who seems to have any compassion at all left in her is Misuki (Hashimoto Ai) the bright and observant girl who grows to feel sorry for Shuya and eventually embarks upon a romantic relationship with him. It is entirely in keeping with the film's bleak worldview that her acts of kindness towards him should be rewarded with violence, and that she too should express the desire to harm others, although we are never quite sure if this is seriously meant or is mere emo-style posturing. Though initially, and understandably, we are on Miss Moriguchi's side (and, as previously noted, her students are such a relentlessly awful bunch that they appear to deserve everything that's coming to them), as the film progresses, and the extent of her distinctly Machiavellian plan becomes apparent, she becomes less sympathetic, so blinded by her lust for vengeance that she is entirely unwilling to take responsibility for her actions. Reformation, as she says herself in the film's final moments, is a lie: clearly, the sentiment applies as much to herself as to her former pupils. There are some undeniably unsettling moments here, particularly once we begin to realise the extent to which both Shuya and Naoki have become disengaged from conventional notions of right and wrong. At times, they're like nothing more than a pint-sized Leopold and Loeb. What's more, their terrifying detachment, self-absorption and willingness to harm others seems to have been nurtured by both their parents (alternatively suffocating and neglectful) and by society at large, which refuses to force such youngsters to take responsibility for their actions. There are also some scenes that showcase the rather camp exuberance often found in Asian genre films (as in the scene where the class are forced to perform an all-singing, all-dancing rendition of KC and the Sunshine Band's 'That's the Way I Like It' by the relentlessly upbeat pawn Werther).

The film is often shot in a very hyperkinetic, lively fashion, though this does mean that it does at times, particularly in the latter stages, it starts to seem a bit like a collection of music-video montages rather than

a coherent narrative, and there is one bombastically over-the-top sequence – involving Shuya’s dastardly plan for revenge, and accompanied by Radiohead’s “Last Flowers” – that comes across as especially ill-advised: it’s like watching a particularly pretentious late-90s Pop promo. Having said that, *Confessions* remains a thought-provoking, intensely watchable and relentlessly bleak depiction of a generation so alienated from all that is meaningful in the world that their only real enjoyment comes from inflicting pain on others. By the time the end credits roll, you’ll be wishing for an alternate opening in which most of these kids had been sent to the island from *Battle Royale* (Kinji Fukasaku, 2000) instead. Mind you, some of them would probably enjoy a fight to the death a little *too* much...

Bernice M. Murphy

The Ward
(Dir. John Carpenter) USA 2010
 FilmNation Entertainment

When did it all start to go for horribly wrong for John Carpenter? Perhaps no other director best epitomizes the sad fate of so many of the most notable progenitors of the 1970s American horror film boom. After the terrifying intensity of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), Tobe Hooper managed one genuine commercial hit – *Poltergeist* (1982) and a string of uninspired and at times downright awful flops thereafter (anyone unlucky enough to have seen the train wreck that was his 2004 remake of *The Toolbox Murders* will know what I mean). George A. Romero, father of the modern boom in all things zombie produced a run of genuinely interesting, if underappreciated, films in the 70s and 80s – gems such as *Jack's Wife* (1972), *The Crazies* (1973), *Martin* (1977), *Creepshow* (1982), *Monkey Shines* (1988), and, of course, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and *Day of the Dead* (1985) – but now seems content to spend the rest of his career churning out increasingly less effective additions to his own canon (such as *Diary of the Dead* [2007] and *Survival of the Dead* [2009]). William Friedkin rapidly faded into irrelevance, although his 2006 effort *Bug* suggested that he may yet still have something to offer the genre; and although Wes Craven (certainly the most commercially successful of that generation) has managed to reinvent himself often enough to remain relevant, the news that he has once more returned to the over-mined *Scream* franchise provides an indication of the fact that he has long been a director more interested in fiscal rather than artistic considerations. Only maverick Canadian David Cronenberg, whose career has in recent years undergone a renaissance and showcased his still-lively intellectual curiosity, continues to make films that defy conventional categorization and further the themes that have been present in his oeuvre from the very beginning.

And then we have John Carpenter. Director of not one, but *three* of my favourite horror films of all time – *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976), *Halloween* (1978), and *The Thing* (1982). Acclaimed as an *auteur* by the French even before he was known to critics in the US. Capable, at his best, of conjuring up scenes saturated with atmosphere from the most hackneyed of plots – the masked killer, the group of reluctant allies under siege by some terrifying external force, the alien invasion narrative. There are moments in Carpenter's work that have a genuinely sinister dreaminess: the ice-cream van scene in *Assault on Precinct 13*; Michael Myers standing stock still in a sunny suburban garden towards the beginning of *Halloween*, his very presence an affront to the supposed security of the family-centered neighbourhood; or a drive along a country road at night that turns into the stuff of genuine nightmare (*In The Mouth of Madness*, 1994).

But even the most ardent Carpenter apologist would be hard pressed to find anything particularly admirable in most of his work since the infamously bad Chevy Chase vehicle *Memoirs of an Invisible Man* (1992). There has been an unnecessary sequel to what was already one of his more minor efforts (*Escape From LA*, 1996); a sorry remake of a classic 60s SF thriller (*Village of the Damned*, 1995); and, in *Vampires* (1998) and *Ghosts of Mars* (2001), two very silly action/horror films that only highlighted Carpenter's indebtedness to his own past successes. And now, we have *The Ward*, which, at first glance at least, seems as if it might be rather promising, returning as it does to one of Carpenter's most fruitful stock situations, that of the relationship between a small group of people trapped in a claustrophobic space, and threatened by a menacing other: here, a psychiatric ward for disturbed teenage girls which seems to be haunted by the vengeful ghost of Alice Hudson, a former patient.

Set in Oregon in 1966, *The Ward* opens well enough, as a clearly unhinged young woman, Kirsten (played by the unconvincing Amber Heard) burns down a house in the middle of nowhere and is taken into custody by the local police. She's involuntarily committed to the Northbend Psychiatric Hospital, and assigned to the care of Dr Stringer (Jared Harris, best known for his parts in the TV shows *Fringe* and *Mad Men*). From this promising opening, the film descends into a decidedly unsuccessful cross between two films directed by James Mangold, 1999's *Girl Interrupted* (also set in a psychiatric ward for teenage girls during the 1960s) and the genuinely ridiculous 2003 psycho-thriller *Identity*, which climaxed with a groan-inducing plot twist of such idiocy that it has since only been eclipsed by the climactic revelations of M. Night Shyamalan's monumental folly *The Village* (2004).

The first major problem here is that, although this is supposed to be a period film, it boasts one of the least convincing 1960s settings *ever*, perhaps constrained by a budget that just couldn't stretch beyond the leading lady's hair. There are a few stock concessions to the decade made in terms of clothing and furniture, but Heard, like her fellow actresses, simply never convinces as a genuine product of the 1960s and it doesn't help that she sports a particularly straggly set of Jordan-style hair extensions throughout the proceedings. Given that he is clearly so uninterested in the decade, and that the 60s setting is completely irrelevant to the story itself, one wonders why Carpenter didn't just set the film in the present day and save us all a lot of annoyance. Alongside 'Kirsten', there are four other young patients in the same ward (along with the doctor and a couple of nurses, they seem to be the only people in the entire hospital), all of whom, as in *Girl Interrupted*, serve more as stock character types than as actual characters (to be fair, this lack of characterisation may be at least partially explained by the concluding revelations – although this would be a generous interpretation). There's a childlike one, a slutty one, a self-harming one and a vaguely intellectual one, all of whom are terrified of their former ward-mate Hudson, who is said to have died in mysterious circumstances.

The scenes in which Hudson's ghost seems to attack various patients and staff members provide Carpenter with an excuse to turn the film into a tame rip-off of those (by now very familiar) Japanese horror films in which disgruntled female ghosts get their own back on the living in various unlikely ways. It's all so workmanlike, dull and unconvincing that the thankfully lean running time (88min) feels decidedly longer, and the climactic twist is by now so overused that it evoked groans of disdain rather than terror from this reviewer. It doesn't help either that *Shutter Island* (Dir. Martin Scorsese, 2010) – another hackneyed period film set in an insane asylum, albeit one made with considerably more atmosphere and a much larger budget – featured a very similar revelation in its final moments, nor that Darren Aronofsky's recent *Black Swan* (2010) does something along the same lines. In fact, can I propose banning this particular plot twist from all films made for the next twenty years? Then the makers of clichéd psycho thrillers would have to try and come up with some other convenient variation on the 'William Wilson'--style plot twist that was already old when Hitchcock used it in *Psycho* (1960).

But perhaps I'm being too harsh. Maybe we should be happy that a man as important to the development of the American horror movie as Carpenter can still find the backing to make a film at all. Unfortunately, though, *The Ward* would seem to provide further evidence that Carpenter's best days are behind him – it is a truly mediocre film made by a man of once considerable talent, and all the more disappointing for that.

Kelly Grant

Primal
 (Dir. Josh Reed) Australia 2010
 IFC Midnight

It's difficult to resist a film which is marketed (in the literature for the 2010 Horrorthon at the Irish Film Institute in Dublin) as containing "the greatest killer-bunny scene since *Monty Python and the Knights of the Holy Grail*." Nor should anyone reading this attempt to do so, despite the fact that the Pythons manage to pull out a far scarier and more blood-soaked rabbit routine than the one which is, undoubtedly, a high point in Josh Reed's highly entertaining if admittedly slight Ozploitation flick *Primal*.

This, however, is by no means to suggest that *Primal* isn't gory or scary, or indeed funny – quite the opposite. And I'm sure that there are all manner of dull misogynistic puns to be made about bunnies and the blond, somewhat pneumatic young lady (charmingly over-acted by Krew Boylan) who rapidly eclipses the aforementioned homicidal lapine in terms of toothy ferocity and feral appetite. That, however, would be to do an injustice to the film's commitment to nodding but never giving in to the tendency of many horror films to focus on sex and female nudity at the expense of a serious consideration of what makes us afraid. In the case of *Primal*, what gives us the heebie-jeebies is fairly old hat – getting lost; enclosed spaces; arguing with friends and lovers; things that lurk in deep water and dark forests; incomprehensible religious practices; the failure of modern civilisation and all the paraphernalia upon which we've come to depend so heavily; and the sense that the past is a foreign country that nonetheless refuses to remain as far away from us as we might like. With horror, however, a lack of innovation or originality in terms of the sources of our fear is not always something to be lamented. It's sometimes more about playing with expectations and tinkering around with a familiar formula than it is about making us dread turning our bathroom taps, or teaching us to look warily at the patterns in our wallpaper (even if the genre has done both over the past hundred years or so). The right effect can only be achieved, after all, if a film, book or story taps into anxieties that perhaps we didn't know we had – or at least didn't want to remember that we had – until they're projected, ten feet tall and in living, bleeding colour, in front of our dilated pupils.

And bleed the characters in *Primal* most certainly do – copiously, and sometimes with an animalistic glee that might be hard to stomach if it weren't shot through with cheerful good humour. What also prevents this from becoming an exercise in gore-for-gore's sake is, perhaps surprisingly, a reasonably steady grasp of some of the more complex anthropological theories regarding the distinction between myth and ritual – in other words, between the often bizarre daily religious observances of frenzied believers and the behaviour of the deities or other supernatural entities that are the object and focus of that worship. Briefly, *Primal* revolves around a group of college students who head out into the Australian outback in search of cave paintings that have languished almost entirely unresearched for over a century – until now. Anja (Zoe Tuckwell-Smith), the quiet, thoughtful one, has come across references to the paintings in the journals of an intrepid great-uncle who seems to have warned of terrible evil lurking in them there woods, evil that he himself has tried and failed to fight. Dace (Wil Traval), the thoroughly unlikeable self-appointed leader of the group, who makes up in brawn what he clearly lacks in either brains or sensitivity, exploits both this and his faintly abusive flirtation with Anja for his own academic advancement, remaining bullishly determined to get the data he needs for a career-defining thesis, even when things start to go wrong and his friends start dying one by one.

Once this starts to happen, the fragile hierarchy and shaky romantic alliances that make up the group crumble with startling but not-unrealistic alacrity. The catalyst is a notably unerotic skinny-dipping scene

involving the aforementioned blonde, Mel, who winds up covered in leech-type creatures and soon begins shivering and writhing in the tent she shares with dutiful, two-dimensional boyfriend Chad (Lindsay Farris), her previous horniness transformed into a hideous parody, prompting Chad to run to Anja for help, establishing her even more firmly as prime final-girl material. What follows, including the killer-bunny scene, is a tense, often hilarious stand-off/chase sequence where Mel becomes a ravenous, horribly unpredictable predator, and the rest of the group her disorganised and poorly prepared prey. I won't give away who becomes infected next, though it does employ the typical horror-movie logic of karmic pay-offs for offensive behaviour.

Once this has been gotten out of the way, we are gradually permitted to learn more about what is causing this demonic, cannibalistic possession, leading inevitably back to the rock paintings and a nearby cave that causes Anja to faint in the opening minutes of the film, and to which she refuses to return, claustrophobia rooted in a past traumatic experience that, frustratingly, (or perhaps tantalisingly), is only briefly alluded to. But return she must, if she is to rescue the only surviving (and unpossessed) member of the group, the constitutionally terrified Kris (Rebekah Foorde), who has been dragged there by Mel and whose screams reverberate harrowingly through the threateningly lush forest. Though the final scenes of the film do not produce quite as coherent a *dénouement* as one might wish, it is here that we are given some hint as to why Mel and Dace, now copulating like (sorry) rabbits, appear to be terrified of the cave, despite being fairly formidable themselves, not to mention the fact that the two phenomena are quite clearly symbiotically connected. While shark-like teeth and an inhuman appetite for raw flesh might characterise those who, against their will, have been made the acolytes of whatever resides in the cave, they are but small fry compared to the thing itself. As usual in supernatural fare (*Jeepers Creepers II* (Dir. Victor Salva, 2003) being a prime example), female characters are far closer to the experience of the numinous than their block-headed male friends, and Mel in particular acknowledges the authority of the thing in the cave by depositing a sacrifice there in the shape of Kris. Nonetheless, she then beats a hasty retreat, terrified of the awesome power of the primeval divine in a way that, anthropology assures us, is typical of all religious behaviour. Anja, however, the very epitome of civilised self-restraint, forces herself, against her better instincts, to walk back into the tenebrous, unsubtly vaginal cleft in the rock-face, and what she finds there is certainly a surprise, even for those schooled in the ways of the genre. Suffice it to say that the revelation of the monster is as disappointing as it always is, in a *Night of the Demon* kind of way, but what happens to Kris should satisfy all but the most jaded of *aficionados*, and the punch-line, while undeniably unbearably cheesy, elicited enough of a roar of laughter and approval from the audience to allow one to come away from the film feeling really rather well disposed towards it in general.

In many ways, *Primal* is exactly what a horror film should be, with most of the budget poured into make up and special effects rather than into big-name stars, mainstream directors, fancy sets or high-concept plot lines. While nowhere near as tightly conceived or neatly executed as *The Blair Witch Project* (Dir. Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999), nor as slick and flashy as *Jurassic Park* (Dir. Stephen Spielberg, 1993), it succeeds in borrowing some of the best elements of both – a hostile, inhuman environment, collapsing group dynamics, technology and the trappings of modernity turning against those who attempt to wield it in order to save themselves (I'm thinking in particular of a scene in a Jeep here). All in all, I would highly recommend *Primal*. Genre-defining cinema it might not be, but it stands up well as an effective little shocker that remains with the viewer as a fond memory of an enjoyable ninety minutes spent in a darkened room in a comfortably deforested Dublin.

Pat Wolfe