

***The Girl With All The Gifts*, dir. by Colm McCarthy** (Warner Bros/Saban Films, 2016)

Polite, intelligent, twelve-year-old Melanie lives in a cell, her world a military base, just a few corridors and a classroom she only sees when shackled into a wheelchair. Her handlers deal with her as if she's a deadly cross between a feral beast and an unexploded bomb. Why are Melanie and the other children held at the base, and what is the terrible secret she holds?

Colm McCarthy directs this feature with a script by Mike Carey, developed from Carey's own novel of the same name. McCarthy last directed a feature in 2010 with *Outcast*, but has been honing his skills on television with an impressive portfolio of work on *Dr Who* (2005-present), *Peaky Blinders* (2013-present), and *Endeavour* (2012-present). His deft touch and astute sense of pace keep things progressing steadily, allowing his young star to deliver an engaging and moving performance. Though completed on a modest budget, the film displays surprisingly high production values and boasts an excellent cast. Melanie is skillfully played by Sennia Nanua, as is her teacher, Miss Justineau, by Gemma Arterton. Glenn Close plays Dr Cardwell, who looks at Melanie as if she's a lab experiment, and Paddy Considine is the demanding, and at times brutal, Sergeant Parks. Carey's background in comics shows in the economic and skillful establishment of character and situation, fleshing out the pertinent points, and allowing the audience to draw the rest of the information by implication and inference. He quickly sets up an original, immediate, and intriguing premise, but it is the complexity of his characters that keeps us watching.

The narrative builds gradually, drawing us in, revealing layer on layer of harsh strangeness in Melanie's world, before the reveal which makes sense of her situation — she is one of a small group of second-generation zombie offspring who somehow retain their cognitive abilities despite their cravings for human flesh. The accretion of harsh otherness and Melanie's acceptance of it as normality provide some of the most moving moments in the film, which outlines the character relationships clearly and succinctly. Carey sets out his stall early, linking the unfolding story to tales that Justineau reads aloud to her captive class, referencing both Pandora and Odysseus. These Greek myths allow the film to draw parallels between Melanie and Pandora, who unwittingly releases numerous woes on humankind, surrounding bright, happy Melanie with a sense of suspense and foreboding, and with the homeward quest of Odysseus, foreshadowing the travels and trials ahead of the characters.

Forced to flee the confines of the base, the group's journey through a hostile hinterland removes the characters from the rigid martial structure which defined their

previous interactions. Barriers are broken, enemies become allies, allegiances shift, and true natures are revealed. Melanie and Justineau undergo the greatest growth, displaying formidable intelligence and strength, and even brutality when required. The brusque Parks softens, recognising the humanity of those he treated as objects. Only Close's Cardwell is a ruthless constant, intent on doing dire things for the very best of reasons, and this lack of growth proves to be the root of a catastrophic undoing.

The journey, again an unforced echo of Homeric narrative, places the characters in situations where only the captive Melanie, still handcuffed and muzzled, can help them, while ironically she has the most limited experience of the world. Forced to seek help by the most direct route, they pass through the heart of the now-dead and heavily infested metropolis of London. This city, once a hive of life and human activity, is overgrown, returning to nature, and makes aliens of the living. Here, the film encapsulates the greatest dangers visually in the use of an iconic London landmark, subverted by fungal growth. The only inhabitants are the plentiful 'hungries' — infected, effectively dead humans animated by the fungal infection. These mammal-mushroom hybrids snap and bite, then die as the host succumbs to the fungus consuming its flesh. In their final stage, these victims gather and help form huge mycelial lattices as the fungus matures its spore pods.

Kristian Misted's production design largely eschews slick, easy CGI for finding real locations that have been abandoned and overgrown, augmenting and adapting them convincingly through Barber's skilled art direction. Many of the aerial shots were filmed in Pripyat, near the Chernobyl reactor. This use of a city abandoned so hastily by humanity adds a frisson of chilling reality and offers a genuine vision of what happens when our technology and ambition outstrip our ability to control them. The grassy avenues and decaying buildings are a timely reminder that we are limited, and that even our great achievements — cities, culture, society — can be swept away in a few years by simple neglect. McCarthy and Carey perhaps remind us that we are passengers on this planet, and are stewards, not owners, and that it might serve us well to respect the planet, nature, and each other more.

The cinematography by Simons Dennis is luminant and dynamic, showing the appeal and danger of a world which clearly doesn't miss humanity. The emotional core of the film is completed by Cristobel Tapia de Veer's music, which mixes ambient sounds, rhythmic chant, and the attenuated sound of the Theremin to convey the beauty, strangeness, and horror of this post-human world. An invasive fungal infection is used as a biological vector for the apocalyptic plague and this idea is communicated very effectively — the make-up team

depict the vermiform and mycelial invasion of human flesh, the infection's growth, as it progressively changes the texture of the tissue. Eventually this transgressive transformation from animal to vegetable is completed when fruiting bodies, in the form of husk-like spore pods, hang from the now-inert eyes and mouth.

This is the third time this unusual fungus has appeared in moving-image horror narrative as a specific vector for transforming infection.¹ Carey's choice of *Ophiocordyceps Unilateralis* as a plausible cause of infection means that technically this isn't a 'true' zombie movie, since the victims of the plague are parasitised and don't actually die and rise again. In spite of this fine technical distinction, it must be acknowledged that in horror narrative, the zombie has a strong record of adaptability and responsiveness, which belies its often-dishevelled appearance and shuffling gait. This ironic vitality may be due in large part to the creature's deeply political and philosophical roots, emerging from folklore into popular culture as a direct consequence of the United States' colonial expansion into Haiti. William Seabrook's travel narrative, *The Magic Island*,² depicts imagery of Haitians that help to vindicate the US interventions on the island, and some have speculated that Seabrook's book informed the Halperin brothers' film *White Zombie*, the first on-screen appearance of the folkloric creature, in 1932.³ Persephone Braham notes that the zombie became a 'potent symbol of colonial and postcolonial relationships',⁴ and that it '[r]eflects the anthropophagic patterns inherent in capitalist enterprise'.⁵ It is clear that the narrative potential offered by this interstitial figure raises questions that address key human issues: consciousness, identity, responsibility, consumerism, politics, and the dichotomy of being human; materiality versus spirit, object versus subject, the status of an animated corpse that cannot hunger but that continues to consume destructively. The qualities of the traditional zombie have been accentuated by the addition of a transmissible element, perhaps transposed from folkloric lycanthropy, by which every encounter becomes a potential infection, making all narrative protagonists in such texts into zombies-in-waiting.

While not as fiercely original as it might at first appear, McCarthy's film delivers some great storytelling and does a wonderful job of presenting a post-human world. Its

¹ *Ophiocordyceps* first appears as an invasive, mind-altering infection in video game *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013), and reappears in Corin Hardy's *The Hollow* (2015).

² William Seabrook, *The Magic Island* (New York: Dover Books, 2016).

³ Robert Spadoni, *Uncanny Bodies: The Coming of Sound and the Origins of the Horror Genre* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) p. 123.

⁴ Persephone Braham, 'The Monstrous Caribbean', in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, ed. by Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J Dendle (Oxford: Routledge, 2016), pp. 17-47 (p. 39).

⁵ *Ibid.*

massified, infectious antagonists resonate with significant political and philosophical meaning, but in the end, it is really the development of the characters and the skill with which their fears and strengths are portrayed that takes *The Girl With All the Gifts* beyond the conventional emotional limits of the horror genre.

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