

Film Review: *The Witch Who Came From the Sea* (Dir. Matt Cimber, 1976)

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The Witch Who Came From the Sea (1976) is one of 72 titles that featured on the Department of Public Prosecutions' (DPP) 1983 list of 'Video Nasties'. Of those 72, 33 were unsuccessfully prosecuted and dropped from the list—*The Witch* (released uncut in the UK on DVD in 2006) is among them. Interestingly, the VHS cover art that originally attracted the DPP's attention is ultimately more salacious than the film's content. While rich in ideas, Matt Cimber's film is frustratingly uneven in its execution.

The film centres on Molly (Millie Perkins), a waitress at a seaside bar who is deeply traumatised by a history of sexual abuse at the hands of her father. Molly is haunted by strange flashbacks, which make their way to the surface of her consciousness. She vehemently protects the idea of her father—a ship's captain who Molly claims was lost at sea—insisting to her young nephews that their grandfather was a stern man, but ultimately a kind one. Further than that, Molly is determined to make her nephews see their grandfather as a role model. This is indicative of her over-investment in the idea of public personas, including her own. Molly's sister Kathy counters her hagiography of her father, saying (rather bluntly) that he was a drunken bum. Molly responds with total denial: 'Papa never kicked anyone, he never put a finger on you'. Kathy is torn between appeasing Molly and the demands of her own truth. 'He was an evil bastard', she retorts, 'and more than anyone, you know it'.

The Witch's historical context in the UK leads viewers to focus on the film's on-screen violence rather than on its thematic content. Yet the film actually accesses something quite potent about the difficulty

of establishing shared narratives in families, especially in situations of abuse. As *The Witch* demonstrates, siblings sometimes might as well live in different worlds. Few things are more cathected and subjective than one's own self-constructed origin story. *The Witch* also seems to say something about the power of adult abusers to retroactively shape causal sequences, along with their contexts and meanings; a power that capitalises on children's limited comprehension of, and control over, broader social-consensus realities. The inherent instability of memory becomes nightmarish, and what horror and suspense the film can claim derives from this quality. While *The Witch* is far from perfect, I've seldom seen this aspect of abuse addressed, and I appreciate that the film follows this depiction up with a narrative that, in some ways, makes the unreliability of memory and the difficulty of establishing shared truths a focal point.

As the title suggests, *The Witch Who Came From the Sea* is also inflected with a nautical theme, which it uses to tie together its metaphors, and which gives it a corpus of imagery to operate within. For example, Molly tells the boys about the models her father built: 'little ships, so beautiful they could stop your heart'. We cut to a flashback image of the ships' intricate miniature rigging, her child-hands weaving through it. Her father adjusts her hands, nuzzles her cheek in a way that feels familiar and comfortable. His gestures of affection slip into something inappropriate. Young Molly's rapt, loving gaze becomes rigid and petrified.

Due to repressing her past trauma, revealed obliquely in flashbacks such as this, Molly may or

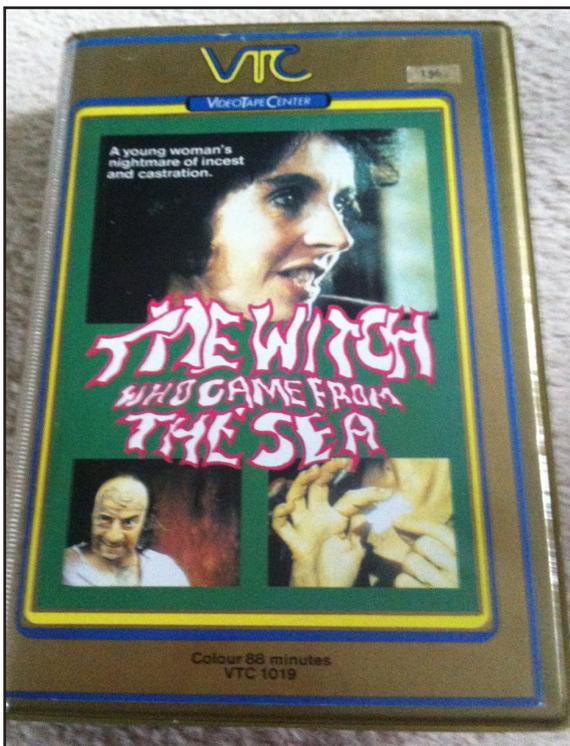
may not ritualistically have sex with and kill men with razor blades, going for castration where possible. Eventually this ambiguity is resolved, and not in Molly's favour: a 'did she do it?' crisis reminiscent of Italian *giallo*. *The Witch* has a clear predecessor in *Lizard in a Woman's Skin* (Dir. Lucio Fulci, 1971). In a rather sophisticated instantiation of horror's rape-revenge trope, Molly is driven to repeated acts of vengeance and domination due to her inability to consciously process her past, and to break through the image of her father that she herself has created.

Even at the film's end, when Molly's actions have become fully crystallised, the audience is still left with competing 'ends' for Molly's father and their 'relationship'. Did he, as Molly claims, die for love? Did he, as she says and we see, end up huddled naked in a closet, gazing up at her in the grip of an unexplained terror? Did Molly's father, as we see near the end, die in her, on top of her? Does the way young Molly's dead-eyed stare during the sex scene transitions into utter surprise when her father begins to die mean that this was an accident, or is Molly simply surprised and horrified at the effects of her first effort to kill?

Clearly, any or all of these alternatives could have put the film onto the DPP's list rather than video store shelves—and admittedly, the film's few, brutal killings made me metaphorically hide behind the sofa. What is awful about these scenes is not what is shown, but the muffled, underwater, inhuman sound of a man's jagged cries as, the viewer is informed, Molly is cutting off his penis with a tiny razor off-frame. 'Shit', Molly grouses, with a waitress's matter-of-fact assessment of the job in hand, 'this'll take forever'.

Genre Location: Horror, Rape-Revenge, and the Gothic

The Witch is difficult to place within a specific genre context. The film's attempt to handle complex themes pertaining to memory and repression render it reminiscent of the *giallo*. It has elements of psychological horror, and is, broadly, a rape-revenge film (with a nautical theme). But while *The Witch* might suggest gore, it is also un-horrific, uninterested in constructing its inherent narrative ambiguity as suspense. Molly doesn't seem that suspicious of herself, and the film's pacing doesn't coalesce to the degree



that others' suspicion is ever more important than our dreamlike exploration of Molly's past and present. *I Spit On Your Grave* (Dir. Meir Zarchi, 1978), perhaps *The Witch*'s closest Video Nasty compatriot, is, comparatively, an exemplary model of typical horror plot-structures and mechanics for generating tension. Perhaps, then, *The Witch* is closer to a film like *Monster* (Dir. Patty Jenkins, 2003). *Monster*, like *The Witch*, is about gender, abuse, sex and murder, but is difficult to place within the broad auspices of the horror genre. Or *The Witch* could be more in the vein of *Baba Yaga* (Dir. Corrado Farina, 1973), a 'fascinating examination of female sexuality and the fine line between the erotic and the horrific' (Smith 2013). *The Witch*'s lineage cannot be easily traced within the somewhat more conventional semantics and syntactics of rape-revenge, or, even more broadly, the horror genre. Instead, I would situate the film within the realm of the Gothic.

The Witch reminded me of *Rebecca* (Daphne du Maurier, 1938) and *Black Swan* (Dir. Darren Aronofsky, 2010). The review to this point, with its descriptions of Molly suffering or in homicidal action, may have occluded Molly's dreamy, elevated way of speaking, which is especially noticeable early in the film. The way she speaks isn't simply stilted, it sounds Victorian or Edwardian, like something out of *The Turn of the Screw* (Henry James, 1898). There's a Victorian sensibility about Molly's repression, her imperious quality, the dated nature of her nautical fixation, and her close, governess-style relationship with the boys. Molly is at turns a firm, eloquent and kind woman along Jane Eyre lines; a totally controlled seducer and killer; and a blank, vulnerable object who doesn't remember much of what's happened to her. The actress, Millie Perkins does some excellent work on this variable character throughout. Her consistent, decisive portrayal lacquers over some uneven characterisation at the script level. Due to this compatibility with a traditional high-Gothic sensibility, the film could be, and might even profit from, temporally relocated in the manner of *Ginger Snaps Back: The Beginning* (Dir. Grant Harvey, 2004), which restaged the original, contemporary *Ginger Snaps* (Dir. John Fawcett, 2000) in 19th century Canada. Yet the Gothic quality of *The Witch* arises not so much from its deployment of Gothic's semiotics as from the recognisable shape of its concerns about sexuality

and identity.

The Witch tries, in a way, to reconcile Rebecca, anti-heroine of the titular novel, and the novel's nameless female narrator—to realise the novel's central tension about identity and ways of performing a role, and to actually conflate the two women, who are always in danger of sliding into one another, into the same person. There's a perilous instability of the self in both *Rebecca* and *The Witch*, but it's not the familiar-to-us existential modernist tension. It's a social-facing fear, concerned with roles, who you are to other people, what you've done, and the extent to which you can control yourself.

With one exception, Molly's victims and potential victims are violent to Molly after she offers them the first, minor signs of provocation. On a few occasions Molly is called 'cunt', etc. (in anger, not sexual play), and we see her, despite the physical strength she demonstrates in other scenes, being easily backhanded so hard she slaps down on the bed. The film at times very deliberately flags up the fact that the violence men subject women to is institutionalised and unremarkable, but Molly's actions are remarkable aberrations and a sign of her descent into madness. *The Witch* is, in general, very concerned with what people think of Molly, and whether they see her as moral. The film itself seems to want to protect her, obsessively framing her actions, contextualising them, and offering us characters that find her sympathetic.

Verdict

The Witch throws a lot of great thematic content at the wall to see if it sticks, but ultimately it's a deeply unsatisfying film. In part that's a problem of low-end production, but more than that, *The Witch* fails in a way that the glossy, modern *Black Swan* also does. Like *Black Swan*, *The Witch* is well-shot and suggestive. And like *Black Swan*, *The Witch*'s efforts to represent the mind in chaos on film are a bit baffled. With its use of flashbacks, its ambiguity as to the events of its plot, and its commitment to staging subjectivity, *The Witch* sets itself a surprisingly ambitious narratological project. Yet *The Witch* is not quite *Baba Yaga*, with its cultivated surreality. Its confusion is less productive. *The Witch*'s sexual mystery is pretty thoroughly mined by the VTC tagline, 'a young woman's nightmare of incest and castration'. There you have it.

The common failures of *Black Swan* and *The Witch* make me wonder if these 'repressed women going ambiguously insane and turning violent in the patriarchy' narratives are well-suited to film. Even in inhabiting and sympathising with her, does this film render Molly a subject/desire object in the way her sexual abuse did? Does it infantilise her? A written narrative like *Rebecca* can give us access to the conflicting material of its core female character's consciousness in a way *The Witch* can't quite find a means of accomplishing. *The Witch* should, however, be commended for trying to push its vocabulary, to the extent that a flatmate described this as a Video Nasty as directed by Brecht. For example, in one scene the camera flicks a tight, horror-movie frame on Molly as she wakes. She hears the sound of the lover she is about to kill shaving in the background. We watch the back of Molly's head, as those sounds become a crashing, atmospheric noise, like waves.

The film ends on a strangely muted, near-tragic note. Molly's boyfriend and her friend help Molly to commit suicide, and she dies in a pieta position, draped over her friend's lap, her hands clenched as if in prayer. We then see Molly in what might be her afterlife, on a boat crowded with corpses--the 'crew' she has acquired throughout her life. While it didn't wholly satisfy as a psychological exploration or as horror for me, other critics would, with good justification, contest the notion that this film can be said to 'not work' simply on the grounds of not meeting what are, after all, entirely arbitrary generic norms (see Mudge 2005). For me *The Witch Who Came From the Sea* fails, but fails in interesting and generative ways

References

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