Written by Chris Alexander
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Don’t be fooled by the presence of Kristen Stewart or the family-friendly property itself; SNOW WHITE AND THE HUNTSMAN isn’t just for swoony preteens looking for melodramatic romance. While it certainly does have all the elements of a multiplex-friendly light fantasy, there is a darkness at its core that pushes it closer to Hammer than Disney.

In fact, isolating the narrative thread detailing the plight of Charlize Theron’s bitch-goddess evil queen, SNOW WHITE is really a thinly veiled remake of Hammer’s 1970 Ingrid Pitt creeper COUNTESS DRACULA! Don’t believe me? Read on…

Slinking across the screen with a fluid, serpentine menace, Theron—porcelain beauty and big blue eyes barely containing desperate madness—owns the film as Queen Ravenna, killer of kings and sadistic stepmom to Stewart’s long-imprisoned Snow White. Ravenna’s magic mirror (a melty CGI effect wherein a brass disc oozes into a faceless specter) informs her one day that she is no longer the most beautiful lady in the land—that young Snow White has come into womanhood in captivity, and her visage now trumps all. This is, of course, more of a fantasy than the film itself, as Stewart’s tomboyish Snow in *no* way, shape or form holds a burning torch to the majestic femininity of Theron, but no matter…

Ravenna, needless to say, makes plans to not only kill her stepdaughter but eat her still-beating heart, thus ensuring that she will stay young and beautiful forever. See, Ravenna is a monster, a vampire of sorts, one that—with the aid of her creepy, possibly incestuously attached brother—procures village virgins (one played by Lily Cole, herself just seen as a vampiric sort in THE MOTH DIARIES) to bring to her chambers. There, she sucks their youth out, often killing them, sometimes only leaving them brittle hags. She also strips (though we never see the full nudity on screen—damn PG-13!) and bathes in milk to rejuvenate her skin, an amazing operatic effect that’s a thinly veiled nod to real-life historical “blood countess” Elizabeth Bathory’s penchant for bathing in her victims’ blood.

At any rate, Snow escapes into the dark forest (an eerie set reminiscent of classic Gothic horror locations *à la* Mario Bava) and is first hunted, then rescued by, the burly, drunken, emotionally wounded hunky huntsman (CABIN IN THE WOODS and THOR’s Chris Hemsworth), befriended by a gang of surly dwarves (not dwarves at all, rather a selection of fine British actors like Ray Winstone, Toby Jones and Ian McShane digitally manipulated to smaller size), bites a bad apple, comes back from the brink of death, rights all wrongs done to her and the kingdom, etc.

You know the tale well, whether tapped from the original Brothers Grimm source or filtered through the animation of Walt Disney, and though many detours push the story into oddball directions and forced love triangles, it remains Snow’s story, tricked out with a dash of LORD OF THE RINGS and even GAME OF THRONES for good measure. But horror fans will groove on this film. The tone is well, grim; nary a laugh or ray of sunshine makes its way into the pictures’s fabric. The violence is potent and relentless, though never bloody or explicit, and people do die, in droves. Monsters in the form of screaming broken-glass soldiers and especially a gigantic screaming troll also show up to the party. The performances are straight-faced and earnest, the stakes high, the dialogue melodramatic but serious and Rupert Sanders’ direction purposeful, and sometimes even marvelously meandering (extended scenes in the fairy forest reminded me of the magical, lyrical sequence in NIGHT OF THE HUNTER where John and Pearl float aimlessly downriver in the john boat while the hidden forest creatures secretly watch them in wonder). James Newton Howard’s score is also a treat, full of sweeping melody and peppered with strange analog Moog keyboard stings.

But it is Theron who pushes the film into Grand Guignol territory. Ravenna is a vampiric, snarling narcissist who was damaged years—*many* years—before and cursed/blessed with youth and the need to kill to keep it. She screams when done wrong, she weeps when she remembers her past, she fights death at every turn and yet most certainly secretly wants to die. Every frame of film that features her is a treat for the senses, especially when she’s married to the excellent visual FX. In one jaw-dropping sequence, Ravenna, after exploding into a murder of crows, splats onto the castle floor in a puddle of dead-bird tar and black oily goop; as she

tries to reconstitute into human form, she crawls forth from the nightmarish ooze like the Wicked Witch of the West screaming for a rebirth. It is probably one of the most imaginative and effective employs of CGI trickery I have ever seen.

Those hardened grumps who wish the rest of the film matched the malice of Theron’s Ravenna should ease up and remember that this is really a film for younger audiences. The fact that it is so dark, so dripping with icky and psychosexual subtext—not to mention Gothic horror—should be thrilled that a studio (in this case, Universal) had the courage to not make the dwarves sing “Heigh-Hoooooooo!” even once.