Written by Allan Dart
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The title for this remake of Robert Fuest’s 1970 film should be AND SOON THE OBVIOUS… Whether or not you’re a fan of the original, at least it tried for some suspense, tension and mystery. Unfortunately, in first-time feature director Marcos Efron’s redux, none of those elements are present.

While the movie (opening theatrically in Los Angeles today ahead of Anchor Bay’s DVD/Blu-ray releases December 28) is visually appealing—and not just due to female leads Amber Heard and Odette Yustman—the obvious storytelling is not. We know who the bad guys are and where this film is heading from the very start, leaving the viewer with nothing to soak up except the scenery (again, not just Heard and Yustman, but the beautiful Argentinean locations) as the generic and predictable plot unfolds.

If you haven’t seen the ’70 version, it was directed by Fuest (who would go on to helm THE ABOMINABLE DR. PHIBES, its sequel and THE DEVIL’S RAIN) and scripted by Brian Clemens (who, like Fuest, worked on the AVENGERS TV series, and would go on to both write and direct CAPTAIN KRONOS: VAMPIRE HUNTER) and Terry Nation (he too wrote for THE AVENGERS, but is better known as the man who created the Daleks for TV’s DOCTOR WHO). The original AND SOON THE DARKNESS focused on two young British nurses, Jane and Cathy (THE INNOCENTS and THE LEGEND OF HELL HOUSE’s Pamela Franklin and BLOOD ON SATAN’S CLAW’s Michele Dotrice) who are bicycling through the French countryside on holiday. When the two get into a fight, Jane leaves, only to return and discover that Cathy is now missing. Turns out that a girl was found murdered in the same place a few years ago, and as Jane searches for her friend, she must deal with unfriendly locals and the suspicious Paul (THE EVIL OF FRANKENSTEIN’s Sandor Elès), who claims he’s a detective and wants to help her.

The remake basically covers the same ground, but instead of France, this movie takes place in a remote, rural area of Argentina. Yustman is Ellie, the girl who goes missing, Heard is Stephanie, the friend who goes looking for her. And DOOM’s Karl Urban is the suspicious Michael. Both movies make the most of their settings, and both create an atmosphere of alienation for their characters (the remake, like the original, doesn’t use subtitles for its foreign-speaking locals). However, the major disparity between Fuest and Efron’s films is the very downfall of the redux: all of the cards are laid out from the very beginning in the new DARKNESS. Its opening scene shows a girl named Camila (Gia Mantegna, Joe’s daughter), half-naked and tied up in a cellar-like room, being tortured. That’s not in the original. Neither is the unambiguously evil dude Chucho (Michel Noher), whom Yustman hooks up with at a bar. And unlike in the ’70 film, where we don’t actually see Cathy being abducted, this DARKNESS shows Ellie being kidnapped by that unambiguously evil Chucho.

Again, whether you enjoyed the original or not, at least you were (somewhat) unsure of what happened to Cathy and who, if anyone, had taken her. (Yes, you figure she was snatched by someone, but you don’t absolutely know by whom or why). The other glaring difference is that in Fuest’s film, much of Jane’s confusion lies in her mistrust of Paul and her suspicion that he may be involved in her friend’s disappearance. In DARKNESS ’10, it’s plain as day that Urban’s Michael is a red herring. In fact, the actor is entirely wasted, and his character could’ve easily been dropped from the story.

If you’re reading this review and are about to get angry because I’m giving away SPOILERS, calm down. All of these points and details are either made evident or are transparent early on in the story. Heck, they give away the girls-being-sold-into-prostitution “twist” right away. Basically, all you’re left with is a frightened and fish-out-of-water Stephanie asking scowling and silent locals if they’ve seen her friend. Oh, and there’s Calvo the cop (César Viano). No prizes for figuring out if he’s a good cop or a bad one.

About all you can say about this unnecessary redux—besides that Heard and Yustman look good in bikinis—is that it’s beautifully photographed and makes the most of its South American environs (the discs’ 2.40:1 presentation is superb). The location shooting is a subject that’s brought up in the audio commentary, which involves Efron, editor Todd Miller and director of photography Gabriel Beristain. The most interesting part of this chat is the conversation between Efron and Beristain as they discuss the lighting and cinematography. Their dialogue really communicates and drives home the significance of the cinematographer’s role and how the DP’s relationship/collaboration with the director determines a film’s visual impact, style and storytelling. The other extras include the trailer, some inconsequential deleted scenes and a short Director’s Video Diary that shows some of the location footage as well as Heard visiting a local school.

So, while this redux isn’t as awful as many a recent remake (see PROM NIGHT, BLACK CHRISTMAS, PULSE…), this DARKNESS will SOON be forgotten, I imagine. OK, maybe you’ll remember the bikini scene.

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