

Fresh from the Archives: “REPULSION” (DVD Review)

Written by Scooter McCrae

Thursday, 03 March 2011 13:07



Roman Polanski’s 1965 classic made the Top 300 Horror Films in FANGORIA #300, and now REPULSION is getting its due as part of the BAMcinématek series Deneuve, a 25-film March tribute to the legendary French actress that’s taking place at the Brooklyn, NY-based BAM theater. You can click [here](#) for the dates, times and other info. And as a special treat, Catherine Deneuve will introduce the film during its March 4 screening. Here’s Scooter McCrae’s review of the REPULSION Criterion Collection DVD (which came out in July 2009).



Roman Polanski’s second feature film, REPULSION (1965), is considered a classic of the slow-burn, first-person psychological-study genre. Just out on a special-edition DVD and Blu-ray from Criterion, it messily observes and records the unraveling of the sanity of an unbalanced young woman (played by an especially delicate Catherine Deneuve) when she’s left home alone for the weekend by her older sister.

That’s really it for plot, folks; this is more of a non-narrative character study than a densely plotted thriller. But if you hook up with the film’s wavelength, settle in with it and allow the flow of images to lead you along, you’ll find yourself taking an interesting and disturbing journey.

The movie is expertly photographed by Gil Taylor (who would reunite with Polanski a year later on CUL-DE-SAC), who imbues the first half of the movie with a rather natural look. But once the long, dark night of the second half starts creeping under your skin, the filmmakers indulge in a full onslaught of stark black-and-white shadows and super-wide-angle lenses that distort the characters and their settings to nightmarish proportions. It’s still an impressive achievement that REPULSION’s most cringe-inducing moment of violence involves the spilling of a single sliver of blood from a fingertip, at the end of a suspenseful build-up involving a cuticle knife. The shot that climaxes this scene—a bottle of nail polish spinning in a mad circle on the floor of the beauty salon after this incident, as Deneuve looks on in shock—is the kind of transcendental image that can only happen in cinema. Visually, it’s as if her growing insanity has taken physical form as a whirling dervish that dances before her eyes and teases her sorry state.

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I remember seeing a smeary, speckled, crappy-looking copy of REPULSION many years ago on VHS, where the image had been reduced to nothing but a smudged gray scale—and of course, I wondered what all the fuss was about. Well, I wonder no more, thanks to Criterion’s precisely detailed and vibrantly high-contrast chiaroscuro 1.85:1 transfer. The discs’ audio commentary, which features Polanski and Deneuve recorded separately, is uniformly excellent, with both participants offering well-remembered anecdotes filtered through their different areas of expertise. As you might expect, Polanski is more forthcoming with the technical aspects, such as the lighting choices and lenses used to create the visual unease that increases as the film moves forward, while Deneuve recounts the finer details of a now veteran and celebrated performer experiencing an early starring role in an English-language movie.



What is especially refreshing to hear in his comments (both here and in one of the featurettes) is Polanski’s respectful attitude toward the low-budget production company that financed this project back in the day. While he’s quick to point out that this was an outfit known for low-level erotic fare that was looking to finally make a “respectable” project with an up-and-coming director, he also makes it clear that they were the only ones willing to take a chance on the still relatively young director, who was being critically celebrated for his debut feature KNIFE IN THE WATER but ignored by the money men who get Hollywood movies made.

He states this most clearly in the contemporary featurette, the 24-minute “A British Horror Film,” which also contains recent interviews (2003) with producer Gene Gutowski, Taylor and (most entertainingly) art director Seamus Flannery. Polanski comes right out and says he doesn’t want to sound like he’s making fun of or being disparaging toward the people who gave him the opportunity to make REPULSION, but he’s also not afraid to be quite honest about the low-budget circumstances under which it was made. It’s refreshing to hear a filmmaker recalling his early days without contempt for the people who gave him such a profound opportunity, even if the circumstances under which the project was made had more to do with making a return on their investment than worrying about whether or not the result would eventually be considered a

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timeless work of art. It’s enlightening to think that “art” can happen under almost any circumstances, as long as talent is involved.

The second featurette, a fantastic period piece created for a 1964 television show while the film was still in production, is made up of nearly 22 minutes of on-set footage, taken during rehearsals, of Polanski working with the actors and his crew. Interestingly, Deneuve makes reference in her interview to a third murder that was apparently filmed but not used in the final cut (uh-oh, deleted scenes that are forever missing for cineastes to fret over for all of eternity!). Polanski actually addresses this near the end of his commentary, and his reasons for cutting out these moments make a lot of sense and help reinforce the movie’s final structure and psychology.



Liner notes by Bill Horrigan hold our beloved genre by two fingers at arm’s length while loudly proclaiming the obvious about Polanski’s genius. Thanks once more to yet another scholar willing to sully himself by association with the (gasp) modern horror film! Hopefully, next time he’ll give credit to master craftsman Jacques Tourneur for directing CAT PEOPLE and I WALKED WITH A ZOMBIE, instead of showering praise only on producer Val Lewton for the “unease and inquietude through lighting and shadow” suffusing both movies (technical qualities someone with filmmaking experience would assign to the director or the great cinematographer Nicholas Musuraca).

Overall, this is an excellent package and a great introduction to Polanski’s filmmaking if you’ve never seen anything by him before. With all the crap movies out there these days which try (and fail miserably) to offer psychological insight into their characters—but are actually no deeper than a puddle of spit—you owe it to yourself to check this one out and see how it’s really done.

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MOVIE: 

DVD PACKAGE: 

{comments on}