



THE EMPIRE MASTERPIECE

# Possession

WHY ANDRZEJ ŻULAWSKI'S  
HORROR MOVIE WON'T LET YOU GO

WORDS ADAM SMITH

FILM LOVERS OF a certain vintage have much to thank the Director of Public Prosecutions for. In 1983, the government's smut-finders general released a list of movies so shockingly depraved, so utterly dangerous that they must be consigned to legal oblivion. Behold the video nasties! And thus a whole generation of future cinephiles was provided with its first 'must see' list.

In the decades that have followed, some of those cinematic outlaws have been recognised as genre classics — *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), *The Last House On The Left* (1972), *The Evil Dead* (1981) — and others have revealed themselves as the meretricious, if entertaining, exploitation tat that they always were. They have been defanged, neutered, and rendered safe.

Apart from one.

Andrzej Żuławski's lunatic divorce drama *Possession* has always defied easy characterisation and is undiminished by the passage of time. It is as shocking, unmooring, bizarre and gruelling today, 40 years later, as it was when it was being snatched by plod from the lower shelves of mom-and-pop video stores.

Describing *Possession*, as anyone who has witnessed it will know, is a fool's errand. It is, superficially, an account of a break-up. Set in Cold War West Berlin, it sees spy Mark (Sam Neill) arrive home to find his apartment deserted, his five-year-old son apparently abandoned. When his wife, Anna (Isabelle Adjani), arrives, it is clear their relationship is doomed. She teeters on the edge of mania, while Mark alternates between violent rage and a glassy-eyed, beaming stupor.

The pair row, she slices her throat with an electric carving knife, Mark has a go at his own arm with the same kitchen utensil. An attempt at reconciliation in a café ends with Mark smashing it up. Mark assaults his wife, and in one of the film's many surreal, profoundly upsetting images, Anna, blood gushing from her mouth, heads off into the city. This concludes the sanest part of the proceedings.

Anna undergoes a shrieking, almost unwatchable breakdown in a deserted subway and either births or miscarries a... something. Subsequently, Mark discovers Anna has a *piéd-à-terre*, a decaying flat which she shares with



Clockwise from here: Anna (Isabelle Adjani) about to do some lurid damage; Miscarrying in a subway; Mark (Sam Neill) helps Sara (Leslie Malton) take aim; Anna takes a traumatic tour of the city; Love hurts.

a nightmarish tentacled monster which she occasionally fucks, and sometimes... feeds. Mark confronts Anna's human lover Heinrich (played with a delicatessen's worth of well-aged ham by Heinz Bennent), who humiliates and finally karate-chops him. There is a fridge full of human body parts, Anna's doppelgänger turns up, a character suffers death by lavatory.

The third act is indescribable.

Żuławski had been pretty much exiled from his native Poland after 1972's *The Devil* (banned) and *On The Silver Globe* (abandoned in the mid-1970s). He went through a turbulent divorce, which formed the inspiration for the film that would become his indubitable masterpiece.

"I saw exactly what Mark sees when he opens the door to his flat, which is an abandoned, messy child in an empty flat and a woman who is doing something, somewhere else," he would later say.

And it is that shock, the Hitchcock-zoom of a world inexplicably warping, that provides the key to understanding *Possession*, if it can be understood at all. Films, both Hollywood and arthouse, have tackled break-ups before, of course. From Bergman's 1973 *Scenes From*

*A Marriage* (which Żuławski had seen and which had left him cold) through *Kramer Vs. Kramer* (1979) to Danny De Vito's sublime *The War Of The Roses* (1989), the terminal stages of matrimony have been sanded down and transformed into approachable, three-hanky narratives. But Żuławski has no interest in telling a story. Just as pain is not coherent, *Possession* obeys no logical rules. The agony is raw — exploding into the world, warping it, transforming it, figuratively (and given some interpretations of the film's final moments, literally) ending it.

It would be remiss not to note that, amid this roiling, wailing chaos, the film is not without both a mordant sense of humour, often missed on the first viewing, as well as a political subtext. "Does the target still wear pink socks?" asks one of Mark's handlers as genius DP Bruno Nuytten's disconcerting wide-angle lens swoops and swirls around a vast, empty conference room early in the film. The Berlin Wall, occasionally glanced at from the couple's flat, disfigures the city, a physical scar that mirrors the characters' inner mutilation.

Placing *Possession* in any kind of cinematic

context is almost impossible. There are shades of Cronenberg's *The Brood* (1979), with its motif of inner torment expressed as gooeey external monstrosities, maybe a soupçon of Polanski's *Repulsion* (1965). And it has distinct echoes in some contemporary movies. Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* (2009) gestures both to its visual excesses and its conjuring of a sense of madness. But the contemporary director who owes the most to it is Gaspar Noé, both in the blend of brutality and sentiment of *Irréversible* (2002), but more acutely in the distorted world of *Enter The Void* (2009), in which the protagonist's agony spills outwards and deforms the reality around them.

The shoot was notoriously hard on the principal cast. Żuławski described voodoo rites he had witnessed in Haiti as his performance benchmark. Nothing, absolutely *nothing*, was "too much". The result is a brace of hysterical, anti-realist, absurdist turns that start somewhere north of 11 and rocket skywards. Isabelle Adjani would win at Cannes for her work — and deservedly; if it isn't the best acting in a motion picture that year, it is certainly the *most* acting in a motion picture that year — before suffering a breakdown

Alamy, Altitude Films, Universal



brought on by the role.

"It was a motherfucking surreal time," Neill would later say. "Żuławski was a genius, but crazed. He asked so much more of you than you could possibly give. He asked much more than a director should." (Creature designer Carlo Rambaldi, who had got the gig after H.R. Giger was unavailable, added to the general sense of lunacy by delivering each iteration of his Lovecraftian obscenity to the set in a handmade coffin.)

*Possession* divides audiences to this day. For some its abject lunacy, its boundless cruelty, is unbearable. For others, it is the nearest thing to human insanity, pain and madness in their rawest forms spilt across a cinema screen, but shot through with a deeply human sympathy for this pair trapped in their *folie-à-deux*. But what it does not do is leave you unchanged. Once you've seen it, endured it, survived it, *Possession* never lets you go.

POSSESSION IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL

FINAL CUT

## PICKS OF THE MONTH

CHOSEN BY CHRIS HEWITT



### 1. THELMA

(OUT 21 OCTOBER, DVD/BR)

Josh Margolin's comedy gives the great June Squibb the role of her long lifetime as an elderly lady who shakes off her shackles to hunt down the guys who conned her out of ten grand. An acutely observed character piece with occasional age-appropriate riffs on spy movies, it's an absolute delight.

### 2. NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD

(OUT OCTOBER 7, BR)

Given the Criterion treatment, George A. Romero's black-and-white original is still one of the greatest horror movies of all time, with an ending that will live long in the memory. It's coming to get you.

### 3. SEVEN SAMURAI

(OUT 21 OCTOBER, 4K)

If you haven't seen Akira Kurosawa's legendary three-hour epic, you have no excuses now with this remastered re-release. If you're still on the fence, know this: it's one of the most remade movies of all time, yet is still better than all its offshoots. Even *Rebel Moon*.

### 4. COLUMBO: THE FINAL YEARS 1989-2003

(OUT 7 OCTOBER, BR)

Peter Falk's last 'one more thing', as the shambling genius detective gets a Blu-ray punch-up. Not as good as the '70s run, yes, with an unnecessary emphasis on comedy, but Falk is as good as ever, there are cracking guest stars (Billy Connolly, Tyne Daly, Dabney Coleman), and one or two episodes that belong in a *Columbo* top ten.

### 5. IN A VIOLENT NATURE

(OUT 30 SEPTEMBER, DVD/BR)

Chris Nash's inventive horror, in which a psycho killer stalks around the woods bumping off various stock characters, isn't always successful, but is utterly unforgettable. Worth a go, if you can tap into its unique rhythms, and features one of the gnarliest kills ever seen in a horror movie.

