

KITCHEN SINK CREEPS

WEEK 9.

A Dark Song (2016)

Liam Gavin

Written and directed by Liam Gavin, *A Dark Song*, in many ways, fits into a strong tradition of British movies which examine aspects of magic, witchcraft and possession. According to Leon Hunt in his essay *Necromancy in the UK: Witchcraft and the Occult in British Horror*, cinema and the British occult falls into two phases...

First Phase (1957-1964)

"...it emerges as a counter-tradition to the dominant Hammer Gothic in its play on the unseen and un-representable."

Leon Hunt

"...the tide has turned in Crowley's favour. The doctrine of 'Do What Thou Wilt' with its encouragement to trample the gods under foot and to take one's fill of love, wine and 'strange drugs', has seized the imagination of this restless world."

John Symonds

Second Phase (1966-1976)

- *The Witches* (1966)
- *The Witchfinder General* (1968)
- *The Devil Rides Out* (1968)
- *Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971)
- *The Wicker Man* (1973)
- *To the Devil a Daughter* (1976)

Whilst there had been examples of British Horror films depicting 'magic' as being from 'somewhere else'

- *Plague of Zombies* – Haiti
- *Night of the Eagle* – Jamaica
- By the 70s the magic/witchcraft/occult was planted firmly in British (usually English) rural settings

"Within the British occult film, there are three strands of particular significance"

Leon Hunt

1. *'...the way the figure of Crowley translates into popular representations of the libertine and 'black magician'*
2. *'...the figure of the female witch'*
3. *'...the conflict between old and new religions'*

Solomon (Steve Oram) certainly feels like a 21st century twist on the 'Crowley' figure. Though it has a modern feel it also takes many of the aspects of 'traditional' occult film and casts them in a more down at heel light.

Premise

Sophia Howard rents an isolated house in rural Wales to convince Joseph Solomon to lead her in a grueling, months-long rite to summon her guardian angel, whom Sophia can then ask to speak with her dead seven-year-old son.

A Dark Song (2016) CONT...

As time goes by, they grudgingly get to know one another. However, Solomon's controlling methods make for an uneasy 'working' relationship. We are never quite sure just how much 'occultism' is being used as an excuse to manipulate or exploit.

The manipulation though appears to work both ways as it is revealed that Sophia has lied about her intentions, perhaps endangering them both

Prevenge (2016)**Alice Lowe**

When heavily pregnant Ruth's (Alice Lowe) husband dies in a climbing accident she blames his fellow climbers. She believes she is being controlled by her unborn baby, who tells her to carry out a revenge killing spree. It is a horror film that plays with existing genre tropes

- Possessed mother
- Evil child
- The slasher/giallo film
- It also subverts many of these well-trodden aspects

Lowe was keen to jettison any Hollywood clichés concerning the pregnant woman. Ruth, after dispatching her first victim, Mr Zabek, a slimy reptile of a man, literally strips away her mumsy disguise and burns it before our eyes.

It's a symbolic cremation of clichéd cinematic motherhood and lets us know immediately that this particular murderous narrative will hold no truck with traditional depictions of maternity frocked frailty. It's a funeral pyre for our unchallenged expectations and a statement of intent.

'It was important to me to portray a pregnant woman from the inside out, rather than the outside in. Many of my favourite films, Rosemary's Baby etc., depict pregnancy I think with an onlooker's gaze, probably a male gaze. The mother is vulnerable, sweet, helpless, loving. There's no sense of existential angst, questioning motherhood itself. What it does to the body, the mind, the identity. These are all assumed as things women should take for granted, as 'normal', 'natural'. Other films such as Alien are much more honest about motherhood in the sense of a 'hostile takeover'

Alice Lowe

It's a film about pregnancy which celebrates death, not life. It is littered with other such visual flourishes, stark social commentary and black as hell comedy. It's a dark character study, a rollicking British slasher film and a deeply unsettling journey into a lost soul.

Birthing Symbolism

There are many scenes where the Ruth is depicted in dark enclosed spaces 'a claustrophobic hell'. There are also scenes of transition – passing through tunnels, caves etc. into wider spaces, which act as birthing metaphors.

Deconstructing Recognisable Tropes

It deconstructs the slasher film and the sexism therein by attacking both literally and metaphorically representations of misogyny and gender based inequality. And yet it also remains a personal film, a moving, if somewhat disturbing drama detailing the anxieties of motherhood, pregnancy and a woman's seeming inability to grieve in a conventionally acceptable manner. It's a darkly colourful film which feels happier in the morgue than the maternity ward and yet there is a humanity and an urgency there which forces us to examine our deeper set concerns about birth, life and death.

Possum* (2018)*Matthew Holness**

- Directed by Matthew Holness
- Produced by Wayne Marc Godfrey, James Harris, Robert Jones and Mark Lane
- Screenplay by Matthew Holness
- Based on *Possum* by Matthew Holness
- Cinematography by Kit Fraser
- Edited by Tommy Boulding
- Music by the BBC Radiophonic Workshop

Holness had become fascinated by early silent cinema and Freud's essay *The Uncanny*. Freud talked about the relationship between Castration Complex and Macabre Fantasy (or horror).

The Doppelganger

In his essay, Freud maintains that the doppelganger is the basis for all 'monster' images. The Doppelganger is "*a defense mechanism; the unconscious mind, sensing a mortal danger to the ego, eye, limb or genital, creates an imaginative stand-in for the threatened part*" – i.e. Frankenstein creates another 'self'

The film concerns a disgraced children's puppeteer who returns to his old home, and is forced to confront a childhood trauma

"I'd been watching a lot of silent horror films from the '20s and '30. '20s mainly. I found them so brilliantly creepy in ways that lots of other films these days aren't, simply because they had to express everything visually and you had all these tortured psyches and tortured characters that were all being haunted by stuff that they couldn't really express. I'd watch them and then I thought, 'Could you do a modern silent horror film? How could you do that?"

Matthew Holness

As with earlier films like *Eraserhead* and *Vampyr* or the more recent *Skinamarink*, *Possum* presents us with a slightly unfathomable 'waking dream'. It's a queasy, incredibly dark piece which is both unrelentingly grim and fascinating.