



IN DREAMS ARE MONSTERS

# Possession

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

Part divorce drama, part creature feature, part Cold War thriller, *Possession* is one of the most unsettling films of all time. With his marriage on the brink of collapse, Mark (Neill) tries desperately to cling on to his wife Anna (Adjani) as she indulges in her affairs with men... and other beings. Adjani's commitment to her performance pushed her to her limits, and she is as magnetic as it is unhinged in the role of a woman on the verge of a cosmic breakdown.

**Anna Bogutskaya, [bfi.org.uk](http://bfi.org.uk)**

Anyone who's heard of Andrzej Zulawski will probably recall him as the Polish director who made *Possession*, in which Sam Neill and Isabelle Adjani screamed at one another for two hours. Sadly *Possession* is the only Zulawski film to have had substantial distribution in Britain (even enjoying a brief moment of notoriety as an early 'video nasty') – though the 11 features the director has turned out in a quarter of a century have all displayed an invigorating camera style, a boldly emotional approach to acting and a challenging set of concerns and obsessions that make him without question an *auteur*. Love him or loathe him, Zulawski makes exciting, indelible cinema that cries out for wider critical examination.

Consider *Possession* for a start. Set in a divided Berlin, the film begins with Marc (Neill) returning home to his wife (Adjani) to find their relationship crumbling for reasons neither can articulate. Marc holes up in a hotel room and spirals into mental decline, so what ensues could arguably be seen as the distorted viewpoint of a man in deep psychosis. Gradually Marc establishes that Anna has a lover, Heinrich (extravagantly incarnated by Heinz Bennent), whose trendy Eastern mysticism and bisexual posturing leads the offended husband to ridicule him at every opportunity. But Anna evidently has another lover, and Marc sets a private detective agency on her trail. Following her to a bare apartment just by the Wall, the detective finds her in the company of a dark, slimy tentacular creature (it is revealed to us four times in the film, on each occasion assuming a more human form). This leap into the fantastic is prepared for by the pervasive air of dementia already surrounding the characters, especially Anna, who is prone to violent outbursts and uncontrollable fits. Rarely has the porcelain beauty of Adjani been turned to better effect, as her demeanour shifts constantly from angelic purity to demonic intensity.

With Anna away from home, Marc takes their son Bob to school and encounters a gentle teacher, Helen, whom he gradually accepts into the house. She is also played in the film by Adjani – so Anna's splintering personality is directly manifested by Helen 'acting' as the caring mother Anna once was. The Anna whom Marc still desires repeatedly describes her own feelings of disassociation. She has found an implacable dark side in herself, disturbingly manifested in a 16mm movie made by Heinrich that Marc watches, in which she tortures a young ballerina in class to sustain a painful position until the girl runs off screaming. This remarkable sequence is only just topped by *Possession's* most notorious scene, in which a truly 'possessed' Anna has a fit in the subway, flies into a ferocious dance of death and, oozing

bodily fluids from every orifice, miscarries something glutinous that is left undefined. This for me exceeds anything thrown up by *The Exorcist* for sheer impact on the nervous system.

Zulawski pushes the narrative into even wilder territory in the final scenes, in which Marc becomes a fugitive from the cops investigating the trail of deaths related to Anna's creature. After a chase, he lies bleeding on a staircase and is unexpectedly approached by Anna, who announces that the creature is now 'finished', revealing it to be a perfect replica of Marc. While the 'real' Anna and Marc die in the ensuing police fusillade, the new Marc makes his escape to turn up at the family home to confront Helen. Bob repeatedly screams 'Don't open the door' and runs into the bathroom to drown himself in the tub. While white light invades the apartment to the sound of a war starting up (sirens, bombs, gunfire), Helen stares at us in a trance, with the figure of Marc (or Marc 2, if you like) pressed against the glass door.

Zulawski's stated aim was to take the stuff of soap opera and push it up a few notches, and for a spectator prepared to make that journey, the power of his direction lies in his conviction that cinema occupies an imaginative space in which energy and emotion at full throttle will *make* you believe. *Possession* is a film about the desire for married partners to possess each other, to know each other, and how that desire taken to neurotic extremes results in the unleashing of a suppressed, demonic side. The city in which the film is set is a deserted one, appropriate to the mental state of characters oblivious to anyone with whom they have no direct emotional involvement. It falls into place that they should then see doubles everywhere, reflections in others of what has become an obsessive quest. But in manifesting the hidden recesses of the imagination, a future chaos may result, beyond our worst nightmares.

**David Thompson, *Sight and Sound*, October 1998**

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#### **POSSESSION**

*Director:* Andrzej Zulawski

*Production Companies:* Oliane Productions, Marianne Productions, Soma Film Produktion

*Producer:* Marie-Laure Reyre

*Production Manager:* Jean-José Richer

*Germany Production Manager:* Klaus-Michael Kuehn

*Unit Managers:* Harald Muchametov, Axel Behr, Jurgen Schmidt, Knut Winkler

*Screenplay:* Andrzej Zulawski

*Adaptation and Dialogue:* Andrzej Zulawski, Frédéric Tuten

*Director of Photography:* Bruno Nuytten

*Camera Operator:* Andrzej Jaroszewicz

*Special Effects:* Daniel Braunschweig, Charles-Henri Assola

*Creature Special Effects:* Carlo Rambaldi

*Editors:* Marie-Sophie Dubus, Suzanne Lang-Willar

*Art Director:* Holger Gross

*Costumes:* Ingrid Zoré

*Wardrobes:* Barbara Lutz, Helmut Preuss

*Make-up:* Ronaldo de Abreu, Laurence Azouvy

*Music:* Andrzej Korzynski

*Sound Recording:* Karl-Heinz Laabs, Norman Engel

*Sound Re-recording:* Jacques Maumont

*Stunts:* Herbert Wiczorek, Willy Neuner, Dragomir Stanojevic, Radevic Miorier

#### **Cast**

Isabelle Adjani (*Anna/Helen*)

Sam Neill (*Marc*)

Margit Carstensen (*Margie*)

Heinz Bennent (*Heinrich*)

Johanna Hofer (*mother*)

Shaun Lawton (*Zimmerman*)

Michael Hogben (*Bob*)

Carl Duering (*detective*)

Maximilian Ruethlein (*man with pink socks*)

Thomas Frey (*pink socks' acolyte*)

Leslie Malton (*Sara, woman with club foot*)

Gerd Neubert (*subway drunk*)

Kerstin Wohlfahrt

Ilse Bahrs

Karin Mumm

Herbert Chwoika

Barbara Stanek

Ilse Trautschold

France/West Germany 1981

124 mins

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## IN DREAMS ARE MONSTERS

### Possession

Sat 5 Nov 20:20 (+ intro by author Kier-La Janisse); Sun 27 Nov 15:30

### Ganja & Hess

Mon 7 Nov 18:00; Sat 26 Nov 15:20

### La Llorona

Mon 7 Nov 21:00

### Frankenstein

Tue 8 Nov 18:20; Sun 27 Nov 13:00

### Viy

Tue 8 Nov 20:50

### Inferno

Wed 9 Nov 20:40; Sat 26 Nov 18:20

### The Entity

Fri 11 Nov 17:55; Tue 15 Nov 20:30

### Nightbreed – Director’s Cut

Sat 12 Nov 20:35

### Nosferatu (Nosferatu – Eine Symphonie des Grauens)

Sun 13 Nov 15:50 (+ intro by Silent Film Curator Bryony Dixon); Sat 19 Nov 14:10

### The Skeleton Key

Mon 14 Nov 20:45

### Def by Temptation

Wed 16 Nov 18:10 (+ intro); Sat 26 Nov 18:10

### Candyman

Thu 17 Nov 20:50 (+ intro)

### Kuroneko (Yabu no naka no kuroneko)

Fri 18 Nov 18:15

### Cronos

Sat 19 Nov 12:10; Sun 20 Nov 18:30

### Us

Sat 19 Nov 15:10; Tue 29 Nov 20:40

### Let’s Scare Jessica to Death

Sat 19 Nov 20:45

### Jennifer’s Body

Sun 20 Nov 15:15; Mon 21 Nov 18:00; Fri 25 Nov 20:45

### Pontypool

Mon 21 Nov 20:30; Sun 27 Nov 12:20

### Fright Night

Tue 22 Nov 20:40 (+ intro)

### Under the Shadow

Wed 23 Nov 20:40; Tue 29 Nov 18:10

### Ouija: Origin of Evil

Thu 24 Nov 20:40; Mon 28 Nov 18:10

### Pet Sematary

Fri 25 Nov 18:15; Mon 28 Nov 20:40

### Blacula

Sat 26 Nov 13:00

### The Autopsy of Jane Doe

Sat 26 Nov 20:40

### 28 Days Later

Sat 26 Nov 20:45

### Good Manners (As Boas Maneiras)

Sun 27 Nov 18:10; Wed 30 Nov 20:25

### A Nightmare on Elm Street

Wed 30 Nov 20:50

## IN DREAMS ARE MONSTERS EVENTS

### City Lit at BFI: Screen Horrors – Screen Monsters

Thu 20 Oct – Thu 15 Dec 18:30-20:30

### Matchbox Cine presents House of Psychotic Women

Sat 5 Nov 17:50

### Son of Ingagi + Panel Discussion

Wed 9 Nov 18:10

### Live Commentary with Evolution of Horror, Brain Rot and The Final Girls

Sat 19 Nov 18:00

### Big Monster Energy

Tue 22 Nov 18:30

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