



IN DREAMS ARE MONSTERS

Under the Shadow

There's nothing new about a ghost story in which a lone mother must protect her child or children from supernatural forces, but there is something new about its context in this film. *Under the Shadow* is ostensibly set in Tehran in 1988 (though filmed by UK-based Iranian director Babak Anvari in Jordan), and its newness lies in a fresh and informed twist on Islamic and pre-Islamic belief systems, since it is a story about the djinn, supernatural creatures mentioned in *The 1,001 Nights*, the Hadith and the Koran. Since ghost-belief is very much influenced by era and culture, djinns are variously described by the scholarly as downgraded pagan gods (there were originally 360 worshipped in pre-Islamic Mecca), generic unclean spirits given to possessing humans, or simply a divinely ordained society of unusual spiritual beings set between mankind and the angels. Increasingly, though, they're perceived as something nearer to the 'poltergeist' of Hollywood cinema, almost entirely malignant non-corporal creatures that like to meddle with domestic situations, cause fright and create divisions between parent and child. They mess with the heads of people in stress situations, a cognitive drama that serves very well in film.

There's a bit of *The Devil's Backbone* (2001) in the ticking bomb, a bit of *The Babadook* (2014) in the single-mother vulnerabilities and the trashcan infelicities (did the ghost throw it out/did the child?), a bit of *Mama* (2013) in the mothering issues, and a touch of Japanese horror in the vision of the daughter's face reduced to little but an enormous mouth (the folkloric Ohaguro-bettari yokai).

This is more conventional and less stylised than that other para-Iranian horror *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014). Its ancestor is certainly Nakata Hideo's *Dark Water* (2002), though it suffers in comparison with that masterpiece of the genre. Childhood possessions come and go on the whim of the elemental entity – a red bag in Nakata, a doll here. A crack on the ceiling (a water stain in *Dark Water*) speaks of a leaking/splintering of sanity in the mother. For the djinn, it is a portal, which Shideh tries to tape up. How-mad-is-the-mother questions lurk, as they always do in such movies.

The ensemble acting is solid, but the two female leads are excellent. The filming style and palette are usually restrained and muted, with some handheld close ups, the odd prowling camera move to suggest a presence and some straight-up and unapologetic trick-shots in the dream sequences. The soundtrack plays effectively with the idea that these unclean spirits, made out of smokeless fire, travel restlessly on the air, and so the mournful wail of wind, the air-raid klaxon and sometimes a call to prayer murmur remorselessly in the background, and are all equally a threat.

Roger Clarke, *Sight and Sound*, October 2016

Director Babak Anvari on 'Under the Shadow'

Following his BAFTA-nominated short film *Two & Two*, Iranian-born writer Babak Anvari makes his screenwriting and directorial debut with *Under the Shadow*: a low-budget, Farsi-language horror, which premiered at Sundance to universal acclaim.

Set in Tehran in 1988, against the backdrop of the Iran-Iraq war, Anvari's debut is a terrifying allegory of the real-life conflict that marked his youth, imbued with his own childhood memories. The film centres on Shideh (Narges Rashidi), an aspiring doctor determined to resume her medical studies, but unable to do so due to her past political activism. When her husband is drafted off to the war, Shideh is left alone to protect their daughter Dorsa from the supernatural force brought into their building by a missile attack. Bracingly feminist in tone, the film is as much an expressionist exercise in genre as it is a portrait of female oppression.

What are the films that inspire your approach to genre filmmaking?

I was really inspired by Polanski's early films, like *Repulsion* [1965] and *The Tenant* [1976]. Guillermo del Toro was also a big inspiration because he loves making films in the backdrop of a real event, like the Spanish Civil War. All these films suddenly merged in my head and eventually became *Under the Shadow*.

What was your inspiration behind the script?

The main inspiration came from my childhood memories; I was born in Iran and was more or less the same age as the child in the film when the war ended. It was a time of excitement and nervousness – as a child everything seems exciting. I remember the noise of the sirens and the times when I would run down to the basement, knowing that if you don't go down there, something bad could happen. Thinking about those memories and talking with my parents, particularly my mother, really inspired the script.

The film is a work of fiction, not autobiography, but my father was a young doctor at that time who had to go and serve in the war. That element from my own life, along with the anxieties that my mother had when my father went away, formed a huge part of the story. Other parts are the stories from family friends and relatives about life at that time – obviously heavily dramatised and fictionalised. Whilst our building never got hit by a missile, we had family friends who went through that. Everyone experienced that time in their own way and has great stories to tell.

In the film, the supernatural horror also acts a metaphor for the war. Did horror feel like the natural choice to depict those troubled times?

Completely. When you look at a lot of horror films, the horror is classically a metaphor for repression. The setting I chose is all about repression, so it made sense to me to go down that route.

The film has been applauded for being refreshingly feminist. What was important to you when developing the role of Shideh?

I didn't really set out to write a feminist story, it just came naturally. I wanted to tell the tale of a woman stuck in a man's world, who is trying to figure out her place in society. As she does this, things start unravelling – she starts unravelling. The starting point was a conversation with my mother where I realised the character had to be a parent. It wasn't until I sat back and looked at the film that I realised that all the men are in the background.

The parent-child relationship occupies a large section in the history of horror. What attracted you to explore those dynamics?

This probably stems from my fears of becoming a parent, because it is such a huge responsibility. I always find it interesting how everyone has their own philosophy and way of being a parent. There is no one way. Parenthood is a

very universal and relatable theme – everyone understands the relationship between a mother and child.

How did you approach working with such a young actress on a horror film?

Avin Manshadi was extremely talented. From day one rehearsing scenes was more like playing – like, ‘I’ll be the big bad wolf, and you be the three little pigs.’ I did this with her to get her trust; telling her it was a made-up story and that none of it is real. She got it instantly. She had never acted before. She tried to absorb a lot from Narges and after four days on set she was like a professional actress.

As the story evolves, the film breaks away from conventional framing, with the camera rotating 90 degrees or panning out to reveal something previously unseen on screen.

This was an ongoing conversation with my DP Kit Fraser, whom I have known since film school. He read almost every draft of the film and when it came to shooting we planned it together, spending nine hours a day on the scenes – planning is really key as a filmmaker. We only had 21 days to shoot the film, but knew what we wanted to achieve. We wanted the film to be very naturalistic at the start, like an Iranian social drama, but as it develops and we get more and more into Shideh’s head, things start to shift. The key thing was for the shift to be more expressionist – but I wanted it to happen smoothly.

Babak Anvari interviewed by Olivia Howe, *Sight and Sound*, October 2016

UNDER THE SHADOW

Director: Babak Anvari
Production Company: Wigwam Films
Supported by: Doha Film Institute
Executive Producers: Sanjay Shah, Nick Harbinson, Patrick Fischer, Duncan McWilliam, Khaled Haddad
Produced by: Lucan Toh, Emily Leo, Oliver Roskill
Co-producer: Donall McCusker
1st Assistant Director: Yanal Kassay
2nd Assistant Director: Dan Clarke
Casting Co-ordinator: Emad Mohtaseb
Script Supervisor: Haya Kattan
Written by: Babak Anvari
Director of Photography: Kit Fraser
Visual Effects Supervisor: Marcin Kolendo
Editor: Chris Barwell
Production Designer: Nasser Zoubi
Art Director: Karim Kheir
Costume Designer: Phaedra Dahdaleh
Make-up and Hair Designer: Farah Jadaane
Music Composers: Gavin Cullen, William McGillivray
Supervising Sound Designer: Alex Joseph
Sound Recordist: Fadi Shehadeh

Cast

Narges Rashidi (*Shideh*)
Avin Manshadi (*Dorsa*)
Bobby Naderi (*Ira*)
Ray Haratian (*Mr Ebrahimi*)
Arash Marandi (*Dr Reza*)
Aram Ghasemy (*Mrs Ebrahimi*)
Soussan Farrokhnia (*Mrs Fakur*)
Behi Djanati Atai (*Pargol*)
Hamidreza Djavidan (*Mr Fakur*)
Bijan Daneshmand (*director*)
Sajjad Delafrooz (*secretary*)
Nabil Koni (*Mr Bijari*)
Zainab Zamamiri (*Sogand*)
Khaled Zamamiri (*Ali*)
Karam Rashayda (*Mehdi*)

UK/Jordan/Qatar 2016
84 mins

IN DREAMS ARE MONSTERS

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
Jennifer’s Body Fri 25 Nov 20:45
Blacula Sat 26 Nov 13:00
Def by Temptation Sat 26 Nov 18:10
Inferno Sat 26 Nov 18:20
The Autopsy of Jane Doe Sat 26 Nov 20:40
Ganja & Hess Sat 26 Nov 15:20

28 Days Later Sat 26 Nov 20:45
Pontypool Sun 27 Nov 12:20
Frankenstein 27 Nov 13:00
Possession Sun 27 Nov 15:30
Good Manners (As Boas Maneiras)
Sun 27 Nov 18:10; Wed 30 Nov 20:25
Us Tue 29 Nov 20:40
A Nightmare on Elm Street Wed 30 Nov 20:50

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