



MARK JENKIN'S THE CINEMATIC DNA OF ENYS MEN

Symptoms

Despite being full of visual clichés and horror tropes, this feels entirely unique; it must be down to the command Larraz has over the medium, crafting a haunting and unnerving descent into madness. It's a film that, at times, clearly signals where it might be going, but proves all the more shocking for actually going there. The production design is stunning and the performances properly unnerving.

Mark Jenkin

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

The name of director José Ramón Larraz is synonymous with his most commercially viable film to date. *Vampyres* (1974), a favourite among Eurocult and horror aficionados, lays no claim to artistic pretensions with its narrative of two lesbian wildcats on the loose in the English countryside. Taking his first films *Whirlpool* (1970), *Deviation* (1971) and *The House That Vanished* (1974) into consideration, with *Whirlpool* upon its initial release described as a 'genuinely sickening film' by critic Roger Ebert, it is no wonder that Spanish-born Larraz is still sought out today by fans of European horror cinema. As an independent filmmaker, Larraz is marginal at best, his filmography a side note in the history of European horror. But the film that made it to Cannes, *Symptoms* (1974), retitled for release as *The Blood Virgin* in November 1977, willingly traded sleaze for a more stylish approach to Gothic suspense and stands comparison to Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* (1965). *Symptoms* was surprisingly selected as the official UK entry for the 1974 Cannes International Film Festival – over Ken Russell's *Mahler* – and was, until now, featured on the 'BFI 75 Most Wanted' list. This change in register is as mysterious as the film itself. Indeed, how *does* a director who earned his stripes in the questionable trade of (s)exploitation production end up showing at the most prestigious film festival of them all?

Although no straightforward remake of *Repulsion*, *Symptoms*' point of departure (a waif-like heroine's descent into madness) and formal composition are very much the same, strikingly underscored by Larraz's appropriation of the film's pacing, timbre, costumes, actors' direction and staging of essential scenes to suit his own means. It was his first all-British production and an exercise in what came to be considered as a typically English speciality – the ghost story – and encompasses all of his sensibilities and directorial flourishes. *Symptoms* bears a striking resemblance to the films of Pete Walker and the cycle of bleak psychological thrillers Hammer produced during the 1970s. Set in a present-day environment, their interest lay with man's 'demons of the mind' and groped for monsters under the skin instead of those franchised by the Hammer monster market. They revived the original premise of the literary Gothic by displaying a range of psychological issues such as schizophrenia, paranoia, excessive fear, hysteria, isolation and sadism. Picking up where *Repulsion* left off, Larraz added androphobia to that checklist, a motif he conjures up in a number of other films including *La visita del vicio* (1978) and *Vampyres*.

Upon returning from time spent convalescing in Switzerland, Helen Ramsey (Angela Pleasence) retreats to her estate in the woods of England. She invites her friend Anne West (Lorna Heilbron) to keep her company. The idea of a rustic vacation appeals to Anne, who seeks solitude to write and wants to get a decent amount of soul-searching done on the end of a romantic relationship. The girls read, prepare their meals and tour the forest in perfect unison, content to while the hours away in comfortable bouts of semi-silence. At this stage, Helen's introverted behaviour occasionally seems a bit erratic – especially in relation to the presence of Brady, the odd-job man (Peter Vaughan) but not alarming. When Anne shows an interest in the portrait of Cora, Helen's 'friend' whom she has not seen for a while but whose presence in the Ramsey household is all-pervading, she touches upon the open wound of a traumatic event Helen had rather forgotten about. Portraits are salient set-pieces in all of Larraz's films and betray his education in art history. Like no other, Larraz understands the chilling quality of 'being watched', whether it be through the eyes of a spectator with intentions of murder or through the re-animated likeness of a photograph or painting, much as one would saunter through an art gallery or museum and have the uncanny sensation of the artwork looking back. He frequently underscores their importance with blasts of montage and swerving camera movements, and in *Symptoms*, lets Cora's portrait herald in a return of the repressed.

Larraz's films riff on the Gothic mansion's potential for setting up mood and atmosphere. It is one of his favoured staple features. In *Symptoms*, it is the direct playground for Helen's haywired psyche. Much in line with the literary tradition of the Gothic that equates the identity of the house with its owner, Helen is the estate she lives in, and its visitors the unwilling partakers in a psychodrama they were not meant to intrude. Even the weather conditions are seen to interact with Helen's troubled state of mind while she falls ill with a surge of anxiety whenever a neighbouring storm approaches. Larraz handles this trope to a dual end by making the best out of the storm's poetic appeal and by using it as a cue to alert the viewer of important narrative events to come.

The mirror is a key element in understanding how Larraz actively compared notes with Polanski on the subject of directing a thriller. For one, it brings about the first shock-effect in the exact same manner that Polanski applied it in *Repulsion*. A pre-eminent Gothic prop, mirrors involuntarily bring out what is brewing beneath the surface. Other substantial echoes to *Repulsion* are found on *Symptoms'* audio track. Larraz sets Helen's nightly terrors to the ticking of a grandfather clock, replicating the agitated alarm clock Polanski used both in *Repulsion* and in *Rosemary's Baby* (1968).

Helen's fear of Brady is also indebted to *Repulsion*. Brady wears the same 'wife-beater' style shirt Carol finds so distasteful on the construction worker who leers after her in the street and later picks up in the bathroom. When Anne mentions Brady's possible attraction to Helen, Larraz underscores her reply ('he disgusts me') with the chopping sound of Brady's hatchet closing in, fuelling another Gothic trope by drawing inspiration from Polanski's original. Gothic works of fiction are filled to the brim with sexual power politics. They thrive on sexual anxieties faced with a so-called male or female Other and, within the genre of the 'Female Gothic', often include Bluebeardian narratives of men bringing home their second wives to a residence that is still inhabited by the presence of a former spouse, living or dead. In *Symptoms*,

Anne is the unsuspecting newcomer who unravels her hostess' darkest secret.

Symptoms reaches a fever pitch with a drawn-out dialogue session between Helen and Brady. This showdown between the sexes is the most explicitly rehashed scene from *Repulsion*, its original the episode in which Carol kills the landlord who leers at her. Both women act out of self-defence, but have to wait for an opening to get rid of their foes. The scenes are near-identical, their staging, identical. The girls bide their time while their antagonists circle the couch and then strike a ferocious attack. With the shot that I for the sake of argument would like to label the '*Repulsion*-shot', the actual kill is seen from the victim's point of view, framed within an expressive, tilted, low-angle shot that represents its perpetrator's state of delirium. Even with *Symptoms* being steeped knee-deep in the vocabulary of its predecessor, it is far more than a reiteration of Polanski's tropes. *Repulsion*'s text fuelled Larraz's own infatuation with the Gothic. The result is a wonderful entry in the short-lived craze of British psycho-thrillers and a flamboyant Spaniard's take on a quintessentially British genre film.

Vanity Celis, booklet essay from *Symptoms* Blu-ray/DVD (BFI, 2016)

Stigma

My favourite of the highly influential *Ghost Stories for Christmas* series. Although it had a contemporary setting, it now feels almost as period as the MR James adaptations. I love the creeping sense of hopelessness that [Lawrence Gordon] Clark creates, albeit through the slenderest of means. And the ending is devastating. There are several references to this film in *Enys Men*.

Mark Jenkin

A GHOST STORY FOR CHRISTMAS: STIGMA

Directed by: Lawrence Gordon Clark

©: BBC

Production Company: BBC

Producer: Rosemary Hill

Production Unit Manager: Elizabeth Small

Production Assistants: Daphne Phipps, Val Sheppard

[Written] By: Clive Exton

Lighting Cameraman: John Turner

Film Editor: Dave King

Designer: Stuart Walker

Costume Designer: Linda Woodfield

Make-up Artist: Madeleine Gaffney

Sound Recordist: Mike Savage

Dubbing Mixer: Peter Rann

Cast

Kate Binchy (*Katherine*)

Peter Bowles (*Peter*)

Maxine Gordon (*Verity*)

Jon Laurimore (*doctor*)

Christopher Blake (*Richard*)

John Judd (*Dave*)

BBC tx 28.12.1977

UK 1977

29 mins

Symptoms (Dual Format Edition) is available to buy from the BFI Shop: shop.bfi.org.uk/symptoms-flipside-032-dual-format-edition.html

SYMPTOMS

Directed by: Joseph Larraz

©: Finiton Productions

Produced by: Jean Dupuis

Production Supervisor: Jack Rix

Assistant Director: Ted Morley

2nd Assistant Director: Chris Kenny

Continuity: Josie Fulford

Screenplay by: Joseph Larraz, Stanley Miller

Director of Photography: Trevor Wrenn

Lighting by: Southern Lighting (Facilities) Ltd

Camera Operator: Alan Boast

Chief Electrician: Barry Miller

Film Editor: Brian Smedley-Aston

Assistant Editor: Geoff R. Brown

Art Director: Kenneth Bridgeman

Assistant Art Director: Chris Cook

Property Masters: Robert Hedges, Robert Douglas

Construction Manager: Ronald Coleman

Wardrobe Mistress: Dulcie Midwinter

Make-up: Bunty Phillips

Hairdresser: Bobbie Smith

Processed by: The Rank Laboratories

Music by: John Scott

Sound Recordists: Trevor Carless, Ken Barker

Dubbing Editors: David Campling, Barry McCormick

Made at: Pinewood Studios

Cast

Angela Pleasence (*Helen Ramsey*)

Peter Vaughan (*Brady*)

Lorna Heilbron (*Anne West*)

Nancy Nevinson (*Hannah*)

Ronald O'Neil (*John*)

Marie-Paul Mailleux (*Cora*)

Michael Grady (*Nick*)

Raymond Huntley (*Burke*)

UK/Belgium 1974

93 mins

MARK JENKIN'S THE CINEMATIC DNA OF ENYS MEN

Walkabout + Oss Oss Wee Oss

Sun 1 Jan 13:10; Mon 9 Jan 20:30

The Stone Tape + Journey to Avebury

Mon 2 Jan 15:40

Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles

Wed 4 Jan 18:30; Sat 28 Jan 16:15

Symptoms + Stigma

Fri 6 Jan 18:10; Sun 15 Jan 15:30

Lost Highway + Jaunt

Fri 6 Jan 20:15; Sun 22 Jan 18:10

Haunters of the Deep

+ The Living and the Dead Episode 2

Sun 8 Jan 13:20; Sat 14 Jan 20:40

Long Weekend + Between the Tides

Tue 10 Jan 18:20; Mon 23 Jan 20:30

Penda's Fen + A Warning to the Curious

Wed 11 Jan 17:50

Two Years at Sea + A Portrait of Ga

Sat 14 Jan 18:00 (+ intro and Q&A with Mark Jenkin and Ben Rivers);

Tue 24 Jan 20:45

Daguerréotypes + World of Glory

Sun 15 Jan 12:00 (+ intro by Mark Jenkin); Thu 26 Jan 20:50

Bait

Sun 15 Jan 18:00; Mon 30 Jan 20:50

Requiem for a Village + The Signalman

Fri 27 Jan 18:20; Tue 31 Jan 20:40

Berberian Sound Studio + Wind

Sun 29 Jan 15:30 (+ intro by Mark Jenkin and Peter Strickland);

Tue 31 Jan 18:10

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Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email prognotes@bfi.org.uk

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