



MEMBER PICKS

Monsters

Monsters

Directed by: Gareth Edwards

©: Vertigo Slate

Presented by: Vertigo Films

Production Services, Mexico and Guatemala:

Ixta Productions

Production Services, Costa Rica:

VB Film Production Services

World Revenue Collected and Distributed by:

Freeway CAM B.V.

International Sales by: Protagonist Pictures Ltd

Executive Producers: Nigel Williams, Nick Love,

Rupert Preston

Produced by: Allan Niblo, James Richardson

Line Producer: Jim Spencer

For Vertigo Films: Development Executives: Emma

Hartley, Chee-Lan Chan; *Head of Finance:* Stephen

Hole; *Post-production Accountant:* Dwayne

Lawson; *Head of Sales and Acquisitions:* Michael

Wales; *Operations Manager:* Huberta Von Liel

Production Manager: Verity Oswin

Production Co-ordinator: Alyson Pengelly

Costa Rica Location Manager: Hugo Roque

USA Location Manager: Jose Hernandez

Post-production Supervisor: Rebekka Garrido

Post-production Co-ordinator: Alyson Pengelly

Dailies for Guerrilla Jungle Sequence, Mexico 1st

Assistant Director: Maritza Carbajal

Script Editor: Toby Rushton

Written by: Gareth Edwards

Director of Photography: Gareth Edwards

Visual Effects: Gareth Edwards

Editor: Colin Goudie

On-line Editor: Gregor Wille

Associate Editor: Anne Goudie

Assistant Editor: Justin Hall

Post-production Services: The Post Republic

Production Designer: Gareth Edwards

End Credits: Florian Obrecht

Digital Colourists: Adam Inglis, Kevin Shaw

Music by: Jon Hopkins

Music Supervisor: Lol Hammond

Music Co-ordinator: Vicki Williams

Sound Designer: Jürgen Funk

Sound Recordist: Ian MacLagan

Re-recording Mixer: Matthias Schwab

ADR Supporting Artists: Brian McGuire, Jon Kluger,

Michelle Parylak, Erika Robledo, Eduardo Idunate,

Hector Crisantes, Jamie Jamison, Elezar del Valle,

Pedro Luis Martin Gurza, Daniel Willy

Unit Publicist and Marketing Manager:

Wahida Begum

Digital Intermediate Supervisor: Gregor Wille

Cast:

Scot McNairy (*Andrew Kaulder*)

Whitney Able (*Samantha 'Sam' Wynden*)

Mario Zuniga Benavides (*ticket seller*)

Annalee Jefferies (*homeless woman*)

Justin Hall, Ricky Catter, Paul Archer, Kerry

Valderrama, Jonathan Winnford, Stan Wong,

Anthony Cristo, Mario Richardson, Jorge Quirs,

Erick Arce, Emigo Munkel, Esteban Blanco

(*marines*)

Victor Vejan, Christopher Chararria, Roman

Bustamante, Solamon Albarran, Alejandro Sotero,

Victorino Angulo, David Alba Garcia, Eduardo

Guizak, Alfonso Pineda, Jose Garcia Gomez

(*guerrillas*)

Erika Morales Yolanda Chacon

(*Mother 'Erika', Bocoyna*)

Elsa Rascon Gonzalez (*grandmother, Bocoyna*)

Jose Luis Morales Chacon, Tamilez Morales

Chacon, Jonathan Cadena Chacon, Cindy Vanessa

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

Monsters does for the CGI generation what George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* did for 1960s horror: takes a series of increasingly tired conventions and reinvents them. And it does so in much the same way that Romero did: by creating a world that is, at base, completely realistic, then matter-of-factly introducing an element that changes everything – there, the zombies; here aliens.

An astonishing achievement for first-time British feature director Gareth Edwards, most of whose previous experience has been in special effects, *Monsters* was shot for under £500,000 with a limited crew and two largely unknown actors. It's a sci-fi thriller based on the premise that most of Mexico has become an Infected Zone populated by alien creatures. Two young Americans – photographer Andrew Kaulder (Scot McNairy) and rich traveller Sam Wynden (Whitney Able) – get stranded south of the Zone at the start of the 'season' (the aliens' most active period) and are forced to cross it to return to the US. *Monsters* is as much a love story as it is a sci-fi thriller – and as much a road movie as it is either of those.

One of the film's greatest pleasures is the casual way in which Edwards (credited as production designer as well as writer, director, cinematographer and effects designer) integrates the fantastic into the everyday: the road signs that casually mark off the kilometres to the Infected Zone; the children's cartoon featuring a comic alien glimpsed on TV during the first overnight stop; the casual references to 'the season', as though it should be obvious to everyone what this means.

The crew evidently followed the same path as the protagonists, feeding off and building on what they found, occasionally dressing the real with elements of the unreal, as when they pass a cart hauling away the engine of a crashed US jet for scrap, or sail past some eerily abandoned hotel complexes on their way through the Zone. And the one lavishly developed physical effect – the pulsating, flashing alien spores attached to trees – is both appropriately creepy and a convincing imagination of what an alien life-form might look like.

The film certainly doesn't look low-budget, and one suspects that, even if he had had the resources of a Zack Snyder or a Michael Bay, Edwards would still have operated on a less-is-more principle. His film is more in the vein of Robert Wise's 1963 *The Haunting* than *Cloverfield* – which could be a problem commercially. The respectful way in which it has been received – including a screening in the Piazza Grande at Locarno and a slew of Independent Film Award nominations – may limit *Monsters'* appeal to the core horror audience, to whom Edwards makes few concessions. The visceral, night-vision opening apart, there are no sudden shocks: the initial alien attacks come not in heart-jolting cuts but via glimpses. Indeed, the only other shock the film delivers is not scary at all, but occurs in a soundtrack cut from a quiet riverside scene to the roar of the riverboat's engine. Despite its obvious potential, this is no film for gore hounds: the eviscerated body of the lead guerrilla is not shown, merely glimpsed at the edge of the frame, causing Andrew to throw up.

Monsters is a film that's very aware that other films precede it. The first sound is of a marine humming Wagner's 'Ride of the Valkyries', *Apocalypse Now*-style, as they barrel along the Pan-American Highway, and Andrew and Sam's river journey clearly references the same movie. But *Monsters* is equally determined to do things its own way. This is especially true of Edwards's attitude to genre. The film certainly uses basic horror-film tropes – Andrew and

Cadena Morales (*children of family, Bocoyna*)
 Javier Acosta Rodriguez (*taxi driver*)
 Victor Manuel Martinez Tovar (*boat skipper*)
 Walter Hernandez Col (*boat assistant*)
 Kenedy Gamaliel Jimenez
 (*driver of pick-up truck to The Zone*)
 Hugo Valverde (*motorbike driver*)
 Roberto Saluzan, Cesan Solauo (*ambulance guy*)
 Aris Martinez, Claudia Valdez
 (*nurses in maternity ward*)
 Elizabeth Blanco Sanchez
 (*main receptionist at hospital*)
 Gloria Soza (*2nd receptionist at hospital*)
 Aura Escobar (*3rd receptionist at hospital*)
 Max Alfredo Coe Tux, Ivan Sanchez
 (*policemen at Ceibal guarding oil barrel*)
 Wilfredo Hernandez Alvarado, Ramon Otzoy Sucuz
 (*policemen guarding barrier*)
 Erma Bradley (*lady holding daughter in flood*)
 Shelmar Bradley (*boy in pink top*)
 Luis Cails Sosa Carlos (*driver of red pick-up truck*)
 Rene Moreno Lopez
 (*passenger in red pick-up truck*)
 Kenia Guadalupe Dominluez Yamas
 (*little girl in pick-up truck*)
 Jesus Jose Moreno Quezada (*boy playing soccer*)
 Marta Maria Acatilla Vasquez (*corn seller*)
 Romeo Arista (*whistle blower*)
 Maria Luisa Ontanon, Refugio Tapia Rendon
 (*dead women in jungle*)
 Katerine Zuleika Guizar Tapia (*dead girl in jungle*)
 Joagun Salazan (*policeman*)
 Anthony Jimenez Jara (*little boy riding bike at store*)
 Luis Roberto Monge Brenes, Oscar Mario Badilla
 Bora, Neston Herrera (*men at bar*)
 Iserias Antouro Morah (*barman at harbour*)
 Cooper Smith (*voice over for Tommy*)
 UK 2010©
 94 mins

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Sam are thrown together in a situation of peril not once but twice, the second time inescapably. There are also a couple of those 'don't go in there' moments without which horror movies could not operate. But Andrew and Sam are far from the stereotype model of boy protector/girl in peril. Sam's role as the only Spanish-speaker gives her equal footing on the journey. And the traditional insensitivity of the disaster-zone photographer, set up in some of Andrew's early scenes, is very much undercut when he finally comes across the money shot he has been seeking all along: a child killed by an alien. He removes the coat that has served as wrapping for his camera in his backpack, but instead of taking a picture, he gently covers the child's body.

Andrew and Sam may start out as stereotypes – battle-weary pap; spoilt little rich girl – but they quickly develop into fully rounded characters who engage our attention as much as the eponymous creatures. Indeed the film is more or less a two-hander (the amiable sleazeball selling ferry tickets is the only other person to come close to character status) and the chemistry between McNairy and Able, a couple in real life, is one of the things that drives the film.

Where Edwards does veer back into Romero territory, however, is in the film's final act, which begins as a lyrical journey through some breathtaking Mexican jungle scenery, includes an Aztec pyramid and the film's most impressive CGI creation – the wall around the United States – before ending in a deserted, desolate Texas, an Armageddon-style landscape as scary and hopeless as anything in *The Road*. The area's one living inhabitant, a mad homeless woman pushing a trolley of possessions, gets fourth billing in the credits and delivers the film's most disturbing sound, a barking yelp of aggression and despair.

But this final sequence also elevates *Monsters* from a highly competent creature feature to something more intriguing. An isolated gas station is beautifully shot by Edwards, its lights glowing against a flat and empty landscape. It is also the setting for the film's all-important coda, in which fear gives way to awe as Andrew and Sam watch an encounter between two of the creatures bonding in a world that, to them, is far more alien than the Zone the humans have just been through. Just before it, both humans have effectively recognised that their attachment to one another is now deeper than the bonds they believed they shared with the other people in their lives: Andrew with his five-year-old son; Sam with her fiancé. In her final conversation with the latter, Sam signs off with a perfunctory 'I love you', but the look that subsequently passes between her and Andrew is far more eloquent than her words.

The ending of *Monsters* is both desolate – the world, as in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), is never going to be the same again – and uplifting, not just in the coming-together of hero and heroine, but in the way in which their relationship with the 'threat' is fundamentally changed by seeing the mating-dance-style encounter between the two aliens. The film's actual final scene – the arrival of two Humvees full of casually aggressive soldiers, walkie-talkies crackling, who separate them and hustle them away to 'safety' – seems like an intrusion.

What Edwards achieves here is in the grand tradition of fantasy literature and cinema: a sense that the humans who have been through the mill of the narrative now share more with the creatures they have been battling than they do with the people they knew before the narrative began. Mina Harker opening herself to Count Dracula is the romantic archetype; Ben (Duane Jones) in Romero's film – the only surviving human in the farmhouse, gunned down by trigger-happy National Guardsmen who can't see the difference between him and the zombies – its bleak modern equivalent. In much the same vein, *Monsters* is a radical parable for an alienated age.

Nick Roddick, *Sight and Sound*, January 2010