



DISCOMFORT MOVIES

Possession

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

Content warning: Contains strong gore, scenes of violence and domestic abuse

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SIGHT AND SOUND

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

Andrzej Zulawski's first and only English-language feature was originally released in the UK in 1982, around a year after its Cannes competition premiere. Though it lost to *Man of Iron* (by Zulawski's former mentor Andrzej Wajda), it picked up a best actress award for Isabelle Adjani's primal shriek of a performance as Anna, whose sudden, unexplained decision to walk out on husband Mark (Sam Neill) jump-starts the rollercoaster that follows.

This cut little ice with the Director of Public Prosecutions, who ludicrously included it on the official 'video nasties' blacklist compiled in the wake of one of the more virulent moral panics to which British officialdom occasionally falls prey. While this was undoubtedly a badge of honour for most of its shoddy companions, it did *Possession* a major disservice, though it's fitting that a film so full of paranoia, oppression and surveillance (it's set in Cold War Berlin, Mark's job seems espionage-related, two detectives meet decidedly sticky ends) should itself fall victim to similarly irrational emotions – and, in the US, severe mutilation, losing more than a third of the original running time. It's worth noting *en passant* that the BBFC never had a problem with it, passing it uncut on three separate occasions, including the theatrical release that preceded the legal threats.

Although it's easy to see why it was pigeonholed as a horror film, its first half presents what is still one of the most viscerally vivid portraits of a disintegrating relationship yet committed to film, comfortably rivalling Lars von Trier's *Antichrist*, David Cronenberg's *The Brood* and Ingmar Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage*. When Anna leaves, Mark runs the gamut of grief responses, going berserk in a café (crockery-smashing, chair-throwing) before shivering on a bed in a cold sweat as though undergoing cold turkey. After he attempts to assault her combat-trained lover Heinrich (Heinz Bennent), there's a doomed attempt at reconciliation that sees Mark and Anna take turns to mutilate themselves with an electric carving knife.

Like Bergman and Cronenberg, Zulawski was dealing with very personal demons: he'd just undergone a psychologically traumatic divorce from his first wife, actress Malgorzata Braunek. At one point, Mark sticks a feather down his throat to induce vomiting, and Zulawski seems to have done something similar when conceiving the film, spewing out every raw emotion that he could recall. These are uncomfortable scenes to watch, partly because there's a child involved (the real-life equivalent of Anna and Mark's ten-year-old son Bob grew up to be director Xawery Zulawski who, on the evidence of *Chaos* and *Snow White and Russian Red*, is very much his father's son) but mainly thanks to the pervasive impression that Zulawski is grabbing us by the scruff of the neck and rubbing our faces in private grief. The camera constantly tracks and circles the couple as though possessed by a pathological voyeurism – camera operator Andrzej Jaroszewicz achieves effects comparable to the Steadicam work in *The Shining* but with far more limited resources.

The film's second half is what earned it lasting notoriety, as it involves Adjani shacking up in a dilapidated apartment to pursue a relationship with a tentacular monstrosity that seems to have erupted from her own id, possibly via a spectacular five-minute freakout in an underpass. In fact, despite its love

DISCOMFORT MOVIES

Eraserhead

Mon 1 Jul 20:40 (+ extended intro to the season by curator Kimberley Sheehan); Sun 14 Jul 17:50; Sat 27 Jul 20:50

The Lost Weekend

Sat 6 Jul 15:10; Sun 21 Jul 17:45; Mon 29 Jul 20:40

Requiem for a Dream

Sat 6 Jul 20:45; Fri 19 Jul 18:20

A Woman under the Influence

Sun 7 Jul 19:30; Sun 28 Jul 17:20

Bug

Mon 8 Jul 18:15; Thu 25 Jul 20:50

They Shoot Horses, Don't They?

Tue 9 Jul 18:10; Mon 22 Jul 20:35

Threads

Thu 11 Jul 18:15; Sun 21 Jul 15:15

Possession

Mon 15 Jul 18:00

Funny Games

Mon 15 Jul 20:45; Sat 27 Jul 14:15

Climax + Strasbourg 1518

Tue 16 Jul 18:10; Sun 28 Jul 20:20

Crash + Titane

Sat 20 Jul 18:15, 18:30

Audition Ôdishon

Wed 24 Jul 20:45; Wed 31 Jul 18:15

Skinamarink

Sun 28 Jul 14:20; Wed 31 Jul 20:45

Relaxed Screening: Eraserhead + intro and discussion

Mon 29 Jul 18:10

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of human flesh (both living – Adjani's – and recently killed), the creature is marginally less repellent than the unctuous Heinrich, who still lives with his mother despite apparently being a one-man *Kama Sutra*. Its precise function is never made clear – a physical embodiment of the notion that the disintegration of the family breeds monsters? A writhing surrogate for the dark and twisted secrets underpinning even the most outwardly healthy marriage? A recurring doppelgänger motif (Mark and Anna have clones of unspecified origin, physically identical but temperamentally opposite) is also left unexplained, but *Possession* is self-evidently far more than just another monster movie. Those prepared to make the leap of faith demanded by Zulawski's ultra-confrontational, deliriously overwrought, symbol-crammed approach will find the experience, like that of Ken Russell's equally maligned *The Devils*, very hard to forget.

Michael Brooke, *Sight and Sound*, November 2010

The common negative view of Zulawski's cinema was that his plots were wilfully baffling, that his camerawork was too florid, that he encouraged his actors to emote and gesticulate as if in some continual state of paroxysm. But this was an entirely superficial impression. Underlying the heightened nature of the films was a deep, questioning soulfulness related to literary antecedents coupled with a vision of cinema open to shifting levels of perception and fantasy.

For many years his only film to have had any kind of impact in Britain was *Possession*, shot in English in a divided Berlin in 1980, which even achieved the distinction of being briefly classified as a 'video nasty'. Described by its director as a 'fairy tale for adults', it was born from two impulses: the director's return to Poland after a period abroad to find his son alone in a flat and his wife elsewhere; and a viewing of Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage*, which Zulawski felt had no fruitful conclusion.

In his vision of a marital break-up, the protagonist (Sam Neil) discovers his wife (Isabelle Adjani) to have acquired not only a preposterous lover but also to have conjured up a monster which she visits for sexual gratification. Doppelgängers proliferate and the crises build to an apocalyptic ending. Is it psychological drama, or a horror film? Zulawski in effect created a genre of his own, while following a path that has also been trod – to greater acceptance – by David Cronenberg and David Lynch, filmmakers happy to twist narratives in unexpected ways and make the viewer become anything but passive.

In 1980 Isabelle Adjani won an award at Cannes for *Possession*, but not before having been so shocked by her viewing of the film to the point of attempting suicide. Zulawski's method of working with actors had evolved out of watching the experimental theatre work of Jerzy Grotowski, as well as trips he made to Haiti to witness voodoo rites. He would admit to putting his cast – especially actresses, who he believed needed to be liberated from themselves – under trances to prepare them for their scenes.

David Thompson, *Sight and Sound*, bfi.org.uk