

***The Ritual*, dir. by David Bruckner** (eOne Films, 2017)

After an unexpected death, four old university friends decide to commemorate their deceased companion with a hiking trip to Northern Sweden. When injury necessitates a short cut through a dense and ancient woodland, the trip turns into a desperate flight for survival. *The Ritual*, based on the Adam Nevill novel of the same name, is David Bruckner's second horror film as director, with a sharply written script by Joe Barton. The premise of the film is far from original; a group of over-confident and under-prepared characters enter the woods and encounter something horrific. It is a narrative motif central to a wide range of films as diverse as *Deliverance* (1972), *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), and *Green Inferno* (2013). Despite its familiar origins, in the capable hands of Bruckner and his skilled collaborators, this treatment of the material delivers a very original story with unsettling, eerie moments.

Shooting in Romania as a substitute for Sweden, Bruckner uses the film's remote location and small cast to focus the narrative and deliver an impactful film with relatively limited resources, relying more on creating a pervasive atmosphere of dread than on gory spectacle. The cast (Rafe Spall as guilt-ridden Luke, Arsher Ali as the witty Phil, Robert James-Collier as the problem-solving Hutch, and Sam Troughton as the ebullient Dom) all deliver excellent performances, exchanging dialogue which is so snappy and immediate that it seems to be almost improvised. The characters are skilfully drawn, with overlapping interests and motivations, resulting in a group that are believably laddish, yet held together by a clear bond of friendship. Many poorly written horror films are flawed from the outset by the writer's need for narrative conflict, a conflict often created by crafting a group of interesting but disparate characters who have no authentic motivation for being together. College sports teams, family interventions, and Hollywood ambition are conventions used to gather characters who otherwise appear to dislike each other. Such inauthentic ensembles feature in films as diverse as *Jeepers Creepers II* (2003), the 2013 *Evil Dead* remake, and *Starry Eyes* (2014). While doing so provides narrative conflict and even tension, the use of such devices often results in artificiality and unrealistic character arcs, distancing the viewer from the action.

The characters in *The Ritual*, however, are part of a carefully delineated group dynamic, each with complementary strengths and foibles. All have been affected by the sudden violent death of their friend Robert (Paul Reid), but none feel it more acutely than Luke. Because of Luke's reluctance to let go of his youth and because of a split-second act of cowardice, Luke blames himself for Robert's death. Luke's guilt provides the audience's

gateway into the story, but each character offers something unique and, as they are picked off one by one, the relationships realign, pushing the survivors to their emotional limits, revealing unexpected depths or resentments. Character and relationships therefore drive this survival narrative, ensuring that every scene is weighted with significance and dread. Bruckner uses the journey as a crucible to test the characters; propelled by violence toward violence, he sets them on a journey where they have only themselves as a resource. Brutal tragedy has pushed the four friends on this path, unifying them in a ritual of memorialisation, making them leave behind the modern world and their previous lives. This nordic odyssey strips away all conceits and affectations, forcing them to fracture old friendships and find new strengths, with only their raw character to help them survive an ancient evil.

There is, however, another major element at work in the narrative – the Woods. The rural, arboreal setting has recurred with increasing frequency in horror cinema since the turn of the millennium, arguably reflecting anxieties about cultural and political precariousness, as Victoria McCollum suggests.<sup>1</sup> By situating the woods as a place of death, Bruckner offers an unspoken reminder of humanity's mortality and decay, subtly suggesting that the plant world we casually ignore will always be indifferent to us, possessing an 'absolute alterity', and reminding us that plant life can, in the end, cover our very graves.<sup>2</sup> Shulkind's cinematography maximises these qualities, lingering on the landscape and drifting across the trees, successfully conveying the bleak remoteness, desolation, and stillness of the landscape and dense forest. Shulkind's use of a high-aperture setting on the camera lens means that the extreme depth of field in the image allows the whole landscape to appear in sharp focus, even into the distance. The consequence of this is that, with everything in the same focal plane, the normal three-dimensionality of the location depicted flattens out, creating a strange alienated space. This technique visually abstracts the closely growing trees, making them look alien and threatening, transforming the woods into a screen of branch and bark hiding terrible secrets. This technique also uniquely facilitates multiple layers of storytelling in a single, framed composition. This is used to particularly shocking effect, as subtle movement makes us suddenly realise that the characters we have been closely watching are not in fact alone in the wooded landscape.

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<sup>1</sup> Victoria McCollum, *Post 9/11 Heartland Horror: Rural Horror Films in an Era of Urban Terrorism* (London: Routledge, 2018), p.110.

<sup>2</sup> Dawn Keetley, 'Introduction: Six Theses on Plant Horror; or, Why Are Plants Horrifying?', in *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Horror*, ed. by Dawn Keetley and Angela Tengu (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp.1-32 (p.6).

Ben Lovett's score is strongly evocative in communicating this uncanny presence, via descending *glissando* dissonance and trembling *sul ponticello* strings, conveying a threat and eeriness that is heavy in the cool, damp air. The forest becomes a liminal space that reveals the characters' frustration and resentment, but also surprising tenderness and care for one another. Mark Towns's editing sharpens the threat established by sound and camera work, cutting away before the viewer is certain of what they have seen, and lingering on the emotional consequences of events. This subtly expresses the dread which descends on the small group. Ghinea Diana's art direction and the production design by Adrian Curelea visually communicate the impermanence of human kind's creations when set against such an ancient and indifferent green world. Abandoned vehicles and decayed equipment subsumed and physically enmeshed in the landscape suggest the impermanence of humanity's interests and achievements, and the inevitability of our demise in the face of time and the impersonal hostility of nature. Diana's and Curelea's skills also offer some persuasively dream-like nightmare visuals, surreally yet naturalistically blending woodland glade with retail lighting and fixings in Luke's recurrent nightmares.

Bruckner, for most of the film, wisely offers only glimpses and hints of the ancient, terrible thing that tracks and hunts the friends through the woods – a three-fingered skeletal hand too high on a branch; a half-seen grey shape slowly but suddenly moving in frame. These fleeting, incomplete phantasms leave us to make sense of the gaps, forcing us, like the protagonists, to impose meaning on what we see. The deep growls, gurgles, and knocks of the sound design are equally effective in this strategy. One particularly harrowing scene communicates a shocking unnatural violence purely through the begging screams of one of the surviving characters, aurally conveying a vicious, uncanny brutality that few visuals could ever impart so convincingly. In doing so, Bruckner, in effect, makes us co-performers in this violent narrative.<sup>3</sup>

Keith Thompson does a superlative job of creature design, with skills honed through his work for Guillermo del Toro on *Crimson Peak* (2015) and *The Strain* (2014-17). Thompson constructs a contradictory creature, something which appears natural, but unnatural, new, yet ancient, terrifyingly different to anything else the audience might have seen, and in so doing visually imparts the creature's uncanny, otherworldly nature. The design also makes the creature a challenge to recognise, even when we get a clear look at it, and the protagonists also struggle to recognise when its influence is at work. The psychic and

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<sup>3</sup>Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 27.

emotional influence of the creature, both supernatural and contaminative, is conveyed through the protagonists' shame and abjection, as it bends them to its will. From the first encounter, it is clear that they are physically and spiritually out of their depth, yet the complacent, secular logic of the modern world prevents them from acknowledging their ignorance of the ancient natural world and recognising the supernatural danger they are in, until it is too late.

While the basic story may cover well-trodden territory, this particular telling carves out a fresh path through that old forest, revealing features seldom seen before. As it wends its way, the trail offers insights and visions which are engaging and genuinely unsettling. The cast, especially Spall, give exceptional, subtle performances, made yet more real by excellent technical support. Bruckner clearly knows his horror, and is unafraid of showing the emotional and psychological pain and suffering that are so often glibly passed over in horror cinema. *The Ritual* is a rewarding, if frightening, walk through the darkest of woods.

Gerard Gibson