

STALK AND SLASH

Alice, Sweet Alice (1973) was part of my eighties VHS youth, and upon re-watching it recently, I realized that I forgot how good it is. This movie is known to many as Brooke Shields' first film, before her controversial turns in *Pretty Baby*, *The Blue Lagoon*, and *Endless Love*, and long before her mid-nineties hit TV series *Suddenly Susan*. It is also thematically removed from all of that fare. Her bratty child character actually dies within the first 15 minutes of the movie (before her first Communion), and the investigation into her death points the finger squarely at her emotionally disturbed sister (Paula Sheppard) who is jealous of the preferential treatment her sibling receives from her single mother (Linda Miller). But as other people die, the question arises as to who the real murderer is.

This was one of only five films directed by Alfred Sole, who previously made a porno called *Deep Sleep* that led to obscenity litigation against him while he was making this film, which itself is critical of the Catholic church. That interesting aspect of the production is highlighted in the bonus features included in Arrow Video's nicely packaged reissue, which includes a restoration of the film from a 2K master. *Alice, Sweet Alice*, also titled *Communion*, is actually a taut psychological thriller with horror elements that features some excellent cinematography and fairly solid performances from the cast. In spite of its low budget, the film manages to invoke real dread and tension and conjures a gruesome finale that will surprise you. This is a cult horror movie that deserves wider recognition. It's not overly bloody and has just the right undercurrent of nastiness.

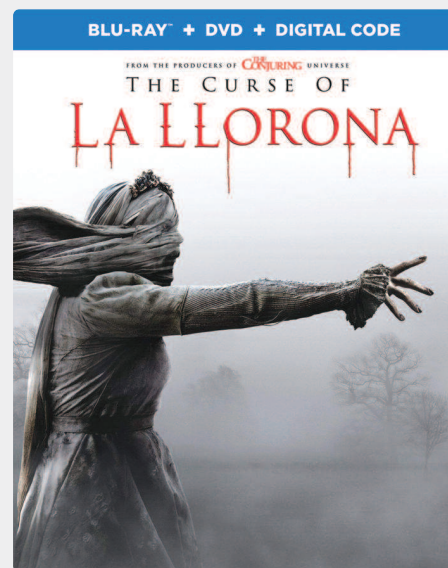


WRATH OF THE WEEPING WOMAN

About a decade ago, I discovered the eerie 1961 Mexican horror film *Curse of the Crying Woman* (aka *La maldición de la llorona*), which was derived by the same Mexican folk tale that inspired this James Wan-produced effort from writers Mickey Daughtry and Tobias Iaconis and director Michael Chaves. That original version was more old school in its approach (I need to revisit it), while this latest incarnation clearly amps up the tension in modern fashion with loud bursts of sound and big jump scares.

In *The Curse of La Llorona* (2019), social worker Anna Tate-Garcia (Linda Cardellini) makes the unexpected mistake of rescuing two young boys from a dark closet where their mother has imprisoned them. Anna thinks the frazzled woman has lost her marbles, but it turns out that an evil spirit called La Llorona was stalking them. After those kids turn up dead in a river far from safety, the spirit of La Llorona sets her sights on Anna's two children. Now the beleaguered mom must use her own resources, and seek the help of a jaded *curandero* (Raymond Cruz), to learn more about why the vengeful spirit arose and how to exorcise her from their lives.

Although I'm a fan of the James Wan horror oeuvre—of which this falls within *The Conjuring* universe—*The Curse of La Llorona* does not add much to the cinematic lineage of malignant spirits. It does benefit from being inspired by a real Mexican ghost story used to scare children into obedience, and some of the actors discuss that very fact in the bonus features. Cruz enlivens things with the deadpan humor he brings to his *curandero* character, and Chaves ratchets up the tension. Although not a classic for the ages, *Llorona* is somewhat satisfying. You'll likely be creeped out by the end, although you'll probably wish they'd gone deeper into the mythos of the creepy matriarch which would've made the scares more effective.



SUN DRENCHED HORROR

About twenty years ago, I saw a dark rock band from Boston called The Reflecting Skin, not realizing that they got their name from this long-lost cult classic written and directed by Philip Ridley and starring Viggo Mortensen. Actually, calling *The Reflecting Skin* (1990) a horror movie is not entirely accurate. It's that unusual cinematic animal that defies easy categorization because it boldly works against genre expectations.

Eight year-old Seth Dove (Jeremy Cooper) lives in the nineteen-fifties Midwest and suffers under the oppression of his abusive mother and emotionally pathetic father. They are struggling financially, and they await the return of his older brother (Mortensen) who's been serving in the military in the Pacific. But a scandal implicating his father—specifically a local child murder—turns their world upside down. Seth thinks that mysterious and grieving widow Dolphin Blue (Lindsay Duncan) may actually be to blame after she secretly tells him that she's 200 years old. Thinking that she is a vampire, Seth begins to fear for his life, and he becomes even more perturbed when his brother returns and becomes amorously linked with her. Further troubling matters are four punks roaming the heartland territory in a black Cadillac, with their possibly sinister intentions not yet known.

Part of what makes *The Reflecting Skin* so beguiling is the fact that nearly the entire film is shot in bright sunlight that amplifies the golden fields of wheat and Midwestern landscape that the characters occupy. Rather than rely on darkness and gothic trappings, Ridley and cinematographer Dick Pope (*The Illusionist*) create a lush, dreamy world with nightmarish elements that one cannot escape from in the shadows. The film is beautifully shot and, despite its slow pace, keeps you anticipating how the events will play out. The bonus features—a making-of feature, commentary track from Ridley, and liner notes essay from Travis Crawford and Heather Hyche—provide excellent analysis and further dissect this unusual film. It turns out that *The Reflecting Skin* has been available in subpar pan and scan or less than stellar transfers on DVD for many, many years, making the Film Movement Classics HD reissue essential not only for new viewers but for longtime fans of the film.

The Reflecting Skin is American Gothic done right.



BORN FOR BATTLE



It took producer/co-writer James Cameron 20 years to turn the anime/manga property *Battle Angel Alita* into a major Hollywood production directed by Robert Rodriguez (and called *Alita: Battle Angel*). It needed a coalescing of the proper evolution of digital effects, the appropriate script (co-written by Cameron with *Shutter Island*'s Laeta Kalogridis), and finding the right star. Spunky Rosa Salazar turned out to be the perfect choice for the title role.

In the post-apocalyptic world of Iron City, located beneath the legendary floating paradise of Zalem, Dr. Dyson Ido (Christoph Waltz) discovers the head and partial torso of the discarded cyborg Alita in a massive scrapheap. He brings her back to life with a new body and tries to help her remember

who she was. During the course of this process, she falls for a young man named Hugo (Keann Johnson) who secretly hunts cyborgs for their parts and profit and the chance to escape to Zalem. As she remembers more of her past life and her warrior impulses instinctively emerge, Alita seeks, against Ido's wish, to become a bounty hunter and enters a world of violence and danger. She is also being monitored by outside powers, which includes a cyborg engineer (Jennifer Connelly) and a vicious entrepreneur with Zalem connections (Mahershala Ali) who oversees a Rollerball-type competition called Motorball. The ultimate champion of that sport will also get the chance to ascend to that fabled city in the sky, which Alita wants to infiltrate.

Salazar shines as Alita, brightening the role with such passion and emotion that the extra-large CG eyes she is given—in homage to the original manga and anime—don't feel jarringly out of place. The key problem here is the writing which suffers from anemic character development and a dearth of strong emotional crescendos. The high-energy action sequences and masterful digital effects can only compensate for that so much—the script needed more finessing. There are moments that click because of Salazar's excellent performance, but overall *Alita: Battle Angel* needed a greater emotional punch to be truly effective. Perhaps in the proposed sequel, which this movie clearly sets up, that issue can be corrected.