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[DVD Review: The Woman in Black, Ethos, Killer's Moon, Planet of Vampire Women and Claustrofobia](#)

Posted by bsimon On May - 29 - 2012 [0 Comment](#)

From a career standpoint, "The Woman in Black" is a very smart move for Daniel Radcliffe. A straightforward but modestly budgeted and staged genre period piece that neither requires a more difficult test of the "Harry Potter" star's box office drawing power (as a twee indie flick might) nor requires him to venture too far out of his comfort zone, director James Watkins' movie is a moderately engaging actor's showcase. It was also a solid box office hit, pulling in over \$125 million, including \$70-plus million overseas.

Radcliffe stars as Arthur Kipps, a widowed lawyer and newly single father who travels to a remote English village to sort out the affairs of a recently deceased man. Taken under the wings of Samuel Daily (Ciaran Hinds) and his wife Elizabeth (Janet McTeer), Arthur learns of the small town's heartrending history — its children die at an alarming rate — and catches glimpses himself of the unnerving titular figure, whose presence is said to precede all tragedy. With his own son set to soon join him, Arthur sets out to try to unravel the mystery surrounding this strange apparition, quietly compelled by the idea that it confirms a state of afterlife in which his wife might still exist.



“The Woman in Black” plays very much like a campfire ghost story come to life — there’s a kind of resolute inevitability to the proceedings, so one’s enjoyment is dependent upon their surrender to the movie’s sleepy tone and rhythms. On a technical level, the movie is fine; Watkins and his cinematographer cook up a muted color palette that matches the somber mood of the narrative. The story, though, doesn’t offer much in the way of surprise, and it’s certainly not scary in any real sense of the word. There are a few “jump scares” here and there, but the film is mostly a vehicle for Radcliffe, who does fine but can’t completely elevate this slice of genre to the same level of something like “The Others.”

Divided into 16 chapters, “The Woman in Black” comes to DVD presented in 2.35:1 anamorphic widescreen, with an English language Dolby digital 5.1 surround sound audio track. Screenwriter Jane Goldman and director James Watkins submit to a feature-length audio commentary track, in which they talk about Victorian era etiquette, and the ways in which they tweaked dialogue to hit a sweet spot that was neither true period piece nor “A Knight’s Tale”-style, caution-to-the-wind re-imagining. There are also two featurettes — one of which is a clip-heavy, four-minute celebration of Radcliffe, in which he admits he “half-cheated” in getting his real-life godson cast in the movie as his son. The other is a bit more substantive, clocking in at nine-plus minutes and including interview tidbits with novelist Susan Hill, upon whose work the movie is based. The movie’s costume designer, Keith Madden, talks about his ideas for the title character, and Radcliffe also jokes that co-stars Hinds and McTeer could in fact be the tallest on-screen couple ever cast in a film. Previews of “Insidious,” “Lockout,” “In the Land of Blood and Honey,” “Tonight You’re Mine,” “7500” and “Salmon Fishing in Yemen” round things out.



A slew of other, more pointedly explicit horror movies, both old and new, are also now available on DVD and Blu-ray. Chief amongst them are a pair of 1970s-era British import “video nasties” from Kino Lorber’s Redemption Films line. One of the more notorious UK horror films of its time, Ray Austin’s “Virgin Witch,” from 1972, aimed to capitalize on the pop cultural fascination with the occult, as well as the era’s somewhat relaxed censorship. Starring Ann Michelle and Vicki Michelle, the movie centers on a couple of girls who travel to a remote castle in order to try to land a modeling contract with a mysterious woman (Patricia Haines). It’s only later, of course, that they discover the agency is a front for procuring fresh victims for a witch’s coven. Make-outs (lesbian and otherwise) ensue, along with supernatural shenanigans.

More engaging, if also quite derivative, is director Alan Birkinshaw’s 1978 feature “Killer’s Moon,” about a quartet of psychopaths who, having escaped a mental asylum where they were subjected to experimental drug therapy, set upon a group of schoolgirls vacationing in the countryside. Its various influences are often worn on the sleeve rather than subtly (the marauding killers are dressed sort of like the Droogs of “A Clockwork Orange”), and its technical execution frequently leaves a bit to be desired, but Birkinshaw’s film actually presents some interesting parallels of victimhood amidst its portrait of unleashed ids. The killers are victims in their own way, too, and as two nearby campers attempt to stop the slaughter, these guys begin to awaken from their druggy stupor, to the reality of some of their deeds.

Divided into 10 chapters, “Killer’s Moon” comes to Blu-ray presented in 1080p in a 1.85:1 aspect ratio, with a 2.0 LPCM audio track. Though mastered in HD from the movie’s 35mm negative, small flecks of grain are fairly consistent throughout, and there’s little to no attempt to color-correct the film’s drab, dark palette. Bonus features are anchored by a moderated audio commentary track with Alan Birkinshaw and Joanne Good, which finds the director explaining non-closed closed sets and addressing the “odd rumors” about the production running out of money, and how this in turn caused some problems and delays with skittish union crews. There’s also a 16-image photo gallery, the movie’s original theatrical trailer and a pair of 12-minute-plus interviews with Birkinshaw and Good. Each of these chats are rangy, and engaging. Birkinshaw touches on everything from his first movie, “Confessions of a [Sex](#) Maniac,” to weather during the movie’s production, filming its rape scenes, and the casting notices involved in securing a three-legged dog. Good, meanwhile, talks about skipping out on her honeymoon to jump into her first feature film (that marriage wouldn’t last, somewhat unsurprisingly), and being the only female cast member not to show a bit of skin.

“Virgin Witch,” meanwhile, comes to Blu-ray in a 1.66:1 aspect ratio, with a similar audio track, suffering from the same sort of occasionally dodgy and dark source material, no matter the HD mastering. In addition to its theatrical trailer and other previews, the movie’s Blu-ray includes only a photo gallery of production and promotional stills.

On DVD, meanwhile, director Domiziano Cristopharo answers the question of what an Italian mash-up of retreaded homage to Tod Browning and David Lynch would look like, in the form of “The Museum of Wonders.” A slice of theater of the bizarre that bills itself as “somewhere between reality and a dream,” this movie charts the machinations of a beautiful dancer, Salome, who marries dwarf circus owner Marcel in an effort to steal his inherited fortune and run off with her lover, strongman Sansone. Aching artistic and pretentious as hell, it’s also deadly dull, and without the benefit of any particular elevating slickness of execution. More fun is “Planet of [Vampire Women](#),” a gory, hybridized genre spoof in which a notorious female space pirate and her gang of interplanetary outlaws find themselves stranded in a world of unrelenting terror. The budget is righteously low, but there’s a certain DIY charm that courses through this schlocky flick. If titular misspelling in your horror movie is your thing, finally, there’s “Claustrofobia,” [sic] a movie in which twentysomething Eva (Carolien [sic] Spoor) ignores the creepy landlord and peeping tom neighbor in moving into her new apartment. Whoops, wrong decision. After a night out drinking with her friends, she’s taken hostage by a hooded figure and has her blood drawn for a purpose that she will soon find out. Again, technical limitations somewhat ding this low-budget effort, but for those looking for off-the-beaten-path indie horror fare, there are far worse options.

Each of the aforementioned three titles come in regular plastic Amaray cases, in 1.85:1 aspect ratios. “Claustrofobia” comes with the benefit of an English language Dolby digital 5.1 surround sound audio track, but “The Museum of Wonders” has the most robust slate of supplemental extras, consisting of nine minutes of deleted scenes, 18 minutes of bloopers (a droopy curtain and various missed cues set off laughter and nervous dancing), and a six-minute featurette spotlighting the sword-swallowing expertise of a gentleman named Murrugun.

Much more sobering than any of the above is Icarus Films’ recent DVD release of Belgium-born documentarian Chantal Akerman’s “From the Other Side,” in large part since it also includes a second disc with her film “South,” examining the 1998 death-by-dragging/hate crime murder of James Byrd, Jr. in Jasper, Texas. “From the Other Side” tackles the great American immigration debate, mixing evocative landscapes with interviews from those on both sides of the fence (pun embraced, if not intended). Sensitive, nonjudgmental portraiture is of course Akerman’s specialty, so those expecting either social justice advocacy or hard-hitting investigative journalism will be in for a rude awakening. Still, there’s a tenderness to this simple testimony and its straightforward capture, which is even more humanistic and illuminating for those removed from the regional frontlines of this hot-button issue.

“South” was born as a much broader meditation on the American region, but took a dramatic turn when the aforementioned Byrd, a 49-year-old African-American, was severely beaten by three twentysomething white racists, then hitched to their truck and dragged three miles through the county. Akerman again blends long stretches of pastoral, almost idyllic nature silence with sit-down interviews from Jasper residents — including the town’s sheriff, who labels many of his burgh’s problems economically based. Even at only 70 minutes the movie drags at times; one can sense the seams of thematic pivot, and wishes there were a bit more discipline and elbow grease applied to a honing of its focus and inquiry. Still, there’s a quiet compassion that hangs over “South,” like a dense San Francisco fog, making this sociopolitical offering and its main-feature predecessor the perfect weekend movie for the NPR set.



Housed in a regular plastic Amaray case with a snap-in tray, “From the Other Side” and “South” are both presented in 16×9 aspect ratio (the former anamorphic), on DVDs with static menu screens and chapter stops. There is no additional bonus content, apart from information screens on Icarus Films, but the two-for-the-price-of-one value of the films themselves certainly mitigates this fact.

Narrated by Woody Harrelson and buoyed by interviews with some of contemporary social psychology’s leading thinkers, “Ethos: A Time For Change” lifts the lid on a Pandora’s box of systemic issues impacting modern life, from the environment and unregulated corporate power to personal liberty and the shadowy influence of the Fed. Its passions are a bit scattershot, to be sure, but the documentary slowly builds a compelling case for big media’s joint unswerving subservience to power and mighty influence on public opinion. A lot of the usual suspects (Michael Moore, Howard Zinn and Noam Chomsky) crop up, but of particular note are Bill Hogan and Charles Lewis, of the Center for Public Integrity, who talk about both how modern-day politics are basically an auction (in essence, how we define how serious a candidate is by how much money they raise) and how the Carlyle Group and more than 70 private companies have rung up massive benefit and profits from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Still in the shadow of Memorial Day weekend, it’s unsettling food for independent-minded thought. Apart from trailers for other Cinema Libre titles, there are no bonus features here, but director Pete McGrain’s film does come with a motion menu screen, and divvied up into 10 chapters. For more information, visit www.EthosTheMovie.com.

Written by: Brent Simon

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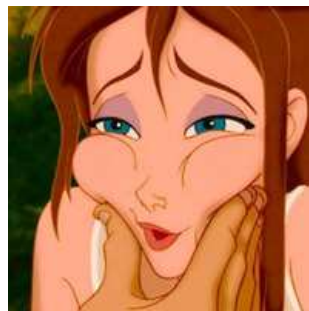
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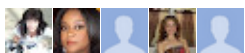
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