



There's iciness to Scandinavian cinema that is hard to pin down, a certain class of emotional detachment that fascinates. This is especially true of the Swedes who, from Bergman on up, have long hooked us with silences and atmosphere rather than explicit shocks or attention-baiting sensory overload.

When it comes to horror, there are but a handful of noteworthy Swedish entries—the most recent internationally recognized hit being *LET THE RIGHT ONE IN*—though it's arguable that even most non-genre films from that country still operate on concepts of isolation and dread. We'll skip the cultural analysis and get right to this review, which is about the new Swedish chiller *MARA* (now on DVD via MVD Entertainment), an ultra low budget affair that makes up in atmosphere and tension what it lacks in originality.

In it, blonde, shapely Swedish supermodel Angelica Jansson stars *not* as the titular Mara (the significance of the title is explained late in the game), but rather as Jenny, an also blonde, shapely young woman who is found drenched in blood. As the police interrogate her, Jenny reveals her side of events leading up to the plasma bath. It seems she and her friends went to a (groan) cabin in the woods one weekend to unwind and instead end up running afoul of a prowler creeping around the peripherals. All is not what it seems in this slow-burning tale however, and the ending is indeed something of a surprise. But the key to appreciating *MARA* is not to focus too much on plot mechanics, rather it's best to just let directors Kondrup-Hedberg-Gustafsson (yes, three filmmakers who brand themselves as one) draw you into the thick, dreamy gloom of the world in which Jenny and her friends are lost in. From the first frames of the dark, moonlit woods, it's evident that DP Fredrik Hedberg has an eye for the ethereal and when he's taking us into those woods, or even when he's studying objects in the house—or admiring Jansson's off-nude body—there's a classic voyeuristic framing that represents everything this critic loves about cinema. For a picture that obviously cost very little, the imagery is rich and the shots lingering and measured. The dialogue, on the other hand, is troublesome and often expository (it would have been nice to see the entire interrogation framing device scrapped). Though to anglo ears, the Swedish language is so alien and lovely in its rhythm, you won't really mind. Jansson is very good as a physical presence and when she's on screen, you follow her. It's not just her admitted physical perfection, it's in her eyes, the way she tilts her head; you believe this woman is afraid, believe she is sinking into a kind of madness.

*MARA* will be rejected by most horror fans, this is undeniable. But for more esoteric viewers, there's plenty to appreciate here and certainly, we're waiting to see what this triptych of directors do next.

