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Produced by **Dominic Anciano & Frank Henschke**

Executive Producers **Jim Beach & Ray Burdis**

Director of Photography **John de Borman**

Music by **Nick Bicât**

Editor **Leslie Healey**

Production Designer **Hubert Pouille**

Costume Designers **Gabi Binder & Anne Verhoeven**





FIREBRAND

THE CINEMA OF PHILIP RIDLEY

by Alexandra Heller-Nicholas

The following essay contains spoilers for *The Reflecting Skin*, *The Passion of Darkly Noon* and *Heartless*, including the films' endings.

There's one moment in *The Passion of Darkly Noon* (1995) where the thematic fascinations that permeate the film work of Philip Ridley manifest with an almost crystalline precision. After the discovery of Roxy's body, the title character hallucinates a vision of his dead, fundamentalist Christian mother and father. Comforting their distraught son who struggles to identify his God-given purpose in the heathen woods, his parents explain to him that the woman who took him in after their violent deaths is a witch. His father tells him that to purify the forest he must kill her; calmly, almost serenely, his gunshot-riddled mother adds: "No faith without blood, right Pa?"

Across the three feature films Ridley has written and directed – *The Reflecting Skin* (1990), *The Passion of Darkly Noon* and *Heartless* (2009) – violence and belief explode across the screen in ways both literal and poetic. These movies each hinge in different ways around how the collision of myth and reality forms conceptual wormholes for violence to enter each film's complex narrative worlds. While played out on screen in different ways, in different realities, our often-simplistic assumptions about concepts like knowledge, innocence and experience all begin to fray, fracture and, at times, literally burn in the face of the irrational things we strange human creatures sometimes choose to believe in.

We see this most immediately in the vampire mythology that permeates *The Reflecting Skin*, the subversion of the folkloric figure of the 'witch in the woods' that lies at the heart of *The Passion of Darkly Noon*, and the terrifying monster gangs that roam the streets of East London in *Heartless*. Ridley's feature films share a near-obsessive fascination with the corruption of perception itself in the face of our own belief in these dark creatures that have ran through cross-cultural history for centuries. They



may not be rational, but they at least provide us *some* way of making sense of a world that more often than not makes no sense at all.

Each of Ridley's three feature films contain their own individual, secularized tabernacles; little boxes that act like sacred treasure chests holding immense power over each of the three characters at the heart of these movies. In *The Reflecting Skin*, Seth Dove is in awe of Dolphin's tiny box of memories, relics of her late husband; Darkly too has his own box of precious objects that he treats with similar reverence, and Jamie's mother's jewelry box in *Heartless* provides him also with a ritualistic space with which to reflect, to meditate. In each box, for each boy, is a tiny world; they are self-contained portals into different states of feeling, being and knowing.

In this way, each of Philip Ridley's three feature films is its own little sacred box. Each contains a universe full of meaning that only makes sense in the context in which it is presented and how the person beholding its contents renders meaning from them. While each of his film worlds are totally independent and unique, across these movies is an unrelenting exploration of the complex myths and rituals we bend, build and manipulate as we to try and comprehend the incomprehensible world we live in. In a 2012 interview with *Exeunt Magazine*, Ridley said: "Each of us creates the reality we need in order to survive. And for me that's tremendously empowering."

While the three worlds in *The Reflecting Skin*, *The Passion of Darkly Noon* and *Heartless* each stand on their own, they are not hermetically sealed; their scent drifts at times invisibly and yet still unmissably into each other, like the smell of gasoline. That sensation can often bleed out from his own feature filmography into cinema more broadly in ways that are far more meaningful and almost organic than any of the kind of clinical ways we might otherwise talk about things like 'reflexivity' or 'intertextual referentiality'. Like the sacred photographs that appear throughout these three films, the ways in which Ridley's films can lead to other film images, to other film worlds, are wholly personal. I can't, for example, watch the scene where James climbs out of a painting-like window and into a golden field at the end of Lynne Ramsay's *Ratcatcher* – released in 1999, almost a full decade after *The Reflecting Skin* – and not have it merge with the sequence where Seth first walks through the bright yellow wheat towards Dolphin's house. Similarly, the DIY barbed wire self-flagellation reveal in Paul Schrader's *First Reformed* (2017)

leads me inescapably back to Darkly and his own brand of twisted, religion-infused self-loathing, while different characters in different film worlds both echo Darkly's mother's observation that there's "no faith without blood." The spirit of Ridley's film work can additionally be traced in everything from Terry Gilliam's *Tideland* (2005) to Ryan Gosling's directorial debut *Lost River* (2014).

At stake here is so much more than mere undergraduate film reference bingo; rather, there's something so deeply poetic and enduring at play here, less Tarantino than it is Aby Warburg and his *Mnemosyne Atlas* project that sought to concretely map the endurance of particularly potent, powerful images across art history. These images – from Ramsay, from Schrader, from Ridley, and others – bleed out, across time and text, across artforms, and into each other, because they themselves have, to recall Ridley's own words in the aforementioned interview, "(created) the reality we need in order to survive."

Ideas rip and burn across the films of Philip Ridley and into the history of visual culture more broadly with the same force as the flames so central to each film. These films ignite and are ignited, and the significance of fire is hard to miss; it has a presence, a function, a role in each film. It triggers transformations at a purely elemental level; as Papa B tells Jamie in *Heartless*, "fire will burn away the old; you will rise anew." Fire in Ridley's work is a more complex phenomenon than merely a marker of destruction or finality; the dedication to Rod Hall at the start of Ridley's play *Mercury Fur* (first staged in 2005), for example, contains a line from the play itself: "I love you so much I could burst into flames." Ridley has even spoken about the act of creativity itself in terms of this kind of dramatic elemental force, saying in an interview on *Heartless in Indie London*, "I always describe it as a film of an explosion in reverse. It begins with all this scattered shrapnel and then gradually it comes together to form a house or a car, so to speak... getting a project together is a bit like that... I have all these various, disparate ideas, or shrapnel, and sometimes they come together and sometimes they don't."

As the reference to *Mercury Fur* indicates, it would be incorrect to reduce any exploration of Ridley as an artist to filmmaker alone. Frequently referred to as a polymath, his ability to cross different modes of creative production to express himself is almost legendary. The list of his skills is undeniably impressive: novelist, poet, playwright, visual artist, songwriter, children's author, photographer, librettist,



performance artist and theater director, as well, of course, as film director and screenwriter.

Across these fields he has won an astonishing number of awards and formal accolades that are too numerous to list in full. As a playwright, based on the reputation of his breakthrough play *The Pitchfork Disney* (1991) alone he is considered an important figure in the history of so-called 'in-yer-face' theater. While typified by the work of Mark Ravenhill and the late, great Sarah Kane, this vital movement was kick-started by *The Pitchfork Disney* years before other key works in the category began to appear. He was named a Jubilee Playwright in 2012 by *WhatsOnStage*, formalizing his status as "one of the fifty most influential writers to appear in the last half a century," and also received the *Evening Standard's* Most Promising Newcomer to British Film and Most Promising Playwright awards just a year apart. His play *Moonfleece* (2004) was named one of the "50 Best Works About Cultural Diversity" by the National Centre for Children's Books, and he won both the Meyer-Whitworth Award and the Critics' Circle Theatre Award for Most Promising Playwright. With regards to film, his 1988 short *The Universe of Dermot Finn* was nominated for Best Short Film at the Cannes Film Festival. This was followed by a veritable onslaught of further accolades; *The Reflecting Skin* won three awards at the Locarno, Sitges and Stockholm film festivals, *Heartless* won major awards at Fantasporto and the Toronto After Dark Film Festival, while *The Passion of Darkly Noon* was included in *The Daily Telegraph's* list of "The 50 Most Underrated Films of All Time."

Even a rough count demonstrates just how prolific an artist he is; twenty-four plays (not including monologues or librettos), over twenty novels, novellas and short stories for adults and children, and he also has impressive form as a songwriter, including collaborations with PJ Harvey, Gavin Friday, Anna Meredith and his frequent co-conspirator, Nick Bicât. As a visual artist, he is often aligned with the Young British Artists movement alongside key figures like Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin and the Chapman brothers; he has had work included in eighteen group shows and twelve solo shows, the latter of which, since 2012, have focused primarily on his photography.

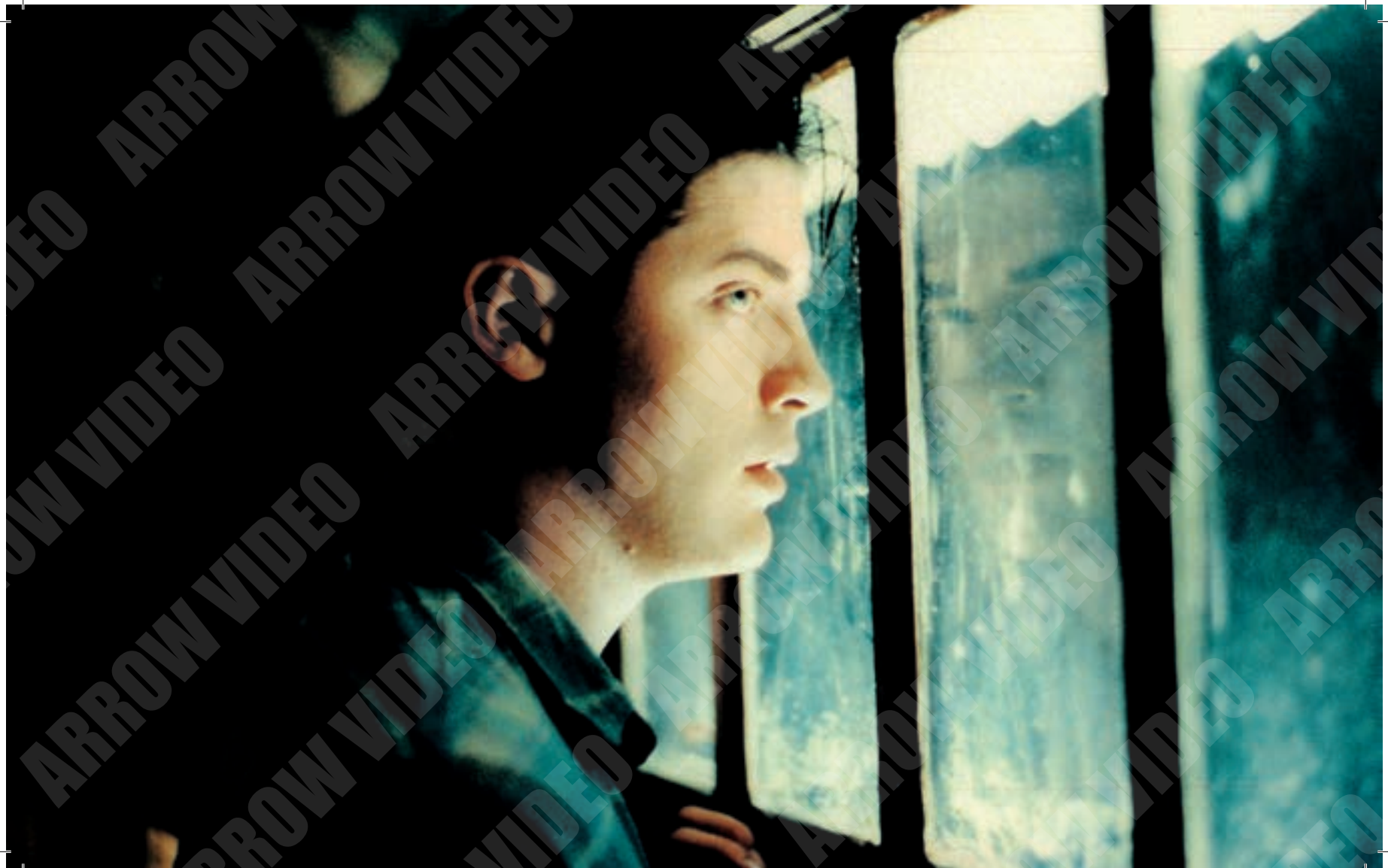
Critics have often struggled to get a wholly convincing handle on how to approach these different facets of Ridley's creative output, one even bewilderingly going as far to accuse him of having "promiscuously crossed artforms." This oddly puritanical

sexual turn-of-phrase is eloquently shut down elsewhere in a quote from Ridley himself, who noted in a 2016 interview with *The Independent*: "I have never seen it as different art forms. I am doing one thing, I am telling a story and sometimes you use different ways of telling a story so I can't say I prefer one form over another. It is our culture that feels a need to put a label on it. I don't think art should be divided in the way I hope we don't divide up gender and sexuality in the future."

Time and time again, the same questions about the diversity of his output have been posed to Ridley who – with frankly impressive patience – always gives the same answer. In a 2015 interview with the *East End Review*, he said "It seems to be something that either bothers or interests people more than it does me." He continues: "In its most simplistic sense I'm just telling stories. If I think of a story and see two people talking to each other then it's obviously a stage play. If I think of a story and its images are moving, and there's not much dialogue then that's usually a film. If I think of a story and it's a sequence of images, then that's either a photograph or a painting. For me they're not different things at all, they're all part of the same mountain but just different peaks at the top."

Watching Ridley's films, the view from this perspective is breathtaking. We see his skills as a visual artist come to the fore not just in the painterly composition of *The Reflecting Skin*, but in its bright yellow wheat that he literally painted to create its vivid impact on film. Across his plays, from *The Pitchfork Disney* to *Shivered* (2012) in particular, critics have sensed a broad thematic interest in what Andrew Wyllie has described as "a concern with the role of memory and of remembering... [that] attempt... to recuperate an authentic past by challenging an accepted, acceptable but inaccurate mythology of the past." An observation that adheres only too well to the presence and subjective corruption of personal experience and broader mythologies in his feature film work.

Born and bred in the East End of London, Ridley lived in Bethnal Green for almost fifty years before moving to Ilford (still in East London, though not perhaps the 'official' East End) to get more space for his painting. Ridley started expressing himself through art early in life; he started work on his first novel at the age of eight, started his own theater company at nine, and had his first art exhibition at fourteen.



The first devoted fan of his storytelling, legend holds, was his younger brother Tony, for whom the young Philip would invent stories to tell as his anxious sibling struggled to get to sleep. As a child Philip suffered from chronic asthma so severe that it required frequent hospitalization and periods in oxygen tents, so an ability to create worlds and to dip into those created by other artists became an essential part of his development; spending so much time around adults who dismissed his presence due to his poor health is one of the reasons, we might speculate, why his astonishing understanding of the nuance of dialogue is so accurate. (Ridley has also confessed that in his mid-teens he would also secretly record adults chatting with a hidden reel-to-reel recorder he'd received as a Christmas present, similarly obsessed with the ways that adults spoke when they believed children were not paying attention.) On top of all of this, his asthma was treated with a now-banned amphetamine called Etheldrene, which Ridley himself has speculated may have been a factor in his penchant for rapid production.

This voracious appetite for art saw the young Ridley impacted by a wealth of influences. In terms of cinema, he has cited David Cronenberg, Alfred Hitchcock, Andrei Tarkovsky, and Jean Cocteau as key figures, but perhaps unsurprisingly, his influences also cross many fields. He grew up with comic books and horror novels and has cited the work of Robert Bloch, Philip K. Dick, Richard Matheson and Stephen King as having left a strong impression on him, and, when he was fourteen, he apparently got a 'D' at his prim and proper grammar school for daring to write an essay about William Peter Blatty's novel *The Exorcist* (1971). Other literary influences include Sam Shepard, Harold Pinter, J. G. Ballard, William Burroughs, Tennessee Williams, Isaac Asimov and Christopher Priest.

But it was the young Ridley's focus on art in particular that in later years led him to find inspiration in the works of Francis Bacon, Francisco Goya, Hieronymus Bosch, Salvador Dalí, Giorgio de Chirico, Paul Klee, Joseph Cornell and Philip Guston. His art education began with his high school art teacher Miss Driscoll – who spotted his talent and encouraged him – and he sneaked into drawing classes at the Central School of Art by British artist Cecil Collins, whose work Ridley had seen at the Tate and greatly admired. At seventeen, he prepared a portfolio of his artworks, and was subsequently accepted to St Martin's School of Art. It was there that Ridley excelled in broadening and further refining his diverse set of talents, working not just on painting but in theater, on his writing and – of course – film.

Ridley was interested in photography and filmmaking before going to St Martins, and bought a Super 8 film camera while still in high school. At art school, he had access to both 16mm and video equipment, which sparked his early experiments in body genres such as porn and horror. He made his first short, *Visiting Mr. Beak*, in 1987. Starring legendary actor Guy Rolfe, who had starred in everything from Robert Hamer's *The Spider and the Fly* (1949) to cult classics like William Castle's *Mr. Sardonicus* (1961) and Stuart Gordon's *Dolls* (1987), *Visiting Mr. Beak* is an absurdist exploration of what the film poetically configures as a kind of 'nostalgia hoarding' that follows a young boy on his journey to visit Rolfe's title character, carrying a precious, at first unknown, object in his cupped hands.

Meeting a number of neighbors on his way, each presents a brief soliloquy and speaks of precious memories as they try to cajole the treasure from the boy. Here, nostalgia is rendered somehow literally magnetic as objects are drawn and cling to each remember-er, culminating in the majestic reveal of Mr. Beak himself, a mountainous monstrous singing perversity, buried under all the junk resultant of his indulgent recollections, rendered tangible and, as he describes it, causing "all [of] one's memories [to] start piling up." The release of the invisible object in the boy's hands is the sound of a baby crying; it breaks the spell and bestows upon Mr. Beak the gift of the memoryless. The boy is rewarded with a swan egg that he (in a hefty symbolic gesture) gives to his doting mother, a material memory of motherhood of her very own.

With the attention of Channel Four and British Screen now turning towards the emerging filmmaker's work, Ridley developed his second short *The Universe of Dermot Finn* in 1988, which premiered at the Cannes Film Festival. A thoroughly captivating and genuinely peculiar tale about a young courting couple meeting the families of their respective sweetheart, even at this early stage enduring fascinations that will appear across Ridley's later film work are clearly emerging; like *Visiting Mr. Beak*, the role and power of mothers is emphasized, and the dinner table is granted particular power as a space where feminine power operates at its most formal and dominant. A textbook early example of Ridley's focus on corrupted subjectivities and that normalcy is in the eye of the beholder, it's hard to watch *The Universe of Dermot Finn* – a very funny, very strange little film – and not draw parallels with a similar scene in *The Krays* (1990) where Frances introduces her soon-to-be-husband Reggie to her parents; stilted, awkward



and uncomfortably funny, the instinct to privilege this ubiquitous, even clichéd social ritual had already been satisfyingly defamiliarized in *The Universe of Dermot Finn*.

With an impressively tight screenplay written by Ridley while he was still at art school, the Peter Medak-directed biopic on East London's famous gangster twins Reggie and Ronnie Kray went into production at almost the exact same time as Ridley was to get to work on his feature film directorial debut, *The Reflecting Skin*. Driven by his widely acclaimed screenplay, other traces of thematic aspects that would come to the fore in Ridley's own feature films can also be identified in *The Krays*; most urgently, perhaps, ideas about myth-making and how the realities of these fantasies can collide with reality, often with spectacular violence, as is synonymous with the Kray brothers' story.

Perhaps most importantly, however, *The Krays* contains not just one of the finest speeches ever delivered in a film based on a Ridley screenplay, but the content itself makes explicit a theme that permeates *The Reflecting Skin*, *The Passion of Darkly Noon* and *Heartless* in different ways. While these films center around male characters, their dramas are inextricably linked to women; Dolphin and Ruth in *The Reflecting Skin*, Callie and Roxy in *The Passion of Darkly Noon*, and Belle and Tia in *Heartless*. In a devastating performance by actor Susan Fleetwood, Aunt Rose, in a highly distressed, agitated state, recalls how hard it was for women during the war. Speaking of unimaginable horrors of the realities of childbirth in wartime conditions, she says:

There was so much blood. Jesus. And the abortions. Those poor girls. One day they'll drain Victoria Park Lake and you'll know what they'll find? What glorious remnants of the Second World War? Babies. That's what. Bullets and dead babies... Men! Mum's right. They stay kids all their fucking lives and they end up heroes. Or monsters. Either way, they win. Women have to grow up. If they stay children they become victims.

Redirecting these words towards the three feature films Ridley has both directed and written, however inadvertently, Aunt Rose tells us a great deal about the male characters at the center of *The Reflecting Skin*, *The Passion of Darkly Noon* and *Heartless*. All three of the central protagonists of these films – Seth Dove, Darkly Noon and Jamie Morgan – for different reasons prove her exactly right. For starters, each is

tethered to boyhood in different ways; Seth for being only eight-years-old, Darkly for having his emotional development stunted by a strict fundamentalist upbringing, and Jamie due to the trauma, insecurities and sense of Otherness that defines his identity due to the large heart-shaped birthmark on his face from which the film is granted its title. With the possible exception of Seth (who has his whole life ahead of him at the end of *The Reflecting Skin*), Aunt Rose knows; these men *do* stay kids all their fucking lives, with the most likely outcomes being that they become heroes or monsters. There is, as she notes, a degree of privilege to this that is in itself gendered, and we see that played out precisely in what happens to the women and girls who surround these male characters; Roxy, Tia, Belle and Dolphin all die, while life for Callie and Ruth can even at best be understood as being significantly negatively impacted by the actions of some of the men in their lives.

As Ridley himself has noted, these three movies retrospectively form a trilogy of sorts. In an interview with *SciFiNow* in 2015, he said: "They're all first-person narratives so they're all through the eyes of one person, and they're all about somebody that's trying to make sense of the world about them. And they're all debates on memory, loss, faith, all of these things."

All of these things indeed come to the fore dramatically in *The Reflecting Skin*, which was based on a series of artworks collectively named *American Gothic* (also the film's working title) that Ridley made as an art student. He's described these in a 1996 radio interview as being inspired by "iconic images of America: children playing in wheat fields, black Cadillacs, clear blue skies behind Andrew Wyeth houses. A place where all the young men wore leather jackets and had jet black hair styled in quiffs, and all the women were blonde like Marilyn Monroe. But there was a darker element. When you looked closer at the children playing in the wheat field, you realized they were torturing animals. The sexy young men with jackets and quiffs were holding *Psycho* knives."

The Reflecting Skin follows a young child in 1950s Idaho who resorts to the vampire mythology of his father's pulp novels to negotiate the realities of an increasingly complex and violent adult world. Filmed in Alberta, Canada, it was essential to Ridley that his vision of rural America presented in *The Reflecting Skin* retained a mythical quality; he had himself not been to the United States when he made the



American Gothic artworks, and in this same radio interview noted it was crucial to him that the film be about “how I *dreamed* America after years of reading American comics and horror novels. And, of course, seeing horror films.” It was in these artworks that many of the core aspects of *The Reflecting Skin* were conceived; for example, Seth first appeared in paintings with names like ‘Seth Plays With a Frog’ and ‘Seth Rides in a Cadillac’.

Still almost thirty years after the film’s initial release, Seth retains his place amongst cinema’s most complex, compelling and frankly honest depictions of boyhood. Played with deep understanding by actor Jeremy Cooper, there’s something of a conscious rejection of presenting Seth as an idealized vision of childhood from an adult’s perspective, rejecting the widespread fetishization of childhood that this film consciously configures as both sexual and violent in the shape of the ominous, unpunished child killers and rapists who terrorize the countryside and its inhabitants unhindered.

On directing Cooper and the film’s other children, Ridley has spoken fondly of the experience and has emphasized how conscious this shift from idealized childhood to the experience of childhood was. In the *SciFiNow* interview, he recalled: “The one thing I kept on saying when we were on set if it got wrong was, ‘No, it’s getting too cute! It’s getting too cutesy! This is not about you being a cute kid; this is you being a monster! This is *Lord of the Flies* in the wheat fields; this is not *Little House on the Prairie!*’” For the kids themselves, by all accounts they had a great time; they thought the frog scene at the beginning of the film was hilarious, and delighted playing with the model of the dead baby that they fondly christened ‘Phoebe the Fetus’.

In terms of its reception, the famous story of the film’s premiere at the Cannes Film Festival is that while there were certainly walk-outs during the screening, after it ended one French journalist immediately told Ridley: “Your film is already a cult.” With its non-patronizing approach to children, trauma and violence, and the difficulty in finding a tidy commercial niche for a film less a genre movie than one experimenting with genre codes and conventions, the film is perhaps most comparable to Ann Turner’s *Celia* (1989); certainly in terms of how the film was

handled – or mishandled – by somewhat bewildered marketing executives unsure of how to most effectively sell such films. But regardless, that French critic was right – after storming the festival circuit, *The Reflecting Skin* developed a devoted cult following, not just for the film itself but for Ridley’s feature films to come.

The next of these was *The Passion of Darkly Noon*, whose protagonist – played impressively by a young Brendan Fraser before his major commercial breakthrough – while an altogether different creature at its most basic level, shares fundamental fascinations with that of *The Reflecting Skin*. Consider, for example, the following quote from Ridley discussing Seth in *SciFiNow*, and how easily the exact same description could apply to Darkly:

He’s desperately trying to piece together some elements of the narrative that he can form a comprehensive story, a story that makes sense, and the tragedy of the film is how he makes mistakes all along the line, he picks up on the wrong information, or the correct bits of information but joins the dots together in the wrong way. Hence the journey of the film. But I’m always wary because even describing the film like that gives it more logic than the film has! Because the film is psychotic, so it’s about a lot more than that really.

Ridley himself of course is aware of these parallels and noted in this same interview that the relationship between Seth and Darkly is inescapable: “It’s like the same personality haunts all of those films. *Darkly Noon*... could almost be Seth grown up.”

The Passion of Darkly Noon tells the story of the eponymous young man who finds himself disoriented, ill and lost in the forest after a massacre results in his forced exile away from his extreme fundamentalist religious community when his parents and other members are killed (it’s never stated what this religion is, but it’s hard not to draw parallels with the Waco siege, for instance). This cult is aggressively misogynist in its beliefs, too, with women reduced to the standard whore or virgin archetypes (here played out more closely to the figures of witches or angels). He is taken in and cared for by a kind-hearted woman called Callie, who has been ostracized from her community by her partner’s mother Roxy, who lives in a caravan nearby. Callie’s social stigma stems from the fact that she was sexually assaulted by her lover Clay’s father, but she’s the one punished for it in keeping with the ‘blame the victim’ mentality that



has particular contemporary resonance in light of the rhetoric about sexual violence, harassment and discrimination that has dominated the #MeToo movement.

With a growing, intense attraction to Callie that his strict upbringing gave him no ability to understand beyond the framework of sin and misogyny, Darkly's mental health deteriorates and he becomes convinced Callie is a witch who must be punished. Darkly is what today would be readily identified as an incel (shorthand for 'involuntarily celibate', an online misogynist subculture linked to real-world horrors such as the 2014 Isla Vista shootings in California). Ridley himself has said:

Darkly has a sense of entitlement: when he [first] sees Callie asleep on the porch, he wants her. He starts to approach. But then Callie wakes up. The question is – and one we all asked when shooting – what would Darkly have done if she hadn't awoken? Darkly, through the fundamentalist beliefs of the cult he belonged to, has been taught women should be passive, his for the taking. But what really throws Darkly's mind into chaos is the rejection, yes, but more so the fact that Callie is having sex with someone else. It's this that – both metaphorically and literally – eventually brings the house down.

But if *The Reflecting Skin* was linked to the American Gothic, *The Passion of Darkly Noon* finds its roots in surrealism, even directly referencing Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's famous collaboration *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) in one moment where ants are shown crawling over a hand. In 2019, Ridley underscored this legacy by noting the conscious link between the film's aesthetics and surrealist art, observing it was "like one of Salvador Dalí's paintings [and] that the film also uses a key surrealist device: the irrational juxtaposition of images." For Ridley, this reaches its peak with the film's famous (and initially incongruous) silver shoe. At the same time, Ridley sought to combine these images in a manner he described as "deliberately simple and obscure." While the influence of surrealism is strong, another simultaneous thread stems from that of the fairy tale, which comes to life in a range of motifs that Ridley himself has identified: "apples, the color red, a witch in the woods, crosses, moon, sun, blood on the Bible, etcetera." Both of these streams of influence lie in tension and add to the extraordinary spell the film weaves on its viewers, quite unlike anything else. In *The Passion of Darkly Noon*, Ridley deliberately situates the familiar and folkloric in sharp contrast with the conscious opacity of surrealism.

Described in the aforementioned radio interview by Ridley as a "fable about religion," *The Passion of Darkly Noon* is again focused on a group of outsiders. The film presents a range of competing belief systems that the extremely naïve Darkly has no emotional, psychological or spiritual capacity to negotiate: there's the witchcraft Roxy tells him lies at the heart of hatred of Callie; there's Callie's own, more sensual paganism; there are the ancient tales inscribed in cave paintings; and there are those from the Bible itself that have so heavily indoctrinated Darkly with the fire-and-brimstone visions through which he was raised. Like *The Reflecting Skin* – and later, *Heartless* – the fire aspect here is both central and literal, its transformative capacity in *The Passion of Darkly Noon* granted an emphatically moralizing dimension as Darkly spends the climax of the film wielding a chisel and painted red like a pantomime devil, terrorizing Callie and Clay before the house burns to the ground, taking Darkly with it.

If fire is important to *The Reflecting Skin* and *The Passion of Darkly Noon*, then it becomes even more so in *Heartless*, released fifteen years later. Despite the time gap, *Heartless* in many ways seamlessly maintains the thematic obsessions that marked the earlier two feature films as much as it is a fully self-contained film world in its own right. Set in the East End of London, so much a part of Ridley's artistic signature (and emphasized in his work as a playwright and his screenplay for *The Krays* in particular), *Heartless* finds the filmmaker back in familiar territory in more ways than one. Yet while both *The Reflecting Skin* and *The Passion of Darkly Noon* exist in a kind of mythic imaginary of what, for most of us, are unfamiliar times and/or places, there are concrete aspects of *Heartless* that tie it very much to the location and era of its production.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the origins for *Heartless* came again directly from Ridley's own art. In an interview, he outlines how the project was the result of a decade of his photographing the East End that became increasingly cinematic, resulting in the creation of Jamie's character. In the *Indie London* interview quoted previously, Ridley described the original premise being launched from "the idea of this disturbed young man who couldn't make sense of the world around him," again tying him closely in his plight to both Seth and Darkly. Inspired by his work with young people in theater, Ridley has said:



Working with kids and teenagers who suffer from bipolar depression and things like that... It's amazing how so many of them come out with the same things and have the same concept of the world – that it makes no sense to them and that they can't get a grip of their story in it. Whenever they open their door, the whole world seems to change. So, I found that an interesting zeitgeist character. So many people don't understand today's politics, or religions, or their family because it's all changing too quickly. So, I thought it would be interesting to mix all that into the screenplay.

Ridley expanded on this in 2019, adding:

But, of course, *Heartless* pushes it further than not understanding certain aspects of life. Jamie doesn't understand the meaning of life itself. His depression is so deep, he doesn't want to live. His sense of 'otherness' has overwhelmed him. Yes, I have described *Heartless* as a horror film. But the horror is not the demons, or a heart being cut out, or the severed head. The horror is depression. The horror is someone who knows he wants to die and is trying to find a reason not to. The first words we hear in the film are "You're going to fucking die!" And Jamie does. The whole film is the journey towards that. I find it an overwhelmingly sad film. There's melancholy in everything. Even the scene where Jamie and Tia dance at the nightclub is heartbreaking somehow. And not just because the song they're dancing to has the prophetic lyric, "When I walked down the street they set fire to me."

Feeling like an outsider due to his large facial birthmark, Jamie is a 25-year-old photographer who struggles to have close relationships with anyone outside of his immediate family, especially his mother, who is murdered at a bus stop by a demonic, hoodie-wearing gang. With an unrequited crush on model and fellow photography enthusiast Tia, and with his grip on sanity diminishing after his mother's death, he makes a deal with the Faustian figure of Papa B to remove his birthmarks in return for what Jamie later discovers is the requirement to commit a number of murders. While things at first change for the better in his life, the gravity of the deal he has made becomes too much, and the reality behind the so-called demons is revealed to have more earthly origins. As he recalls being the victim of a Molotov cocktail attack, the film finishes with a flashback to a formative childhood memory of his

father, whom Jamie recalls speaking of being a child forced to spend a night alone with his father in the forest. In his memory, Jamie's father says:

When things are really dark, as dark as they can get, you see so much more. So many wonderful things. Sometimes, old son, things can get darker for you than they do for the rest of us. But you've got to see those moments as something special. Because they are showing you things. A way of looking at the world that no one else will ever, ever understand.

Despite having gone on the record to state that he has given up filmmaking for good, for Ridley, this is precisely the experience that art itself more generally can bring. As he said in 2019:

What I'm doing now, I've always done. Ever since I was a child. I wake up and I write. Or draw. Or take photos. I never had any concept of it being 'art' as such. It's just what I did. My brother played with his toy cars, I wrote and drew. Of course, when I was young, I did a lot of that writing and drawing while I was very ill with asthma. I was in an oxygen tent a great deal of the time. I viewed everything through a sheet of plastic. This sheet of plastic distorted things. I saw the world in a different way. I related to people in a different way. But somehow, I think, within that distortion, there came a sort of clarity too. I think that's why I wrote and drew so much. It wasn't just the amphetamine-based medicine I was taking. I wanted other people to see what I was seeing.

Alexandra Heller-Nicholas is a film critic and author from Melbourne, Australia, who has published five books on cult cinema with a focus on gender politics.



ABOUT THE RESTORATION

The Passion of Darkly Noon has been exclusively restored by Arrow Films and is presented in its original aspect ratio of 2.35:1 with 5.1 and 2.0 stereo audio. This new restoration was fully supervised and approved by director Philip Ridley.

The film was restored at Pinewood Studios, London. The original 35mm camera negative was scanned in 2K resolution on an Arriscan. Color grading was completed on a DaVinci Resolve and picture restoration was completed using PFClean software.

Additional grading and image processing was completed under Philip Ridley's supervision at Silver Salt Restoration.

Audio remastering was completed at Pinewood.

All materials for this restoration were made available by AMBI Distribution and Lionsgate/Summit via Technicolor.

Restoration supervised by **James White, Arrow Films**

Pinewood Studios Group:
Rebecca Budds, Michael Davis, John Pegg, Jon Mann, Darren Rae, Jashesh Jhaveri, Lucie Hancock, Rob Langridge, Jason Stevens

Silver Salt Restoration:
Anthony Badger, Steve Bearman, Mark Bonnici

Technicolor:
Thomas Cliff, Adam Naylor, Mary Ambartsumyan, Erik Forsberg

AMBI Distribution:
Larry Greenberg, Stefania Monsalve

Lionsgate/Summit:
Les Becherer

Special thanks to Philip Ridley for his generous participation on this project.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **James Flower**
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**
Technical Producer **James White**
QC **Nora Mehenni, Alan Simmons**
Production Assistant **Samuel Thiery**
Blu-ray Mastering **Fidelity In Motion**
Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**
Design **Obviously Creative**

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Alex Agran, Sarah Appleton, Espen Bale, Nick Bicât, Cynthia Burnett, John de Borman, Edward Fletcher, Les Healey, Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, Dora Nedeczky, Philip Ridley, Brian Shingles, Peter Strickland, David Wilentz, Eli Wooten



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