



A woman with long blonde hair is shown in profile, driving a car. She is looking out the window towards a snowy landscape with trees. The car's interior, including the steering wheel and dashboard, is visible in the foreground.

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CAST

Madison West Virginia

Joey Millin Leo

Nadine Sondej-Robinson Mom

John Terrell Shelby's Brother

Daniel Abraham Stevens Man

CREW

Directed by **Powell Robinson & Patrick R. Young**

Written by **Patrick R. Young**

Produced by **Lauren Bates**

Cinematography **Powell Robinson**

Music by **Nick Chuba**

Editing by **William Ford-Conway**



THE TIES THAT BIND:
CULTS, DRUGS AND FAMILIES IN

THRESHOLD

BY ANTON BITEL

THRESHOLD AS CULT MOVIE

Originally, “cult” was a category of cinema defined entirely by its eccentric reception. A film would become “cult” when it acquired a repeat audience of devotees who congregated—often at the midnight hour, typically in the marginal precincts of the grindhouse, the drive-in and the fleapit—to worship the obscure object of their adoration. When viewers imbibed psychotropic pharmaceuticals together while watching Alejandro Jodorowsky’s *El Topo* (1970), or collectively elaborated a catechistic call and response to the lines of Jim Sharman’s *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), or engaged in spoon-throwing communion with Tommy Wiseau’s *The Room* (2003), these audience behaviors and attitudes conferred the films’ cult status—and it was a status which could only be acquired over time. Nonetheless, such responses tend to be elicited by a certain type—or types—of film, and so today the term “cult,” though hard to define with precision, typically draws on a range of characteristics and criteria relating as much to a film’s production (low-

budget, independent, “outsider”) and content (transgressive, genre-blurring, uncategorizable, etc.) as to the mode of its viewing.

When it comes to this much looser definition of a cult film, *Threshold* easily fits the bill. After all, its production was far removed from the mainstream, as director/cinematographer Powell Robinson and co-director/writer Patrick Robert Young hit the road with just their two lead actors (and college friends) Joey Millin and Madison West and their producer Lauren Bates along for the ride. They had two cars, two iPhones (for cameras), and a shooting budget of just US\$7000 (a further US\$8000 would be spent on post, festivals and delivery). If this production team sounds lean, so was the screenplay from which they were working: a 20-page roadmap rather than a full script, with most of the dialogue improvised by the cast. So, this was a truly micro-budget, indeed nano-budget or even no-budget, operation, made entirely outside the system—all factors which already had it racing down the highway to cult.

The content too: for perhaps in keeping with its very title, this is a film that constantly crosses thresholds, veering wildly along and across the conventional boundary lines of genre, and mixing and merging disparate elements (road movie, Linklater-esque “hangout” flick, the occult, family film and horror) that are rarely seen travelling parallel lanes. This self-same mismatch of materials that makes the film elude easy categorization is also what earns it precisely the categorization of cult. It helps that *Threshold*, like *The Sound of My Voice* (2011), *Red State* (2011), *Martha Marcy May Marlene* (2011), *The Sacrament* (2013), *Faults* (2014), *The Invitation* (2015), *The Endless* (2017), *They Remain* (2018), *Mandy* (2018) and *Welcome to the Circle* (2020), is also concerned with an actual cult, thus finding a reflexive route to its cult movie status.

FAMILIES AND OTHER CULTS

Threshold opens with words severed from their associated images. “We’ve found Virginia,” we hear Leo (Joey Millin) being told on the phone by his mother (voiced by Nadine Sondej-Robinson), while all we see are white-and-red title credits on a black

background. Such separation of sight and sound might seem innocuous, but in fact this mediated conversation establishes immediately that the lines connecting us to others are sometimes invisible. Later, on the road, Leo will put in an interstate phone call to his wife Kelsey and their young daughter Ally, both characters never seen on screen—and given that Leo is reluctantly having to face the decision of whether to sign divorce papers, this long-distance talk only amplifies his broader sense of estrangement. Leo is in the process of losing his immediate family, and feeling cut off.

Leo is even more disconnected from his sister Virginia (Madison West), a once promising law graduate whose addictions to various drugs sent her reeling off course. Nobody in Leo’s wider family has seen or heard from the self-destructive Virginia since a get-together three years ago ended in a “big blow-up fight.” Now not only has Leo been assigned to go pick up his long-lost sister, but without current access to what Virginia calls his “suburban dad” van, he has to take his old car out of storage. The stickers plastered all over its bonnet, and the collection of CDs and the open pack of cigarettes inside, mark the vehicle, which he has not driven for a decade, as a relic of Leo’s past, from the days when he was a hard-rocking musician rather than working for the system as a music teacher for seventh graders (a job which he despises). So, the journey on which Leo is about to embark is also a trip down memory lane, as his gradual reconnection with Virginia will also involve a reversion to his younger self, and a reassessment of his present direction. Back on the roads he once toured for gigs, this now respectable parent will even reengage, improbably and incompetently, in random acts of theft which once characterized his more delinquent days. In redefining his bond with the estranged Virginia, Leo is also revisiting the childhood that he shared with her, when both were younger, happier—and closer.

If Leo is tied to Virginia through their common past, she has meanwhile formed other ties. The first is her succession of drug dependencies, from Adderall to OxyContin to “other things.” When Leo finds her holed up in her ex-boyfriend’s apartment, wailing

and writhing on the bed with her pupils dilated, he naturally assumes that she is on something—even as she insists that she is not only clean, but eight months sober. “Honestly,” she explains, “I’m cursed.” For according to Virginia, a cult which helped her work through her addiction problems also performed a ritual binding her to them. This involved conjuring an occult bond between her and a male stranger (Daniel Abraham Stevens), so that, as she says, “I could feel what he was feeling, and I know he could feel what I was feeling.” The drug-induced convulsions that Leo just witnessed were just Virginia’s vicarious experience of what the stranger was suffering elsewhere—and Virginia is convinced that the only way she can untether herself and break the curse is to find the stranger. And so, with the skeptical Leo in tow, a cross-country road trip begins.

Three different ties form the coordinates along which the siblings’ search triangulates: Virginia’s fading addiction to drugs, kept alive by the stranger’s own continued usage of narcotics; Virginia’s former association with the cult, maintained through their magical hold over her via the stranger; and her sibling bond to Leo, which regains its strength as the road trip continues. These three axes represent the conflict within Virginia, torn between her different allegiances—but they are also tightly interwoven, with only a thin line between them. After all, a cult is a surrogate family, and makes similar demands on its straying members, while blood, thicker than water, can prove as much of a draw as heroin.

SIBLING BONDS

There have always been siblings in horror. They are right there in the title of the (brothers) Grimms’ fairytale *Hansel and Gretel* (1812), and play a significant role in Henry James’ gothic novella *The Turn of the Screw* (1898)—both texts with a considerable influence on future cinema. Not only did George A. Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) usher in the era of modern horror from the genre’s graveyard, but its opening sequence placed siblings Johnny and Barbara at the center of this

momentous transition—and thereafter we have had, inter alios, Sally and Franklin Hardesty in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), the Frog Brothers in *The Lost Boys* (1987), Ginger and Brigitte in *Ginger Snaps* (2000), Darry and Trish in *Jeepers Creepers* (2001), Su-mi and Su-yeon in *A Tale of Two Sisters* (2003), Tim and Kaylie in *Oculus* (2013), Jaime and Kelly in *It Follows* (2014), Becca and Tyler in *The Visit* (2015), Justine and Alexia in *Raw* (2016) and Justin and Aaron in *The Endless* (2017)—not to mention the countless horror films focused on twins.

The sibling bond, after all, is special. It is intimate and intense, yet without the complications of romance. Rooted in the vagaries of birth, it is unchosen and arbitrarily bestowed, yet the shared blood, ancestry and childhood at its core are also what make it so primal. And although it is often associated with rivalry and resentment, the sibling bond can survive, thrive and evolve into adulthood. Leo and Virginia may have drifted apart, much as Leo is unhappily drifting from his wife, but on their trip together, the siblings gradually bond again: they bond over stealing



from a gas station, they bond over honest talk, they bond over karaoke, they bond over washing dishes together, they bond over a *ouija* board, and they bond as Leo, bit by bit, places his faith back in his errant sister and comes to believe her unlikely tale and become a part of her adventure.

The last time cinema gave us a pair of people who could magically feel whatever the other felt, it was Prince Nuada and Princess Nuala—significantly siblings themselves—from Guillermo del Toro's *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* (2008). Virginia is still tied to other things (the cult, her addictions), and to another person (the stranger)—but as Leo and Virginia drive towards a destiny that was at first just hers but is now theirs jointly, and joke about how great it would be if the stranger they were seeking were in Cancun or the Bahamas or Paris or Italy, it is clear that these siblings are mapping out, however fancifully, an itinerary that they would like to pursue together. They have willingly and happily become tied to each other, reunited in a journey of sibling affection and interdependence.

HALLOWEEN WEEK

As Leo and Virginia drive across America, bickering and bantering and learning to love each other again, it would be possible momentarily to forget that *Threshold* is (also) a horror film, were it not that Robinson and Young keep reminding us. When Leo goes to the apartment to pick up his sister, he glimpses—in shades of Nicolas Roeg's *Don't Look Now* (1973)—a figure in a red hood. Periodically, Virginia behaves as though she is possessed, claiming to be under the influence of the stranger to whom she has become tethered. All this unfolds expressly during Halloween week, the year's main calendar event associated with the occult. Our two fellow travelers themselves celebrate Halloween by carving jack-o'-lanterns together at one of their motel stops—and later, as they pass the time with a *ouija* board at a house that they have rented, a man (John Terrell) who suddenly, terrifyingly intrudes with clown mask and knife will turn out to be the brother of the house's owner (more

siblings!), dressed that way because he is on his way to a nearby Halloween party. It will not take Leo long to speculate aloud that maybe the red-robed figure he saw at the apartment, far from being a cultist on Virginia's tail, was also just someone in Halloween costume.

By the end, the cultists—and their use of black magic—will be unambiguously established as real and literal, but that does not mean that their weird rites, performed in the week of disguise, cannot also wear the mask of metaphor. For the climactic transfer of the curse from the stranger to Leo figures the realignment of Virginia's co-dependencies from drugs and the cult back to her beloved brother. As Leo leaves his wife and home behind him, and Virginia more or less disentangles herself from her own recent associations, brother and sister become more closely bound to each other than ever, in an extreme, maybe even dysfunctional, mutual sympathy which will force them to face together the road ahead, their fates now intertwined unto death. It is a bold and potent portrait of the ties that bind siblings forever—and a kind of horror that, upon reflection, need not be so bad after all.

Anton Bitel is a freelance film critic for Sight & Sound, Little White Lies, VODzilla.co and ThroughTheTreesMag.com amongst others, specializing in genre cinema. He has been a member of the Online Film Critics Society since 2007, and of the London Film Critics' Circle since 2009. He blogs at ProjectedFigures.com.



DIRECTORS' STATEMENT

POWELL ROBINSON
(CO-DIRECTOR / CINEMATOGRAPHER)

Threshold has a few themes, all of which our small but mighty team resonated with in their own unique way. However, one of those themes extended beyond nostalgia and emotional connection into physical manifestation on a daily basis while we shot.

Control: who has it, who feels out of it, how easy it is to lose, and how can you reclaim it—these questions are on Leo and Virginia's mind in one form or another throughout the entirety of the film. Similarly, film production is an industry defined by predictable, material constraints, and conversely acts of god which limit, redefine, and imbue the feeling of control for those who work within it.

I'm not sure how to say this in a graceful way... we had no control. Just, none. And it was perfect. *Threshold* was based on an outline with little to no dialogue. There was no ending. Our travel schedule was based on a rough, theoretical road map with no housing plan. We were shooting on phones, something none of us had done before. I don't think we could have gone into this with LESS control. And yet it was completely freeing.

Traditional setup times, storyboards, and shot lists were thrown out the window. When something felt right in the moment we filmed it. When the outline felt wrong, we changed the plot. Everything was able to come in service of the characters, and no one could tell us to stay on book. I feel like I lived and traveled with Leo and Virginia as much as Joey and Madison as there was often little to no separation from the rehearsing and filming of these scenes before hitting the road back to the hotel in the same car, with the same people, in the same clothes.

We're taught in film school, and on traditional sets, that the plan is what will get you through your days. The script will guide you and you can always fall back on it if you're lost. And for many types of production this may be true. But I feel truly blessed and lucky to have had an experience working on a project where the only reason it flourished is because we relinquished all that. I've gotten beat down and spit out by a commercial and music video system which can feel all too much like you've lost all control and are forever at the service of capitalism. *Threshold* made me feel at the service of my own emotional well-being.

We always fell back on our actors, and their characters' connection rather than the page, and it gave us a perfect ending which none of us could have possibly written without being along for the ride first. It gave us a filming experience so visceral and impulsive and fresh, it's changed my outlook on directing forever. And it gave us a final product I'm proud to say feels as much like cathartic on-screen therapy as it does a cult-y spooky (mostly drama honestly) horror film. My only hope is that with the incredible audience Arrow has granted us, someone else can find a spark like that and let it take them on a ride of their own.

PATRICK R. YOUNG
(CO-DIRECTOR / WRITER)

A lot has been written about shooting ultra-low budget movies. Robert Rodriguez's \$7,000 plan is still a good one. As well, the capabilities of the iPhone have been proven over and over. Everyone from Sean Baker to Reed Morano to Stephen Soderbergh to Matthew Cherry to probably God himself have made something cinematic using this tech. And so did we! That's not what I want to talk about. I want to talk about my friends.

Powell Robinson. Madison West. Lauren Bates. Joey Millin. William Ford-Conway. The people I've worked with before. The people I'll work with again. The people better at their jobs than I am. I owe these people the world.

We shot this movie over 12 days, 2000 miles, on two iPhones, working off a 20-page outline based off an idea I had in high school with only \$6500 in our pocket. We slept on floors together. We drove tired together. We created together. It was one of the most satisfying, terrifying experiences of my life and I now know new levels of trust I didn't think existed. To have the vulnerability and dexterity that they all had requires not only professionalism, but a deep well of empathy.

That was the key for us. My friends' superpower. And, for the most part, is the key for the greatest horror movies. No other genre so easily allows for us to simultaneously empathize with and dread man.

Our story offers a look into the life of a vulnerable woman who's been taken advantage of. A woman looking to heal who the world only looks to control. Someone wanting to be believed. To connect and understand and be understood. To take one step forward, even if it means taking two steps back. She's met by her brother, a man who, at one point, accounts for one of those steps back, dealing with his own issues and taking it out on others with no responsibility or awareness. With no empathy. That changes. All five of us connected with these people. Saw the good and bad in ourselves. Our biggest hope is that others do too. We hope that having the film loving, bizarre embracing arms of Arrow behind us will allow this movie to breathe and find the space to take on its own life within people. Or, at least more space than we had all packed into that car.

And, hey, if you get a little creeped out too... sweet.

ABOUT THE TRANSFER

Threshold is presented in 2:1 aspect ratio with 5.1 audio. The High-Definition master was provided by the directors Powell Robinson and Patrick R. Young.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Jasper Sharp**

Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**

Associate Producers **Caroline Lichnewsky, Ewan Cant**

Technical Producer **James White**

Disc Production Manager **Nora Mehenni**

QC **Alan Simmons**

Production Assistant **Samuel Thiery**

Blu-ray Mastering and Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**

Artist **Tom Clark**

Design **Scott Saslow**

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Anton Bitel, James Byrkit, Elle Callahan, Zena Dixon, Zach Donahue, Brandon Espy, Kelsey Griswold, Joey Millin, Powell Robinson, Ryan Shoos, Gabrielle Walsh, Scott Weinberg, Madison West, Patrick R. Young





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