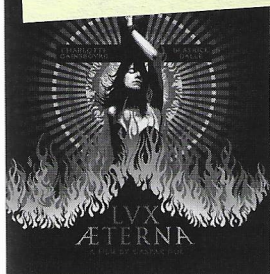


LUX ÆTERNA

Directed by Gaspar Noé
(2019) Yellow Veil Pictures Blu-ray



Director Gaspar Noé isn't afraid to ask tough questions like, "What does a modern day burning at the stake look like?"; or "how is a good old fashioned witch hunt deconstructed?" In his 2019 film *Lux Aeterna*, Noé explores these curiosities with a metaphysical approach that escalates into a madness so intense, that by the end,

audiences are left with nothing but the peaceful wash of sheer resignation.

The traditional "film inside a film" sub-genre often proposes a fascinating look at how movies are made, but with some understanding of simulacra between the creators and the audience. The experience, while informative and entertaining, is hardly as relatable or immersive. Noé's film is definitive immersion, from the audience's experience right down to the characters in the film inside the film.

Lux Aeterna opens with clips from Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Day of Wrath* with a narration explaining that the success of the actress' performance as a witch burned at the stake is attributed to her actually being tied to a stake for two hours in the making of the film. This sets the entire theme and tone of Noé's feature. The film inside the film is called *God's Work*, and the audience is dropped right in the middle of its making as crews prepare to shoot a witch burning scene.

All the characters portray themselves, and much of the dialogue is improvised—including 12 minutes of anecdotes between Béatrice Dalle and Charlotte Gainsbourg at the beginning of the movie. This doesn't sound entertaining, but Noé cleverly makes it work for the metaphorical themes eventually revealed in the film. Dalle plays the director of *God's Work*, while Gainsbourg is its star and is to be hoisted up on a stake for the scene in question. Starting to sound familiar? It's pretty easy to see where this film is going, but Noé executes the intensifying madness in a wild seizure-inducing climax with a narrative told in split-screen diptych and overlapping dialogue that includes producer mutiny, a contemptuous cinematographer, a Hollywood twerp, and the anxiety of trying to make a phone call to determine if child abuse has occurred. One character is even heard saying, "Why is there a fucking dog here?" and whether intended or not, the line is reminiscent of Mick Jagger's realization that he'd lost control of the situation at Altamont when a dog ran across stage during the ill-fated concert. Additionally, the film's brisk 51 minute runtime secures the cast's and the audience's growing tensions into the final moments that give way to a tranquil release of hysteria as Gainsbourg, tied to a stake in a wash of flashing color, has little choice but to give in to her imminent destruction "literally" and figuratively. And thus, the true horror in her performance is realized.

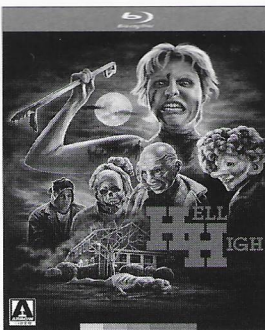
The term *lux aeterna* is Latin for "eternal light" and while much of the story takes place in darkness, at night, and is driven by antagonistic intentions, the mechanics of film's creation and execution dictate the need for light. Furthermore, the act of burning is what drives this particular scene in *God's Work*. Ultimately, it's by the light of a giant malfunctioning LED screen that Gainsbourg "burns" in a culmination of the chaos surrounding her. Keeping with the theme of light, moments prior to Gainsbourg's resignation, the screen displays a reddened sky lined in a fiery blaze. The light in this picture is indeed eternal, even through the closing credits and beyond where one final thought is posited in a quote by filmmaker Luis Buñuel: "Thank God I'm an atheist," which adequately and universally sums up the dualistic nature of the narrative.

To further solidify the growing severity and imbricated metaphors, the mildly boring anecdotal conversation between Dalle and Gainsbourg at the beginning of the film establishes their characters as mocking and doubtful of God. The women exist amongst a group of people seeking to question and undo them. These women are in fact, witches in the midst of a trial.

Lux Aeterna is presented in high-definition on Blu-ray disc from Yellow Veil Pictures. Special features include an introduction by Noé, an audio commentary with the director and Béatrice Dalle, and behind the scenes photos. A bonus second disc is loaded with four short films that inspired *Lux Aeterna*, featuring *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* by Kenneth Anger, and *La Ricotta* from Pier Pasolini.

Lux Aeterna is overwhelming, but that's entirely the point, which will most certainly put off some viewers. Plot is not the chief concern in this film, but rather sharing the exasperating experience unfolding on screen with the film's characters. Noé's efforts immerse and include the audience, and those looking for a thoughtful thrill ride will find *Lux Aeterna* a version of chaotic cinematic perfection.

Lucas Hardwick



HELL HIGH
Directed by Douglas Grossman
(1989) Arrow Video Blu-ray

There's a lot to unpack in director Douglas Grossman's 1989 slasher film *Hell High* (A.K.A. *Raging Fury*) and, depending on your mileage, there's far more misses than there are hits.

For anyone that might not be familiar with Grossman and co-writer Leo Evans' ode to latent psychological trauma, revenge and high school bullies then you're in for quite an 84 minute journey: Beginning in flashback, *Hell High* introduces viewers to a very young Brooke

Storm who, while out on her own playing one idyllic-looking day, comes upon two young lovers who inadvertently become the target of her ire when the teen boy destroys one of the girl's dolls. Thinking that she'll get some innocent revenge, Brooke tosses some mud onto the departing teens which causes the motorcycle they're traveling on to lose control, sending the duo flying into some nasty fence posts which impales and kills them.

Though it's nothing more than an innocent prank gone horrifically wrong, Brooke is understandably traumatized by the event and flees the scene, leaving behind two bodies which are now in-bound for a never-to-be-solved cold case file as well as local myth and urban legend. Nearly two decades later, the story picks back up with Brooke (played by an adult Maureen Mooney) who is now a teacher of biology at a small high school. The years and the ensuing guilt of what she accidentally done has left its mark on the young teacher: She's standoffish to the point of being rude to her fellow teachers and she's no great shakes with the student body either, particularly one ne'er-do-well named Dickens (fiendishly essayed by actor Christopher Stryker) who has a disturbing fixation on Brooke which borders on dangerous, if not outright life-threatening. Dickens is one of those peculiar bullies exclusive to 1980s cinema who not only tormented their onscreen prey, but who provided an entire generation of younger viewers with enough nightmares to properly fund an entire field of psychologists; as portrayed by Stryker, Dickens is that *mean* and *vicious* with absolutely no room left for nuance or shades of grey. Little does this Borscht Belt hooligan realize that he's playing with a ticking time-bomb.

Following Brooke to her old childhood home where she is the sole occupant, Dickens and his slightly less psychotic friend Jon-Jon (Christopher Cousins, trying valiantly to hit any redeeming high notes he can for his character) leer into an upstairs window as their teacher, in an intimate moment, is showering. This moment sends Dickens over the edge with a lust that's at least the half of his blind rage, and its not long before he recruits Jon-Jon and two other friends—Queenie (Millie Prezioso) and Smiler (Jason Brill)—into a scheme to humiliate the teacher.

Gathering at the very spot where Brooke accidentally killed the two teens years earlier, the de facto Manson Family hatch their insidious scheme and one can't help but wonder how it's even remotely possible that the three lesser-lights can't see that there's something else entirely on Dickens' mind that goes beyond merely soaping some windows or toilet papering a house. A dark light burns in his eyes and the only thing that seems like it might save it is the utter destruction of Brooke Storm.

After converging at the teacher's home, the four students set about terrifying the isolated woman by hopping up and down on her roof and slinging swamp mud onto the front of her house. Not satisfied with just that nasty bit of business, Dickens ultimately breaks into the home and sets about raping the now-drugged Brooke who has been given a pill to relax her by a friend. As the small cadre of pupils surround her, she momentarily regains her senses and, in a "fight or flight" moment, hurls herself out of her upstairs bedroom window leaving the quartet convinced that she's dead.

Panicked now, Dickens devises a plan to frame a fellow student for the murder which involves Jon-Jon heading out to snatch a football jersey to plant as evidence of the student's guilt. The big twist in all of these frenzied machinations by the four is that its ultimately all for naught: Brooke is actually still alive and has finally (and understandably) snapped; it's time for some good old-fashioned revenge, *Friday the 13th*-style. One by one, Brooke picks off her assailants until she's finally stopped once and for all by lone survivor and resident Good Boy Jon-Jon.

Hell High is a disturbing and nihilistic piece of filmmaking which may just be (along with such features as *I Spit On Your Grave*) the precursor to late 1990s and early 2000s 'Torture Porn' horror genre epitomized by the likes of *Hostel* and *The Strangers*. As is the fast-and-loose rule for such efforts, no one gets out of this one alive save Jon-Jon, a questionable character from the get-go who might just go the route of Dickens and Co. before all is said and done. There are no real winners in this story and it's telling that, at least tonally, this film makes similar entries in the slasher genre feel almost quaint and safe in comparison. The acting is solid, the directing is clear and concise, the music is memorable (perhaps more so than the story itself) and the cinematography is nice to look at, but *Hell High* is a horror movie emperor with no clothes.

Arrow Video does its usual breathtaking job of presenting *Hell High* to the Blu-ray format, with a beautifully presented print taken directly from the 35mm camera negative and scanned into 2K resolution. Other special features abound on this release, including multiple audio commentaries, interviews, deleted and alternate scenes and TV spots and theatrical trailers.

Ryan Vandersgriff