



THE FRIDA ZINEMA  
**OBSESSION**

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# THE OBSESSIVE GAZE OF MARI ASATO

By Brian Ly

There is a classical trifecta of modern auteurs who have become household names out of the dregs of V-Cinema: Kiyoshi Kurosawa, Takashi Miike, and Hideo Nakata, and it thus stands that the vast majority of other directors who have worked in this ecosystem are largely forgotten journeymen, both in their own home countries unless they've made a successful shift into a more mainstream cinema as well as within the larger Anglosphere discourse of Japanese cinema, which is already working with a rather limited pool of canonical directors. There is probably no director more acutely aware of her positioning within the industry than Mari Asato, herself a female director working in a largely male space who has managed to carve out her own niche with several acclaimed horror films.

The career of Mari Asato is fairly typical when it comes to V-Cinema directors, starting out as an apprentice under the previously mentioned Kiyoshi Kurosawa before moving on to direct her own feature films. Her body of work is defined by typical trashy genre films, peppered with entries within established film franchises, idol films, and horror anthologies, and her foray into the more mainstream

film industry is largely through adaptations. True to auteur theory, this is also where, despite a seemingly unfocused filmography, Asato's authorial voice emerges with a clear thematic through line, with her tendencies being embedded within the existing confines of franchises and adaptations to most strongly demonstrate her recurring preoccupations. It's clear that obsession is central to the works of Asato, particularly in how she explores the various facets of characters and their awareness of how they are generally perceived within society, in their introspection of their own self-presentation in the world, and in the gaze by which they are subjected to by others. There is almost certainly a sustained meta-commentary on her own position as a female director working in genre and film as a whole in a male-dominated field where women filmmakers in general are not celebrated to any large degree, and certainly not in films that do not immediately reflect a sort of feminist urgency. Yet, those very concerns are absolutely present at the core of her films.



We see the initial preoccupation of obsession by Mari Asato in an early V-Cinema horror anthology work titled *The Boy From Hell*, which centers on a mother's fixation on resurrecting her son in an incredibly campy and twisted adaptation of *Frankenstein*, but she really hits her stride with one of the later entries in the acclaimed *Ju-On* franchise, *Ju-On: Black Ghost*. As with any other long-running horror franchise that has evolved with sequels, reboots, and other branching paths, admittedly sometimes

JU-ON: BLACK GHOST (2009)



overstaying its welcome, the structure provides a perfect creative space for an auteurist director to explore their own ideas within the constraints of an established universe. Like other *Ju-On* films, it is told in nonlinear segments exploring a vengeful curse that possesses the various characters. What sets this film apart in particular is its emphasis on body horror, with the recurring motif of a parasitic cyst that acts as a physical manifestation of the curse in the form of a latent unborn twin that possesses its host, the surviving sister. The obsession is a propulsive force, with the cyclical nature of the curse spreading through the characters as a supernatural representation of their fixation on their failed relationships, unfulfilling lives, and regrets, an obsessive inability to move on, anchored by the demons of their past, to a catastrophic end. This film would lay the groundwork for what would be the pervasive thematic concerns throughout Asato's body of work, where her interest in the metaphysical and how it impacts the human experience often manifests as the obsessive internal gaze.

This idea of reflexivity is perhaps most explicitly explored in the adaptation of an award-winning horror novel, *Bilocation*. While the concept of doppelgängers is not the most original idea in horror, most films tend to focus on the evil double committing crimes, Jordan Peele's *Us* coming to mind, and that's only the first act of this film. Mari Asato homes in on something much more



nuanced, employing more of a mystery thriller approach to the genre as the real horror of another you with your exact memories, abilities, and potential becoming a better version of yourself, living the life you could only imagine, exposing you as an empty husk of unfulfilled expectations. What began as an obsessive fear over what your doppelgänger's actions in your skin transform into the sheer horror of someone else living out your unrealized dreams and a sinking awareness of your own inadequacy. The main character is an unmarried starving artist who observes her alleged doppelgänger, seemingly less addled with anxiety, with a stable, happy marriage, winning the

prestigious award she had been working desperately toward, revealing a potential version of herself that is thriving without the burden of expectation, leading her to question whether she's the one who truly deserves to belong in this world. The film acts as an allegory for creative obsession, mirroring Asato's own reconciliation with her personal relationships and life goals as she's thrown herself into a career as a filmmaker against all odds. Asato almost certainly contemplates a more successful career with greater recognition, for a director who at the time had little more than short features within horror anthologies to her name. The source material, also written by a woman, was also likely particularly compelling because of this tacit acknowledgment of a woman's self-sacrifice in an environment that didn't foster the career aspirations of women. It's a uniquely female-coded sort of obsessive concern about reckoning with your inadequacy for anyone who has high expectations of themselves that they are almost certainly not going to achieve in a system that actively antagonizes their aspirations.





FATAL FRAME (2014)

Longing is perhaps one of the most classical forms of obsession, and this is explored through the sapphic love between the characters of *Fatal Frame*, adapted from a spinoff novel from the acclaimed survival horror video game series. Set in an all-girls school, a microcosm of female space constrained by traditional patriarchal values, the girls' obsession, rooted in repressed feelings about taboo lesbian relationships, manifests itself in a ritual of kissing the photographs of the girl they admire, which act as a host for a curse that is thus inflicted on them. This is the foundation of spirit photography, where the photographs are haunted by ghosts, in this case, the spirit of the drowned twin of the girl in the photo. If all of these motifs sound rather familiar, it's no coincidence, and even when working within the confines of adaptation, Mari Asato manages to imbue her preoccupations directly into the text of the film. It's certainly by no accident that the film almost exclusively concerns women and their experiences, demonstrating that even almost exclusively female spaces aren't necessarily safe havens for

self-expression without judgment and ire, where women are often their own harshest critics within their communities.

What may seem on the surface to be a fairly straightforward adaptation of a novel series that had developed into a multimedia manga and anime franchise of its own, *Hyouka: Forbidden Secrets* is yet another representation of Mari Asato's brand of obsession, even if it's a marked departure from her previous genre outings and usual directorial style. The film revolves around a rather eccentric cast of members of the Classics Club, natural outsiders from the mainstream high school setting who might otherwise have little reason to associate with one another, coming together only by circumstance. It's very clear that they generally have no natural inclination toward the actual subject matter, but they become fast friends, particularly



HYOUKA: FORBIDDEN SECRETS (2017)

the two leads: the apathetic male lead Oreki, who can't be bothered to do anything, and the charming Chitanda, always curious and inquisitive about the most mundane shit, who he can't help but be entranced by. Though they probably would have been otherwise satisfied doing no real activities, their disinterest shifts to an obsessive fixation as they begin to hyperfocus on a mystery, devoting all of their energy to getting to the bottom of various cases, and though they're ultimately largely inconsequential endeavors, it's a canvas for which otherwise unadjusted, lonely teens can have some semblance of a normal high school life, developing a natural connection through shared experiences.

It's no surprise that we see all her preoccupations come together in their most overt depictions in one of her later masterpieces, *Under Your Bed*, a film about a man who stalks a woman that he encountered many years later after a single minor interaction from their college days, forcing casual interactions secretly hoping for her to remember him and developing an obsession over her as he initially peeps through her window and eventually begins a ritual

of sending her gifts, which later evolves into a pattern of invading her home, leaving signs of his presence for her to discover, and hiding under her bed, all to keep a watchful eye on her, silently witnessing the abuse by her husband. While the more conventional approach would be to focus on his perversion, almost stereotypically so from the female gaze, Mari Asato is less interested in this particular facet of the perception of his character, as it's something that's already self-evident from his behavior of encroaching on the boundaries of the woman whose home he's occupying. What is far more interesting is to consider his internal justification as well as the experience of the woman who is subject to his constant gaze, which develops into a sort of rather symbiotic relationship between a lonely man who is largely invisible to the world and the woman he is protecting. For a woman who feels unseen by a society that would never take her distress seriously and would otherwise have to suffer silently under abuse, she has a keen awareness of the presence of her stalker, and what may otherwise normally be a serious cause for concern becomes her sole source of solace, feeling the tenderness and care of a watchful gaze, disconcerting yet somehow comforting at the same time, for once in her life. While it doesn't

quite absolve him from his crimes nor does it justify his behavior, it doesn't change the fact that in a way he saves her from her situation, both from an emotional perspective and quite literally when he intervenes when her husband takes a rather violent turn. While there is a sense of initial disgust from the woman, both from the fact that a total stranger appeared from nowhere to save her and from the realization that he was someone she encountered just briefly so many years in the past, there is a moment of gratitude and acknowledgment as she calls out to him by name, and just the fact that he was remembered made his obsession all the more worth it as he is carried out in handcuffs.

While her career may seem rather disconnected, working largely on adaptations and genre films, there is a distinct thematic through line in the concerns explored in the films of Mari Asato. These are characters, often, though not

exclusively, from the female perspective, operating in a very male society, keenly aware of how they are perceived and operate within this space. This grounds the formation of their sense of obsession, a fixation on their particular positioning and how they exist within the world. Her works reflect a woman who has managed to carve out a career in an ecosystem that didn't respect female creators, especially so for those whose auteurist bent wasn't expressly feminist or concerned with woman matters explicitly, though obviously her works largely reflected the female perspective. She is certainly a trailblazing female director with a distinct voice who managed to express a clearly female gaze in both an industry and genre that more often than not exploited women, a natural conclusion for someone who was always conscious of her gender and translated it as such into the more generalized experience faced by women on an everyday basis.



UNDER YOUR BED (2019)

# The Competing Obsessions of **RE-ANIMATOR**

by Micah Lara

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Fans of the Stuart Gordon classic *Re-Animator* are well acquainted with the obsession held by mad scientist Herbert West and his goals of conquering death and resurrection. West however is not the only character in the film with an obsession. His foil, and overall antagonist of the film, Dr. Carl Hill also presents dark obsessions. While these men share powerful desires, the forces behind them are in direct opposition.

Throughout the course of the film, we see Herbert West as a man consumed by his work, driven by his goal of successfully reviving a dead human beyond the conventional period of viable resuscitation. While testing his reagent serum, he has no issue with deceiving others and breaking laws to get his results. His personable skills are obviously less than normal, because he has no real need for them. To West, other people either aid his goals, or are nothing more than distractions or obstacles. He enlists his roommate Dan Cain after he shows a willingness to help him with testing the reagent, showing him more tolerance than he provides to anyone else. Aside from him, West shows a general dislike of Cain's girlfriend Megan Halsey, as well as an

intense hatred for Dr. Hill. For West, his obsessions lie in what is already dead. He wants to master resurrection of the deceased, not for fame or wealth, but to stroke his own ego. He wants to be the man who spits in the eye of God and improve on what he sees is a frail and flawed creation, human beings. Nothing spells out West's obsession with this monumental goal than his statement from the film's sequel, *Bride of Re-Animator*. "Blasphemy? Before what? God? A God repulsed by the miserable humanity He created in His own image? I will not be shackled by the failures of your God. The only blasphemy is to wallow in insignificance. I have taken refuge of your God's failures and I have triumphed."

In major contrast with West's fixation of control over death, Dr. Hill's obsession lies with control over life. In the film, we see him develop a method of laser-based lobotomies that allow him to control the will of all who fall victim to it. While he ends up using this on corpses he has reanimated himself, his goals with this were originally intended for regular people. Like West, he too sees people as pawns to be used how he sees fit,

but he has no real goal beyond this. He has no ambition and only wants power for power's sake. This is also highlighted in his desire for Megan, another target of his obsessions. He has taken a dangerous liking to her (or rather, her body) and seeks to make her another one of his possessions. This is in direct contrast with West's more dismissive view of Megan. Another example of their opposing obsessions is their reasoning for wanting the reagent. Unlike West, Dr. Hill absolutely seeks to gain recognition in the medical and scientific communities by stealing the serum and passing it off as his own. Hill's hedonistic desires lie in total contrast with West's self serving agenda.

While both these men share an obsession with control, their need for power over life or death sends them on very different paths. Herbert West has an uncontrollable desire to perfect his serum no matter the cost. While his methods are less than desirable, his intentions are not to cause harm to others. Dr. Hill however caused meaningful destruction to serve his thirst for power over the living. Whether for life or death, obsession is the root of all the disastrous events of *Re-Animator*.



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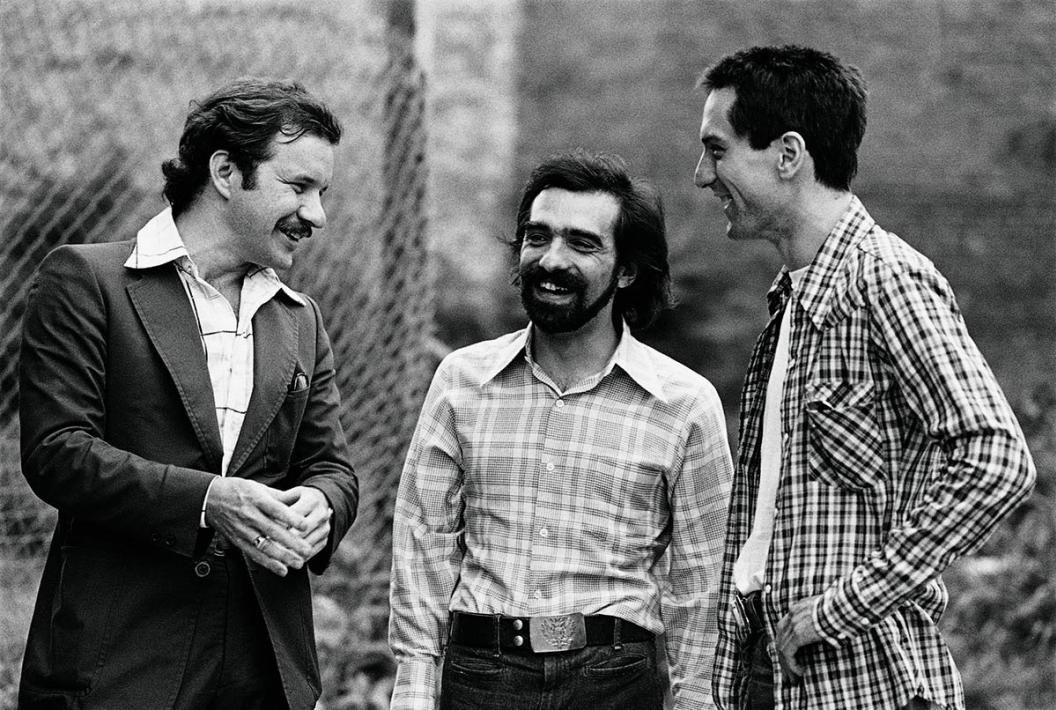


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Jan 11-15-25

BUT THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT YOU.



# AND ALL THE SINNERS SAINTS

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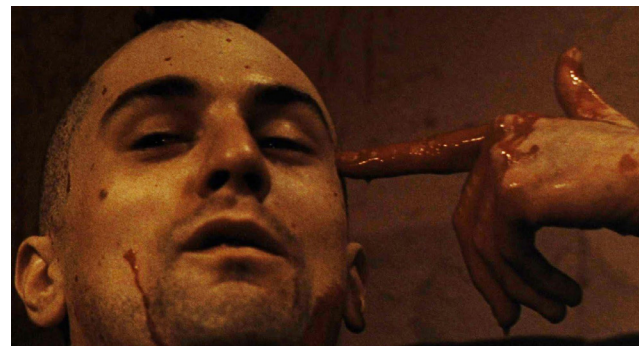
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Few creative partnerships have encapsulated obsession as fiercely as the collaboration between director Martin Scorsese and screenwriter Paul Schrader. Across four films spanning three decades: *Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull*, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and *Bringing Out the Dead*, Schrader's psychologically tormented writing and Scorsese's visceral direction depict characters consumed by self-inflicted isolation, moral

absolutism, and an innate desire for self-destruction. In these films, obsession is never a straight line, but a nebulous force that warps identity, erodes relationships, and poisons every facet of these protagonists' lives. This fiction reflects the filmmakers' own compulsions, battles within production, and personal crises, reframing the films as products of obsessive labor that meaningful art and film demand.

Their first collaboration, *Taxi Driver*, tells the story of Travis Bickle, a man whose obsessions impregnate his entire worldview. Schrader conceived Travis during a period of extreme loneliness and illness, while hospitalized for an untreated stomach ulcer. Schrader modeled the character as a projection of what he feared he might become if he didn't externalize this despair. *Travis* focuses on two women: Betsy, a campaign volunteer for Senator Palantine, and Iris, a 13-year-old prostitute trafficked by Sport. His unwanted advances on

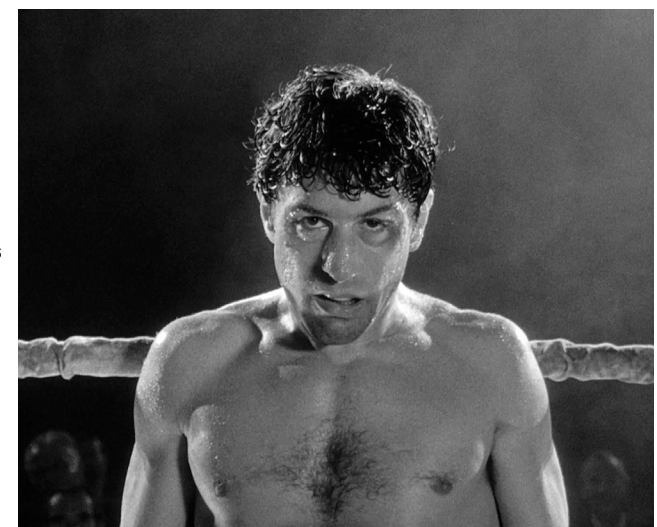
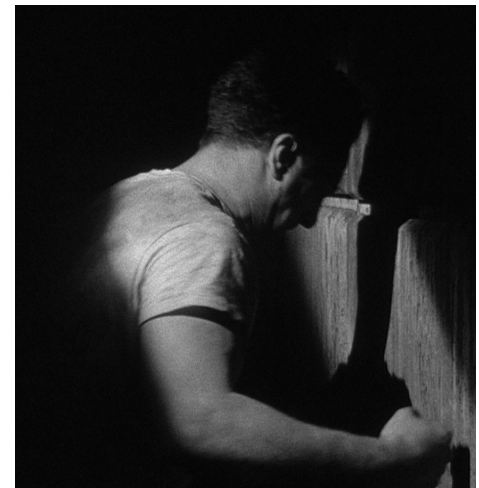


both women are less about lust, but rather seeking rejection, therefore reinforcing his own isolation and hostility toward the world. Travis clings to the abstract notion of 'cleaning the streets,' hypocritically imagining himself morally superior to the grime of 1970s New York, while degenerating into madness. After a failed assassination attempt on Palantine, he declares, "My whole life is pointed in one direction," climaxing in a brutal massacre at Sport's brothel. The result of this homicide is not condemnation nor imprisonment but rather praise from the media that recasts him as a hero for 'saving' Iris and washing away the sins. The film's final stages of production echo this intensity as the studio threatened to cut the bloody finale to avoid an X rating. Scorsese refused and allegedly threatened the studio head with a gun until a compromise was met by desaturating the color. The blood in the climax now appears brown rather than red, and Scorsese's cut was preserved. *Taxi Driver* remains the most potent expression of obsession as a corrosive, all-consuming force crafted by people who truly understood this loneliness and derangement.

While *Taxi Driver* externalized the violence of an isolated individual, *Raging Bull* manifested the collapse through self-destruction. Robert DeNiro visited Scorsese in the hospital after a near-fatal cocaine overdose. He brought boxer

Jake LaMotta's autobiography, *Raging Bull*. Scorsese felt he had nothing left to live for, much less to direct another film, but he read the book and saw this boxer's crusade for self-harm as his own crisis. LaMotta was not governed by ambition, fame, or money, but by his jealousy and the pathological need to exert control over everyone around him. By the end of the film, LaMotta turns against his brother, his wife, and even himself. He is left broke, fat, and imprisoned,

unable to reflect on the choices that destroyed him. LaMotta's breakdown in the jail cell, banging his head against the wall and begging, "Why?" captures his blindness and self-hatred that define his obsession for self-sabotage, mirroring his creator during his own struggle with addiction. Scorsese credits *Raging Bull* for saving his life, convinced this would be the last movie he would ever make. Like Schrader with *Taxi Driver*, Scorsese made *Raging Bull* to exorcise his fear of becoming this character, using art as a baptism of a sense to cleanse himself from this demon.





*The Last Temptation of Christ* stands apart from Scorsese and Schrader's other films in its time, place, and mode of conveying obsession. This film appears to be a classic 1950s era biblical epic, but it is much more nuanced and subversive. *Last Temptation* fictionalizes Jesus' story, portraying him as a human riddled with doubt, fear, and uncertainty rather than the all-knowing Messiah. Scorsese, being Catholic, and Schrader, a Calvinist, adapted the holy gospel to open a conversation about Jesus as a metaphor for humanity, rather than an untouchable ideal. Jesus' motivations are not obsessive, rather constantly shift between preaching love to the destruction of the axe and ultimately choosing martyrdom. He is not the one who is obsessed with gaining followers, rather his disciples project their obsession of finding a messiah onto him as a means of escaping religious persecution from the Romans. This production was met with intense backlash from Christian right-wing groups, convinced that the film was blasphemous in depicting Jesus as a man rather than God. Their zealotry, marked by protests and threats, mirror the theology of obsession within the film itself. The intention was to explore Jesus as a man rather than a distant ideal, but the public backlash overshadowed their nuanced exploration of Christ.

*Bringing Out the Dead* is not as widely known as their prior work, but it offers a unique lens into obsession by offering a path forward. Nicolas Cage's Frank Pierce is not propelled by ambition or rage but haunted by the guilt of all the people he couldn't save. Frank works as a graveyard-shift paramedic in 1990s New York City. The studios hoped this would be a spiritual sequel to the now acclaimed *Taxi Driver*, but instead it became a hypnotic surrealist nightmare that wallows in grief and failed commercially. Frank is haunted by the ghosts of every person he could not save, sending him into a spiral of insomnia and emotional exhaustion that warp every medical emergency



into proof of his continued inadequacy to save anyone's life. Only when a partner tells him that a medic's job is not always to save lives but to "bear witness" does Frank begin to find peace. Unlike the other films, *Bringing Out the Dead* does not resolve in violence, isolation, or martyrdom, but concludes with Frank's connection with Mary Burke over her father's death in quiet acceptance. Though *Bringing Out the Dead* lacks the climactic grandeur and behind-the-scenes drama of their other collaborations, it proposes a way forward beyond guilt and obsession, choosing to hope and accepting companionship.

Scorsese and Schrader put their whole creative selves into these projects, exorcising personal demons that are simultaneously vulnerable and revealing. These films persist in the current age of social media profiting off addiction, self-imposed isolation, and proselytizing radical ideals that lead to rage and violence in the real world. These films confront obsession as a destructive force beyond a cinematic trope and are deeply human.

# OBSESSION IN OBSESSION

(Not the Beyoncé Version Unfortunately)

By Julia Petty  
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Brian De Palma's version of Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), *Obsession* (1976), is an ethereal nightmare showcasing the power of destruction of the theme in the titular title. My take is it's melodramatic. It's over the top. It's extremely disturbing. It's exactly what one loves to see in a De Palma movie. Gluing it all together: Bernard Herrmann's hysteric score that haunts the entire length of the film. This was Bernard Herrmann's second to final score, his final being, of course, Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976). When he finally handed the written score to De Palma, Herrmann transcribed on the page that this was "...finest film in his musical career". In this reviewer's opinion, this most definitely rings true. *Vertigo* is a personal favorite movie of all time, and a major part of that is the score. Ironically, a second favorite score of his is for *Obsession*, which is essentially, a sister to *Vertigo* in a De Palma font. The score, however, is quite different. Romantic violins sweep throughout *Vertigo* often in a cyclical fashion imitating the main character's head space. In *Obsession*, however, Herrmann used a large cathedral pipe organ to create an ominous, grand, and reverberant atmosphere. And though it pays homage to his earlier score with romantic tones, the unique use of the pipe organ (very uncommon for scores of that time period) is one of the main reasons the film is so haunting and sits obsessively in the audience's mind.

I admit that although the score is the best part of *Obsession*, the music wouldn't hit those notes without the melodramatic environment. Cliff Robertson and Geneviève Bujold make up the principal cast playing Michael Courtland and Elizabeth Courtland / Sandra Portinari respectively with massive support from John Lithgow as Robert LaSalle. Bujold's versatility in a dual performance was the star of the show: strikingly tragic, childlike, and intense in one fell swoop. Loved obsessively by the titular character, Bujold carefully navigates his emotions in a disturbing, yet intriguing way. Robertson, though, was criticized for his performance for being stony and static, even by De Palma. Personally, however, this take on Michael is incredible, as he has this glassy-eyed stare that bores into the camera and Bujold. This look symbolises both the vacancy of his present self, while also showcasing how desperate he is to reclaim the past. It all adds to the melodrama. Finally, John Lithgow was an absolute treat

in this film, with a strong drawl of a southern accent (the film takes place partly in New Orleans) and an illusion of normalcy to Michael Courtland's eccentricities. Each of these characters adds to the fantastical world De Palma and Paul Schrader (who wrote the screenplay) have created.

Inspired by the narrative of *Vertigo*, Schrader and De Palma decided to create another story with similar themes. Schrader's original script titled, *Déjà Vu*, went on for far longer than final product audiences see today. Unfortunately for Schrader, De Palma believed the script went on for too long, another act 10 years later, and cut the original ending. Herrmann agreed with De Palma, and Schrader went on to resent the director's choice for many years following. Regardless, the film went on to be made in De Palma's vision, and in other words, creating the iconic

ending that is seen today. Though Schrader's ending will never be seen on screen, the current finale isn't one to bat an eye at. Despite the behind the scenes drama, *Obsession* went on to become a surprising financial success to the surprise of Colombia, due to the myriad of taboo themes. Initially, many critics were not fans of the film, citing examples of *Vertigo* and its many similarities, however, some including Roger Ebert, enjoyed almost everything about the film, noting its melodrama as the glue of the movie. Can one really criticize De Palma for the over the top melodrama? No, it's perfect. But in all seriousness, once you watch this film, Ebert's opinion makes a lot more sense. There are no two ways about it: *Obsession* wouldn't work without this element.

Usually in a review of this sort, the story would be more of a focal point. But there is a specific reason for this, one that becomes clear once one watches the film. Some tips, however, pay attention to the oddness of certain choices made by characters. Do that, and the finale will land that much better. The final point this reviewer has to make is: enjoy it for what it is. This is a film where enveloping yourself in the vibe De Palma has created makes the experience all that more enjoyable. Herrmann's score undoubtedly serves as the main way to orchestrate this, but the acting and cinematography all lull the audience into a weird sense of comfort, imitating a dream, with hints of the disturbing, until the nightmare fully descends upon the viewers and characters. It is the same as *Vertigo* in that sense,

something that De Palma and Schrader dutifully pay homage to.

As a small, fun afterthought, this writer, aka me, has hidden a clue within this review that reveals the end of the film. A hint to this clue is that it is a quote from another film that has an extremely similar ending, and even though it came out later, it is much more popular (and in a different language). In order to avoid spoilers, this clue serves as a way for the curious to figure it out on their own, or come back to this review after watching the movie with the knowledge of the story. Pay attention to the way this is written, if one notices words being used sparingly or in places that they might not normally be...well...it might be there for a reason. Here is a code for additional help: 2 11 15 1 4 10 5 7 8 9 11 12 4 5 7. An answer will be in my review next month.





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